

# Economic sovereignty

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# Introduction I

A bookkeeper by trade and advocate by chance, Annette Medford-Griffin grew up in Philadelphia. Training and volunteering have been the foundation of her passion to advocate on several platforms. She contributed to the formation of the coalition to Save the Free Library of Philadelphia and has served as a community outreach tech with Onslow County Partnership for Children, as well as a guardian ad litem/court-appointed special advocate, acting as the eyes and ears of family court judges whose rulings determine the future of children in foster care. Currently focused on cooperative business models, Medford-Griffin continues to use her voice to change the conversation.

I am thinking differently. I was a blank canvas, but now I am a portrait of self-determination. *Philadelphia Assembled* sparked a paradigm shift in how I view my very existence in Philadelphia. It embodies both the history and current moment of this city in which I live.

We assembled as collaborators to envision what could take place throughout the city. There was libation, music, food, art, networking, enlightening, and yes, sometimes differences.

The Sovereignty atmosphere is where I met extraordinary people from across this city exploring the space of self-help and determination. Owners of land and producers of goods building a stronger community for the well-being of all.

We attempted to redefine the term "sovereignty", which was already defined as "turning something old into something new." Conversations around economic and food sovereignty were at the forefront of our discussions, and I chose to focus on what I like to call social justice through economics.

How do we build a new economic infrastructure while resisting current oppressive systems? What is our vision for an economically just future? Cooperatives are my answer. Worker-owned cooperatives provide jobs for their members as well as services that cultivate economic justice.

Working within this current economy while building one that is anti-oppressive and respects

people over profit is difficult, but the economic revolution is upon us. Worker solidarity and a radical change in leadership are needed. Cooperators must run for political office so we have politicians that share this view of a fair and just marketplace.

Education is essential in building a cooperative. We need an understanding of co-op business models and the local economy of the city of Philadelphia to become better cooperators. We must encourage people to understand the benefits of being producers as well as consumers of goods, and that our money should be spent in our neighborhoods, doing business with those who reinvest in our community. That is the future of this alternative economy.

New avenues have opened up for me in this vibrant city, including the Philadelphia Area Cooperative Alliance (PACA). They launched a program called 20/20 Study Circle, a method rooted in African American and Philadelphia cooperative history to grow twenty community-owned or worker-owned cooperative businesses in the city of Philadelphia. The Commonplace, better known as the Marketplace, was one of the events that the group decided

to plan. The 52nd Street Marketplace took place on Sunday, June 25, 2017, as the *Seeds of Sovereignty festival* to celebrate the history of 52nd Street as a center for Black-owned businesses, allowing us to draw a common space where we buy and sell, laugh and learn, and eat and share, with the goal of keeping profits local.

At the heart of this grassroots get-together was the African Cultural Arts Forum (ACAF), established in 1969 by fellow Sovereignty collaborators, brothers Rashid Abdul Samad and Sharif Abdur-Rahim. What an experience in community-based economics. ACAF is a manufacturing business whose workforce is made up of members of the community. ACAF personifies the principles of Kwanzaa, showing concern for the community by providing educational programs for our youth, while building and developing a stronger community through economics. According to the brothers, starting your own business is about “more than a notion.” When we are conscious to spend our dollars in our neighborhoods and establish businesses, thereby creating jobs, we embody a model for alternative economy to capitalism.

“Free your mind, for there is a way to build a better Philadelphia,” this is how I felt after every *Philadelphia Assembled* gathering.

In the beginning, I was clueless—not sure where or how I would fit into this exhibition. Everyone had a chance to share their ideas. Even I am now a muse. I begin to see the transformation in myself. *Philadelphia Assembled* was more about the process than the final work that would be displayed, using art as a vehicle to express commonalities and differences. For me, the landscape of this city shifted after every meeting. I cannot wait to see the outcomes.

—Annette Medford-Griffin,  
*Philadelphia Assembled* collaborator

# Introduction II

Russell A. Hicks is a passionate business leader and educator committed to creating sustainable impact in communities around the world. He is the owner and CEO of Ebony Suns Enterprises, LLC, a consulting business that provides program development for schools and nonprofit organizations as well as project management for emerging private-sector companies in the green economy.

The Sovereignty working group had a very organic process, a lot of synergy; people from different backgrounds, origins, communities, and professions coming together. In my case, as an Associate Editor on the project, I played the role of bridging two worlds, trying to make sense of all of those ideas and get them into one direction. That's always a challenge, but the main thing is to have core values, principles, and goals that you can reach throughout your process.

The main goals were threefold. The first was learning, which involved going into West Philadelphia communities and educating people about things that they could do that were sovereign. These were things that would not only make them feel sovereign, but would also give them something tangible or allow them to learn from an expert in the community.

The second goal was to have a marketplace, because, it always starts at the marketplace. You get your goods, services, fruits, vegetables, raw materials to make things, all of that is from the marketplace. We did it in a festival forma, which speaks to one of the other goals established from these meetings - to create a coming-together of different minds. The third goal was to present stories at the Museum and capture the history (and present) of the 52nd Street corridor, and sovereign family businesses in general. To do that in the Sovereignty room at the museum is something we're all very excited about, because these stories are rich and valuable—to us, to communities, to this city.

I've been involved with economic justice and small business development in West Philadelphia for a good twenty years almost, helping

local businesses grow and create jobs. That process of small business development is fun for me. Before my time, 52nd Street was the happening place for entertainment, culture, art, business—all the entertainers from back in the day, they came here. Fast forward to today, and it still is the main thoroughfare in West Philadelphia. It's second to Broad Street in the whole city in terms of transportation from north to south. It's also an impoverished area where there's a lack of resources and all different issues from redlining, lack of access to housing, lack of access to start-up capital, difficulty developing a local customer base on 52nd Street. But even today, the vendors on 52nd Street produce goods and services that get distributed outside of Philadelphia, so the commerce that takes place on this corridor on a daily basis is fascinating. It's a great place to come to find authentic culture, particularly authentic African culture.

The principle of Sankofa has always been here, present on 52nd Street, but it started in ancient Nubia, in Egypt, before moving to West Africa, and going down to the markets in Brazil with the African slave trade. We can look at economic development in a

historical way and conquer the things that have been holding us back, like racism, if we look to that ancient principle of Sankofa to solve problems. How do you solve issues? How do you bring people together? Socially and economically, there is a lot of potential in collaborative economics, in trading together and being fair, and it's rooted in principles that allow everyone to have a sense of sovereignty. Before the chains, before corporate business models, that was done through family businesses. But you can still retain a sense of that through your independence with your own family, teaching skills, teaching trades. And there is a spiritual context in legacy, something you discover throughout your life experience.

There's really something for everyone in this project in terms of sovereignty, whether it's the children, teaching them how to make jewelry, printing T-shirts, offering them internships at businesses and opportunities to engage. We are supporting different events at Malcolm X Park, and even after the festival we've met with the Friends of Malcolm X Park about how to sustain and continue the vending, something that was discussed at the workshops presented at the Philadelphia Area Cooperative

Alliance, who already agreed to help establish a co-op for vendors. So you know, it's organic. Really for me, the process throughout has been organic, and thoughtful, and intentional.

—Russel A. Hicks,  
*Philadelphia Assembled* collaborator

'Seeds of Sovereignty' Marketplace at 52nd Street, June 2017.





'Seeds of Sovereignty' Marketplace at 52nd Street, June 2017.



*"These are leaders who have always been at the forefront of helping people learn and become involved in what it takes to help this neighborhood be what it can."*

*This marketplace helps them to share who they are, their culture, while [providing a space for] fellowship and socializing to get to know one another and work together, and that's always good. There are so many people here and when they interact, it helps their business. The more people come and interact, the bigger this becomes. ACAF has been doing this forever, starting here in '95, but even long before that. I'm honored they're in our area. 52nd Street is our main corridor, the longest corridor in West Philadelphia. We're honored to know one another, and we realize that we have to support one another. We're all brothers and sisters and all of this helps us spread the news about what is important, which is moving the community forward.*

*This is the main business that helps foster the heritage and culture here on 52nd Street. So many people look forward to coming here for that very reason...people here feel at home. They're overjoyed to know that they are welcome, they're included, and they can be part of the future. It's wonderful."*

—Philadelphia Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell



# Understanding Sovereignty



# Sovereignty from A to Z

Sovereignty cannot be understood by a single definition.

Through the concepts of self-determination and autonomy, we define sovereignty as the ability to shape our communities at the level of the **personal**—the ability to claim control over our bodies; the **financial**—the production and distribution of products; and the **cultural**—the practice and preservation of ancestral ways through, and in, community.

This next chapter explores this layered understanding through examples of Sovereignty in this city. Moving from A to Z, we use the alphabet to declare that sovereignty means freedom to create a new language paradigm, one that is informed by the ways in which land and economic exchange reinforce people's connection to the past and cultivate unity for future generations.

When communities unify to reclaim their voices and authority over their narratives, land, bodies, and products, this is a sovereign act. This is sacred.

## A: African Cultural Art Forum

The African Cultural Art Forum (ACAF) is located along 52nd Street, the historic main street of West Philadelphia. This Black-owned business has been at the forefront of community empowerment since 1969. The assortment of African masks, carved totems, clothing, amulets, jewelry, and sculpture invite visitors to appreciate the value of African material culture. Their line of natural products and oils challenges people to manufacture their own products to generate wealth; they also stock ethically sourced products like Freedom Toilet Paper and African black soap. The store's inventory promotes a holistic approach to individual and communal well-being. Much more than a business, ACAF hosts workshops, community meetings, and talks by influential stakeholders. A unique collection of CDs, DVDs, and books allow visitors to educate themselves on topics related to Black liberation.



At ACAF, Art is more than a way of life, it is a strategy for economic independence.

## B: Bookstore

Literacy has been a source of historic contention for people of African descent. During the time of slavery, it was illegal for an enslaved person to read and for anyone to teach them. Still, enslaved people huddled by candlelight and traced letters in soil, chalk, or anything they could get their hands on. Today, Black bookstores honor the history of learning, literacy, and education as a path to freedom while educating people about key leaders, movements, ideologies, and systems of meaning from the African continent. Bookstores are also places where children of color can see themselves reflected in storybooks or greeting cards. They are spaces of alternative knowledge creation, interrogation, and dissemination. Hakim's Books in West Philadelphia has been family-owned and -operated since 1959. In North Philadelphia, the acclaimed bookstore Black and Nobel takes its name from the national chain Barnes and Noble. Both of these bookstores go above and beyond their typical tasks. Hakim's space hosts workshops and book readings, while Black and Nobel sends books to prisoners, offering a strong message that even physical incarceration is not a barrier to mental emancipation.

## C: Co-Op

Food is essential to survival, while the ceremonial "breaking of bread" is a cornerstone of communal and family life. Yet, for many who live in the inner city, accessing food is a source of insecurity. The lack of access to adequate nourishment in urban neighborhoods has given rise to the term "food deserts" - areas where fresh produce is limited or unavailable, especially within walking distance. Pop-up produce stands and trucks are one temporary solution to increase food access in urban areas. Food co-ops, democratically owned and controlled by their members, are a more permanent example of how neighbors and individuals have united to secure food for their communities. In 1971, Mariposa Food Co-op began as a buying club, distributing food out of basements and garages. A year later, the owners rented a store that was open one day a week. In the 1980s, they merged with the Life Center Association, increased their hours to three days a week, and garnered 270 members. Today, Mariposa Food Co-op has its own storefront, is open seven days a week, and has over 2,400 members. The co-op supplies local produce, fair-trade and sustainably made household goods and food items, and accepts SNAP/EBT payments, ensuring access to low-income populations.

## D: Doula

Inspired by African birthing chairs, when artist Jeannine Kayembe made this sculpture she wanted to emphasize that "we gain freedom the moment we are born." Since archeologists have dated the oldest human remains to Africa, Kayembe asserts that "the first time a Black woman gave birth is when freedom was created." The industrialization of birth has taken much of the process away from the community and from the female body, but doulas work as advocates for mothers and families. The sculpture depicts a birthing chair that incorporates a Philippine symbol of fertility, the African adinkra symbol of family and togetherness, and the Fibonacci symbol for manifestation, as a sign of consciousness multiplied. Made from recycled goods, the chair incorporates sorghum, cotton seeds, peas, sunflowers, and peppers, as well as metals such as pyrite, gold, copper, silver, crystal quartz, and hematite. It incorporates cotton to represent the moment birth was transformed from a symbol of freedom to one of bondage during slavery. Artificial flowers honor women in North and West Philadelphia who adorn their porches with plastic flowers, affirming an image of life and growth even in harsh environments. Kayembe is co-founder of Life Do Grow, a two-acre garbage dump that was converted into an urban farm. The sculpture is an energy piece that sits on the farm and gives energy back to the soil.



## E: Elders

Elders are the cornerstone of a sovereign community. They are integral to the preservation and transfer of knowledge in communities where oral history is the primary means of documenting information. For the PHLA installation, artists Jeannine Kayembe and Celeste created portraits of Ms. Bernice, Ms. Pat, and Devon Bailey, three elders who “bring their honesty, their love, their recipes of green tomatoes and sweet potato pie.” These are installed alongside portraits of Ramona Africa by Michael Jones, former Native American and African indigenous inhabitants by Lisa Adjei, and Pocahontas Turquoise Sunrise Barbara Allen by Priscilla Anackuyani Bell.



## F: Freedom Paper Company LLC

Sovereignty is exercised not only through traditional means, but also encompasses new practices and inventions that push the boundaries of our creativity. Freedom Paper Company LLC is a prime example. Founded in 1974 in Newark, New Jersey, the company describes itself as part of an economic revolution that starts with a product we all need: toilet paper. Today, Freedom Paper is a small manufacturer and distributor of household products operating out of Baltimore. The owners describe their company as “born from the foundation of grassroots movement combined with the best of corporate culture and business acumen.” Several Philadelphia businesses stock their products, including the African Cultural Art Forum on 52nd Street. Freedom Paper challenges us to replace everyday household items with ones that are sustainable and community-focused, reminding us that change is made not through large, singular gestures, but through sustained daily habits.

## G: Grooming

Barbershops and hair salons are at the intersection of community life, self-care, and economic independence. During times of slavery, enslaved people were discouraged from wearing flashy clothing and tribal hairstyles. In the antebellum period, hairstyling became one of the ways that newly freed people fashioned their own identity and exercised creative agency. Today, barbershops and hair salons are the most common types of independent businesses registered to Black owners. Photographer Theresa Stigale produced a series of images of Philadelphia's Black barbershops reflecting on the importance of these iconic businesses: “Barbershops have a long, rich tradition as a gathering place for socializing and public discourse among Black men. Barbers play a key role as neighborhood

public figures who offer services in a welcoming and safe communal space, while sharing news, commentary, advice, and insight.” Barbershops and hair salons alike often serve as a “third space,” a place outside of both home and work where individuals come to share stories, hear news, strengthen social ties, and forge a style that is uniquely their own.



## H: Healing

Sovereign healing is holistic. It simultaneously takes into account the external, internal, spiritual, nutritional, and emotional being. Countless individuals have become certified in holistic and ancient healing modalities that allow them to heal their bodies, minds, and communities. Herbalism is a sovereign practice because it encourages knowledge of plants and their many properties as a method of healing. The Philadelphia-based company, Divine Natural Herbs, aims to demonstrate in practice and in product some of the ways in which plants can stimulate and sustain health, offering “a holistic approach to divine health.”

## I: Indigenous Sovereignty

Indigenous rights activism is strong in Philadelphia and has been supported by a number of individuals, such as the late Pocahontas Turquoise Sunrise Barbara Allen, who founded Indigenous People's Day and groups such as Indigenous 215, which is made up of Indigenous peoples in the greater Philadelphia area. These groups seek to foster community, promote awareness and education of Indigenous history and contemporary communities, and to support the urgent struggles for Indigenous rights, sovereignty, and self determination in Philadelphia. In honor of Indigenous sovereignty, the Delaware Land Wampum Belt records the conditions under which the Lenni-Lenape (or Delaware Nation) ceded a particular tract of their territory to the white man. Wampum belts are sacred items, composed of shells that are woven in intricate patterns to communicate history, laws, and agreements. Today, there are many initiatives to repatriate Wampum Belts stored from museums, historical sites, and private collections to their original communities. Some of these initiatives are being spearheaded by professors and graduate students at the Penn Museum. The design of the Delaware Land Wampum Belt represents the trails along the territory sold, as the Lenape retained the right to travel, hunt, and fish on the property.

## J: Justice

Founded by John Africa, MOVE is revolutionary Black living community committed to justice, fighting oppression, exposing capitalism, and celebrating the sovereign lifestyle of natural living. Members became the target of police brutality in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1978, nine members were sentenced to prison following a contested conviction for the murder of a Philadelphia police officer. The conflict between MOVE and Philadelphia city officials came to a climax in 1985, when a bomb was dropped on the community headquarters, killing six adults and five children. This remains a painful and open wound in our city's history.

Yet MOVE still flourishes today. During a historic MOVE conference in April 2017, youth poured across the stage, strongly communicating, "We are still alive, we are ONA MOVE." Most recently, the MOVE story inspired students of the Jubilee School in Southwest Philadelphia to raise awareness about MOVE and its history, resulting in a historical marker at 62nd and Osage streets.



## K: Kitchen

A central gathering place in the home, the kitchen is where cultural identities are affirmed, solidified, and shared among family. This is a kitchen from North Philadelphia that was used to feed community members and share traditional recipes from Latin America and the Caribbean. Made from repurposed materials such as wood, cinder block, tin, wire, and metal, the community kitchen installation was created by Raúl Brown from Norris Square Neighborhood Project, with contributions from Iris Brown and Marian Dalke.

## L: Land



Land—explorers traveled across mountain and sea to encounter it. Land has been the foundation of new nations, sparked war, built community, protected families, encouraged trade, and created barriers. What happens when land is covered over, reclaimed, renamed, or repurposed? What happens when former inhabitants of the land move elsewhere? What does the land remember that others forget? To represent this land, members of Soil generation, along with Keir Johnston and Ernel Martinez from Amber Art and Design, obtained soil from the Life Do Grow farm and walked it through North Philadelphia in a wheelbarrow before arriving at the Museum. Before there were nations, cities, or communities, there was only dirt, only soil. Thus, soil represents infinite possibility and unbridled potential.

## M: Masks

Masks and carvings from the Dogon tribe in Mali exemplify the craftsmanship, culture, and wisdom of the African people. The Dogon tribe is notable for its extensive astrological knowledge, long before scientific instruments capable of viewing the stars were known to humankind. These ancient masks are paired with contemporary cardboard masks made by children from the Norris Square Neighborhood Project. By placing these two types of masks in conversation with one another, we invoke both past and present, ancestor and future generations. This installation also includes a large, hollowed-out wooden carving that served as a communal serving dish, used during meal-time at large gatherings.



## N: Norris Square Neighborhood Project

Founded in 1973, Norris Square Neighborhood Project (NSNP) is an arts organization centered on Latinx culture and its African heritage. In the 1990s, NSNP joined with Philadelphia Green and Grupo Motivos, a female collective of Puerto Rican activists, to process the trauma inflicted on the community from increased violence and drugs in the decade prior. Together they repurposed the vacant land, transforming it into a safe, empowering, and communal space.

Occupying the center of this gallery, the two trees by artist Jasmine Hamilton are made from chicken wire, aluminum cans, and cardboard, ascribing new life to things we would typically discard. The nearby NSNP installation, with contributions from Adolphe Alexander, Sandra Andino, Iris Brown, Raúl Brown, Marian Dalke, Pedro Ospina, and Christian (TAMEARTZ) Rodriguez, recreates a casita, a traditional Puerto Rican garden shed often made from the debris of abandoned houses. The synthesis of wood, wire, crates, and household items that make up the casita's kitchen honor food, tradition, and community as central within the household.



## O: Oils

The production of essential oils, body oils, and aromatherapy oils are part of a booming business that allow people to employ themselves as itinerant or stationary vendors. The sale of oils is an example of a sovereign practice in that it enables individuals to be mobile, flexible, and self-sufficient. Oils sometimes copy famous scents like Chanel No. 5 or fragrances that attempt to capture the feeling of diaspora such as Egyptian musk and African queen.

## P: Planting

Seeds, seed banks, and planting are key to ensuring nourishment and survival. In contemporary Philadelphia, planting is incorporated into city life in many ways, from community pop-up gardens in concrete jungles, to herbs grown in tires and planters on residential porches, and to fruit stands that provide fresh produce. Inroads are also being created to expose community members to forms of green energy-power through solar panels, wind, hydropower, and other forms of sustainable energy. Today, seeds are becoming scarce as mass-produced, genetically modified seeds proliferate both in the United States and around the globe. This hand-operated seed planter from the 1920s honors the age old tradition of small-scale organic farming and is still in use by the Experimental Farm Network. Sovereign planting means having our own seeds and planting them, rather than yielding to businesses that wish to corporatize food production through the engineering of seeds.



## Q: Quilting

Quilting is more than a pastime, it holds historical and cultural significance. Historically, quilting was used by abolitionists to chart the pathway to freedom. Members of the Underground Railroad hung quilts in windows and across porch railings to signal safe passage to the North. Quilting is also a visual form of storytelling and cultural preservation. The PHLA installation includes two quilts. The first, made by Diana Larisgoitia and participants in the PHLA city-wide workshops, which depicts all fifty four African countries. The quilt is a contemporary representation of the continent, together with some of its iconic wildlife such as elephants, camels, and cheetahs. The second quilt, made by acclaimed textile artist Betty Leacraft, uses a specific technique to print historical photographs onto fabric. Leacraft's quilt depicts archival maps of Philadelphia's Kensington neighborhood from the 1920s, when the neighborhood was separated by nationality and ethnic group. The quilt is bordered by black-and-white photographs, documenting the turbulent history of Kensington across race, space, and time. The panels are separated by red ribbon, alluding to redlining across the city, which is the practice of denying services or access to neighborhood residents based on their race that still continues today.



## R: Repurpose

The repurposing of materials is one of the ways people maximize the value of what they have, using creativity, ingenuity, and resourcefulness to meet their basic needs. This transformative process is propelled by both necessity and imagination. Repurposing involves merging distinct elements to create something that has new meaning and function. Neighborhoods, too, are transfigured through the coming together of unique parts. Immigration, both foreign and domestic, has brought different cultures, races, and ethnicities into neighborhoods in ways that transform the landscape and give places new meaning. Land is also repurposed when vacant lots are transformed into community gardens, providing food and open-air classrooms where people learn to tend the soil. In honor of this practice, artist Jasmine Hamilton created a garden of trees made from repurposed materials including crates, cardboard boxes, wire, and cans. By arranging items typically thought of as trash, Hamilton invites the onlooker to imagine ways to give new life to the things we typically discard. Her decision to fashion these items into trees also speaks to the way recycled goods, through proper processing and reusing, can be disposed of in ways that encourage growth and a healthy planet. Repurposing pushes the limits of our own creativity and challenges us to be more responsible with what we produce, consume, and leave behind.



## S: Spirituality

Spirituality manifests itself in a number of rituals, practices, communities, and gatherings throughout the city. In honor of this diversity, the Toward Sanctuary dome invites visitors to practice their various spiritual beliefs within the safe space of a singular structure and look at different ways in which we provide Sanctuary. An altar is a designated space that where one may choose to honor ancestors, natural elements, or one's own spiritual guide. A series of altars designed by Charlyn Griffith is dedicated to the farmers, elders, and youth from across a network of urban gardens in North Philadelphia. With these altars, Griffith asks, "What if we saw our neighbors like they see themselves? Wildly, beautifully complex, we are places of worship."



## T: Textile

Culturally symbolic and essential materials for every age, textiles take on modern production technology while retaining historic significance and physicality. Charlyn Griffith first conceived of her textile work *NAH, WE Made This "Place"* as a chaotic meditation with community-generated symbols and definitions of terms like *community, creativity, place making, pattern, and control*. Drawing digitally and then printing on tightly woven polycotton canvas, she made the composition in figurative and literal layers. Says Griffith, "Our relationship to living beings which we see, hear, feel, touch and sense along with those things which we animate through our play and work. For this piece, we pay attention to pattern, and meaning woven along with fibers. Impressions made upon that fabric, beg us question why and how is it possible for us to be made invisible? Especially as others claim to "make place."

## U: Umoja (Unity)

Umoja is one of the seven principles of Kwanzaa, meaning "to strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation, and race." Unity is demonstrated through the formation of co-ops, the maintenance of urban farms, and also exemplified through family-run businesses and endeavors such as the African Cultural Art Forum, Hakim's Bookstore, and members of the MOVE collective who take the last name "Africa." These families exemplify unity across biological and non-biological ties, and epitomize the special resilience derived from collective strength, cooperation, and shared vision.

## V: Vision

What is your vision? Often, the images we see shape our perception of reality as well as our vision of the future. In attempt to reorient our vision of the city of Philadelphia toward sovereign people and communities, an interactive viewing station houses stories, conferences talks, speeches, documentaries, and creative nonfiction relevant to Africa and the diaspora, from the history of slavery, to mass incarceration, to the science behind melanin, to Islam. Visitors can select DVDs from the rack and watch the images themselves, emphasizing knowledge-building as a personal process, formed by independent discovery and autonomous decision making.



## W: WURD

The collection and dissemination of news is key for a sovereign community. Whether through the *Philadelphia Tribune*, *Westside Weekly Newspaper*, or other independently run news media, local people connect the city by sharing their independent voice. As the only Black-owned and operated radio station in Philadelphia, WURD privileges communication and dialogue as a route to empowerment. Founded in 2003, the independent radio station calls itself the “heartbeat and pulse of Philadelphia’s African American community.”



## X: Malcolm X

The historic figure of Malcolm X is portrayed in a silkscreen portrait. An acclaimed African American leader and revolutionary who boldly attacked racism, Malcolm X formed the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) and became a prominent figure within Philadelphia’s Muslim community. In West Philadelphia, a park named in his honor has his name engraved on each of its public benches.

## Y: Youth

Just as elders are important for the preservation and dissemination of historical knowledge, youth are key in ushering in a new future. Countless organizations such as the West Philadelphia YMCA and the Institute for the Development of African American Youth invest in supporting, inspiring, and securing the future of Philadelphia’s young people. A recent photograph of the MOVE organization honors youth by depicting the generations of young MOVE members that have survived and been born since the devastating 1985 bombings. The collective image of these young people sends a message of survival, perseverance, and growth. Also in this collection, cardboard masks made by Philadelphia youth illustrate the importance of future generations learning from the traditional practices and creative art forms of their ancestors.



## Z: Zeitgeist

Merriam-Webster defines *zeitgeist* as “the general intellectual, moral, and cultural climate of an era.” History, whether of the recent or distant past, is often told from the perspective of those in power, while the perspective of the vulnerable, marginal, and disenfranchised are largely deemphasized, disqualified, or silenced. This installation showcases daily and weekly newspapers from both mainstream and independent news sources. Their content captures the “spirit of the times” with special attention to the issues affecting disadvantaged populations and communities of color. When mining news for stories, as much can be learned about the spirit of the times from what is emphasized as from the stories and people who are left out. Hung above the NSNP Kitchen is a graffiti drawing created by artist Christian (TAMEARTZ) Rodriguez. The inclusion of this contemporary urban art form is a transgressive act, one that challenges us to be more reflective about the types of stories, experiences, perspectives, and creations that represent our present moment.



# Supermarket is the Enemy

## THE SUPERMARKET AS OPPRESSOR \*

Oppression is the language of our time, at least among thoughtful people. Women wrestle with the question, as they establish their own bearings. Men, aware of their pasts, view their own historic role as oppressors. We challenge many institutions, private profit and governmental, as oppressive. We view conformity --- especially fashions in dress, politics and life-style --- as oppressive.

The reaction to oppressive institutions and practices is often to resist them, to side-step association with those institutions that represent oppression by creating for ourselves new ways of thinking and doing and by creating alternative institutions.

Except in the food field.

Some people have edged slowly into cooperative forms of food distribution, small buying clubs, co-op food stores, meeting some needs cooperatively. But even those people return to the conventional and oppressive marketplace to meet needs not yet met through alternative forms.

Either because of a lack of clarity about the supermarket and its oppressive role in American society or because of uncertainty about alternative forms, many persons in social change movements have continued to rely on supermarkets, claiming either lower prices, convenience or lack of alternatives.

Evidence persists, however, that the private profit supermarket, as the dominant form of food distribution in the United States, is an institution that should not be used by persons of conscience. Radicals have chosen not to participate in war-making institutions; they have boycotted companies systematically oppressing farm-workers; they have not eaten beef for price and philosophical reasons. Now, perhaps, with greater clarification of thought, they may choose to avoid the supermarket, as such, not as a minor fly in the ointment but as a major institution oppressing people of all classes.

Consider the evidence, in no particular order of importance:

- 1) Food is produced by a field work system built in large part on poor wages, inadequate housing, little education for children, imported labor.
- 2) Increasingly, farm acreage is owned and controlled by large business corporations (f.i., oil companies), owning large farms as investments, replacing the old tradition of family-farming. "Agri-business" is interested in large-scale farming as investment, not as way of life.
- 3) Food processing is performed by marginal labor, low-paid, seasonal.
- 4) Food processing, increasingly performed by a narrowing group of companies, is burdened by additives and preservatives, many unnecessary and usually costly.

\*Offered for discussion purposes to the Movement for a New Society, to the leadership of cooperatives in the food field and to all persons concerned for a rational approach to the marketplace by the Rockland Movement for a New Society. Comments are welcomed by the Movement, c/o Sisuu-Olana, Route 45, Pomona, New York 10970.

# Coop By-Laws

## MARIPOSA, INC. BY-LAWS

### PREAMBLE

Mariposa, Inc. located at 4726 Baltimore Avenue, Philadelphia, PA, is a not-for-profit corporation which promotes principles of cooperative neighborhood action in West Philadelphia, primarily but not exclusively as a food cooperative. All activities of the corporation will conform to and exemplify such principles.

### ARTICLE I: MEMBERSHIP

Section 101: DESCRIPTION. Mariposa, Inc. is a membership organization.

Section 102: DUTIES OF MEMBERS. Membership is available to any person who:

102.1. Makes a cash deposit, in an amount determined from time to time by a membership meeting, to "Mariposa, Inc." This deposit will be refunded at the time of voluntary resignation if the member gives appropriate notification to the designated staff member. (The membership meeting defines "appropriate notification" and designates the staff member, as well as any specific procedures to be followed.)

102.2. Pays annual membership dues. The membership meeting or its designated representative will determine the amount and date of collection.

102.3. Signs a membership agreement, approved by the membership meeting, which covers work obligations to the corporation and explains the cooperative method which is central to all activities. MEMBERSHIP INDICATES A COMMITMENT TO WORK COOPERATIVELY IN TASKS AND IN DECISION-MAKING. IT INDICATES A COMMITMENT TO STRIVE FOR CONSENSUS IN DECISIONS (see Section 401) BY LISTENING TO ALL POINTS OF VIEW, ATTEMPTING TO REACH COMPROMISE, SUPPORTING THIRD-PARTY INTERVENTION IN A CONFLICT, LEARNING FROM THE STATEMENTS OF OTHER PARTIES TO A DISPUTE, AND AGREEING TO WAIT FOR PARTICIPANTS TO DEVELOP AND CLARIFY THEIR OWN OPINIONS.

102.4. Complies with any additional terms set by the membership meeting.

SECTION 103: RIGHTS OF MEMBERS. Members have the right to:

103.1. Participate in all activities of the corporation. Every member has equal voice and vote in a membership meeting. The membership, acting

as a committee of the whole, oversees and has ultimate responsibility for the activities and resources of Mariposa, Inc. They set and review administrative and financial policy, evaluate the effectiveness of programs and activities, take responsibility for long-range planning for Mariposa, Inc., hire and fire staff members, act as final determiners of the membership status of any individual, and delegate duties to appropriate persons or groups. A quorum of the membership (as stipulated in Section 402) may call special or emergency meetings in the same manner as regularly scheduled meetings (see Section 601).

103.2. Receive information about the status of the corporation and its activities, semi-annual financial reports and, at regular intervals, a corporate newsletter.

103.3. Amend or repeal these by-laws, according to the procedures described below in Article VII.

103.4. Enjoy any other rights or limitations or obligations which are approved by the membership meeting.

SECTION 104: COMPENSATION. Unless the membership meeting determines otherwise, no member will be entitled to any compensation for services as a member. Any member who serves Mariposa, Inc., in another capacity may be entitled to compensation as determined by the membership meeting.

#### SECTION 105: TERMINATION OF MEMBERSHIP.

105.1. Any member may resign voluntarily at any time by following procedures established by the membership meeting.

105.2. If any member fails to meet financial or work obligations or consistently behaves in ways incompatible with the cooperative principles of the organization, the membership meeting may expell the member. In such cases, no deposits will be returned.

### ARTICLE II: OFFICERS

SECTION 201: DESCRIPTION. The officers of Mariposa, Inc. shall execute the decisions of the membership meeting and represent Mariposa, Inc. in its dealings with other organizations.

SECTION 202: SELECTION OF OFFICERS. The membership meeting will choose three persons whose membership is in good standing as officers. Criteria and method of selection will be decided by the membership meeting. Officers serve until replaced.

SECTION 203: REMOVAL OF OFFICERS. Officers may be removed for cause at a called membership meeting at any time.

#### SECTION 204: DUTIES OF OFFICERS.

204.1. The secretary will see to the recording, maintaining and publicizing of all records of the decisions of Mariposa, Inc. in accordance with the pertinent sections of these by-laws.

204.2. The treasurer will be responsible for relations with agencies and organizations to which Mariposa, Inc. incurs financial liabilities and from which Mariposa, Inc. receives income. The treasurer develops and oversees an annual budget for Mariposa, Inc. and will report the financial status of the Corporation as required. The treasurer keeps custody of the bank accounts of the Corporation, maintains regular books of account, and has authority to write checks.

204.3. The convenor will call regularly scheduled meetings of the membership and will facilitate at those meetings (or designate a representative to do so).

### ARTICLE III: COMMITTEES

SECTION 301: DESCRIPTION. Committees may exist to carry out short-term tasks, develop and execute special projects, or take responsibility for an on-going activity of Mariposa, Inc. Whenever possible, service on a committee should be designed to increase membership knowledge and involvement.

SECTION 302: RELATIONSHIP OF MEMBERSHIP MEETING TO COMMITTEES. All committees are responsible to the membership meeting. The membership meeting may appoint persons to serve on committees or may delegate this responsibility to appropriate persons.

SECTION 303: THE MARIPOSA FOOD COOPERATIVE COMMITTEE. A standing committee will administer the affairs of Mariposa Food Cooperative. All paid staff, and other members designated by the membership meeting, will comprise the committee, which will meet at regular intervals, as determined by the committee. Any member may attend the meeting as an observer. The time and place of the meeting will be posted in a conspicuous area of the Coop.

SECTION 304: TERMINATION OF COMMITTEE MEMBERS OR COMMITTEES. Terms and conditions for the removal of a member from a committee or for the discontinuation of an ongoing committee will be formulated and ratified by the membership meeting.

### ARTICLE IV: DECISION MAKING

#### SECTION 401: USE OF CONSENSUS

401.1. Any decision made in a committee or membership meeting should be made by consensus (unanimous approval) if at all possible. As a first step, consensus always should be sought.

401.2. If no consensus is achieved within a reasonable time on crucial matters, then, with the unanimous consent of all members present, the meeting shall call for a vote, with a two-thirds majority of the members present to decide the issue.

#### SECTION 402: QUORUM.

402.1. No business may be transacted at a regular meeting unless a quorum is present.

402.2. For a membership meeting, a quorum will consist of 5% of all eligible members.

402.3. For a committee meeting, a quorum will consist of two-thirds of all eligible members of that committee.

### ARTICLE V: ACCOUNTING & BUDGET

SECTION 501: FISCAL YEAR. The fiscal year of Mariposa, Inc. will begin on January 1 of a year and will end on December 31 of the same year.

SECTION 502: ANNUAL BUDGET. A proposed budget for an upcoming year should be developed and presented to the members for comment and ratification by the December meeting of the previous year.

SECTION 503: SPECIAL PROJECTS. Special projects apart from the ordinary business of Mariposa, Inc. must be decided by the membership meeting.

### ARTICLE VI: MEETINGS

SECTION 601: MEMBERSHIP MEETINGS. Regular membership meetings will be held at least quarterly, (on the third Sunday of March, June, September and December, with time and place to be determined by the membership or officers of the Corporation and members of the Mariposa Food Cooperative Committee. Officers of the Corporation will be selected at the December meeting.

SECTION 602: SPECIAL MEETINGS. Any member may ask the convenor to call

a special meeting. The convenor must call such a meeting within thirty days of the request. If the meeting has not been called within this time, the member is empowered to call the special meeting.

SECTION 603: NOTICE. At least seven days' written notice of a meeting--which includes place and time--must be given to members, and a copy of the proposed agenda must be placed in a conspicuous area inside Mariposa Food Cooperative.

### ARTICLE VII: AMENDMENT

SECTION 701: PROCESS. Members may amend or repeal these by-laws at a membership meeting. At least fourteen days' notice must be given to all members, and the proposed change(s) must be given in writing to all members and must be posted in a conspicuous location inside Mariposa Food Cooperative. A two-thirds majority of all eligible members present is necessary to change a by-law if consensus cannot be reached.

SECTION 702: RECORDING OF AMENDMENTS. The text of all amendments must be attached to the by-laws. Each amendment must be dated (according to date of passage) and must be accompanied by a notation which indicates that, indeed, this amendment was adopted by the membership meeting in accordance with the stipulations in the preceding section(701)

### ARTICLE VIII ADOPTION OF BY-LAWS AND RECORD OF AMENDMENTS

These by-laws have been adopted as the by-laws of Mariposa, Inc. on February 12, 1984, and shall be effective as of the same date.

Witness: David Simon

Secretary: Phyllis A. Patow

#### AMENDMENTS

Section Amended:

Date Amended:

Adopted By:

# 52nd Street

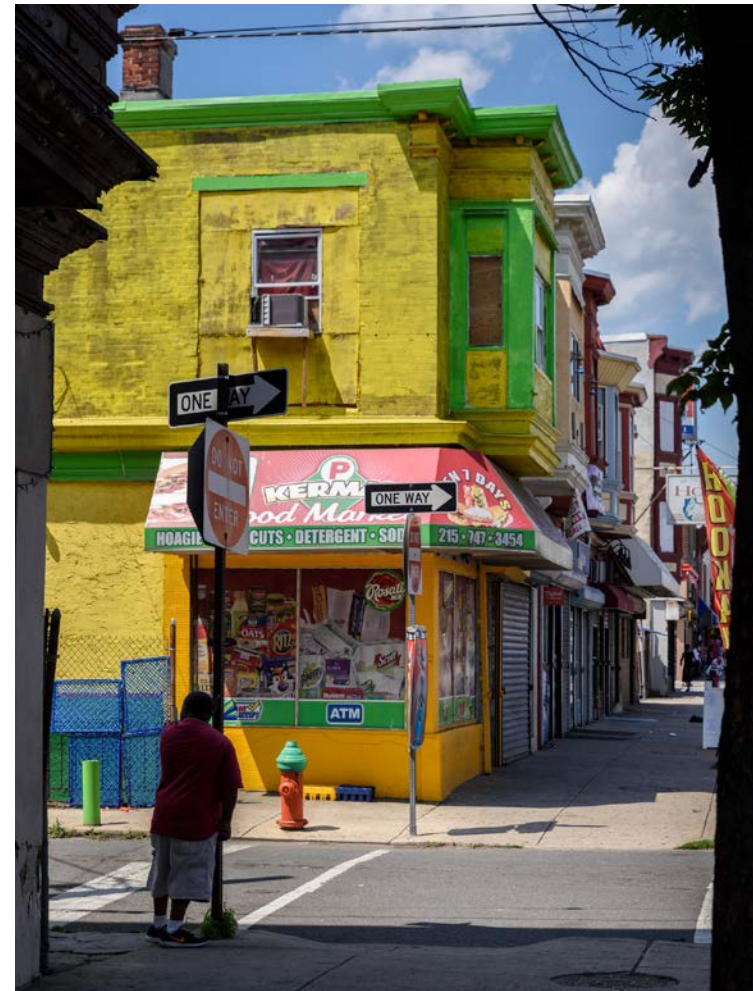
From horse and carriages to luxury SUVs, 52nd Street has been West Philadelphia's "main street" for over a century. "The Duece," as the street is also known, has been the setting for vaudeville theaters, dynamic Jewish enterprises, and the Radical Black Arts Movement. Economic booms and busts can be seen in the buildings located along the street. For instance, the current Bushfire Theatre of Performing Arts was established as the Locust Theater in 1914. The theater held vaudeville performances and by the 1930s was a movie theater, complete with a large Art Deco marquee. By the mid-1970s, the theater sat vacant. That is when West Philadelphia native Al Simpkins purchased the building and founded the Bushfire Theatre.

The theater initiated its forty-year tradition as a center of Black and African diasporic narratives. Stars like Loretta Devine and Morgan Freeman have attended the theater, while countless actors received their first professional gigs on its stage. These hidden gems are found throughout 52nd Street.

For example, Dynamite Pest Control has been both Black-owned and family-run for over forty years and had a cameo in a classic Blaxploitation film called *Trick Baby*. On the north end of 52nd Street, an impressive eight-story marble and white stone, building has held everything from jazz clubs to municipal space and banks. One of the most impressive hidden treasures is the African Cultural Art Forum (ACAF), located at 52nd and Chancellor Streets. This building once housed a jazz club that showcased the likes of John Coltrane. It is covered by impressive and richly colored murals of historic Black leaders. Inside the space is raw but brimming with priceless pieces of art and natural body products. It is also home to a wholesale incense manufacturing arm. Outside, the streets are filled with new vending kiosks that have replaced the plucky tables that once turned the street into what resembled a bazaar. For at least half of its history, 52nd Street has been a center for enterprising Black-owned businesses that have held and polished what had been divested.

The journey continues as the street now faces additional pressures with increasing gentrification. Yet, what remains constant over the past century is that 52nd Street will continue to be dynamic and filled with human treasures.

—Tempest Carter,  
52nd Street Corridor Manager,  
The Enterprise Center



# Voices of 52nd Street

The following interviews explore the trials and triumphs of small businesses in West Philadelphia, highlighting the perspectives of local business owners on economic sovereignty, community development, and self-determination. Interviews conducted by Cass Green, Franne McNeal, and Dianne Loftis.



## African Cultural Art Forum



Established in 1969, the African Cultural Art Forum (ACAF) is a community-based organization that manufactures and sells products by entrepreneurs throughout the African diaspora.

221 South 52nd Street,  
Philadelphia, PA 19139

### Hours

Monday–Friday, 9:00 a.m.–6:00 p.m.  
Saturday, 12:00–6:00 p.m.



**Dianne Loftis (DL):** ACAF has such a presence on the 52nd Street Corridor. It's not just a business, but a fixture in the community. What brought you to Philadelphia originally?

**Rashid Abdul Samad (RAS):** Before my brother and I came to Philadelphia, we were in Delaware. Martin Luther King got killed in April of '68. When we came here and opened our business in February of '69, it had a lot to do with what was going on with Martin Luther King. Delaware was under siege during that time, we had martial law in the streets of Wilmington. This city [Philadelphia] was more conducive to people of color—there's more of us here, more of us with the same understandings. We came as a group, and Philadelphia took us in.

We came here as a business, but we were always also involved in the social issues. We've always been committed to creating jobs and economic development. But this interview is kinda difficult because those social issues are the reason why we're having this conversation. In other words, some people must see us in a different light than we see ourselves.

**Cass Green (CG):** You'll be celebrating a 50th anniversary soon. Is everybody from the group that originally came with you from Delaware either a business owner or entrepreneur? Do you guys still work together?

**RAS:** Well, there's Sister Atiya Ola. But the problem I have with what we are doing now is like, where is the economy in these situations—where is the economy needed to save businesses? That's the problem I have with where we are now. We're in a social conversation, but we are not in an economic conversation.

I mean for us as a community, it might be glamorous, the idea that we lasted. 'Cause you know the community really supports us. The community has supported us all these years, and we worked hard to be in this position. But now we've gotta talk about what happens next.

**DL:** You were saying that you think there's a disconnect between the ways that you consider yourself, and your work, and what perhaps a project like (*Philadelphia Assembled*) implies about ACAF. Could you say more about that? Is that tied into that question of economics in relation to the social?

**RAS:** Yeah, the economic part. We're still trying to create jobs and we're also still involved in social issues. The social issues are just as industrious now as in the '60s. Same thing.

I want to reframe the Civil Rights Movement, by bringing it all the way from the Haitian Revolution to now. It's the same movement, you know what I mean? So, it's the same conversation. The civil rights movement didn't start with Martin Luther King. It started a long time before that, we fought for this position that we're in now. At ACAF, we've made our own way, we've built a business and a space for community, and there are similar models all across the country. Now we got to talk about where we go from here. Everybody is fascinated, like, "Hey, ACAF, you lasted!" But now, what's the benefit of the lasting? Of course, there's the social benefits that we enjoy for our own selves. In actuality, this is fifty years out of our life that we've been working to make ACAF an institution in the community, and we want that to have a lasting impact and a sustainable presence.

**CG:** Moving forward, what do you see as your call to action? You've talked, you've protested, you've walked, you've stood and now we're here.

So, as the elder with experiences, could you tell me what you define as action items, things we can do right here on 52nd Street in West Philadelphia?

AS: Well, of course we've got to renovate this building.

CG: To do what?

RAS: To manufacture more products for distribution in the community. We have young people manufacturing products, so we are also creating jobs for the young people. But even though we are manufacturing the products and also buying the products, the industry is still making more money. You see what mean I mean? How can we turn this around?

So many young people want to do things but don't have the opportunity because they don't have the economic means to make it happen. Creating that opportunity is a big part of our vision, and to do that, we need to increase distribution.

CG: Do you see yourselves as the teachers of economic traction? There are some practical lessons that go into maintaining a business and entrepreneurship. So with you being able to last, you're able to actually teach those. Would this become a hub for that too?

RAS: Well, it would be a hub for it because we can prove these issues. It's not like something in theory; we can prove it. As a matter of fact, we sell our products in the supermarket. Those are the biggest retailers in this area, in the Delaware Valley. We can prove that as long as we've got the items in there, they will generate money in a 360-degree circle, always returning it back to the community, because we are the ones supporting these supermarkets. But the whole community's gotta be open to that. It can't be something that we have to force the community to do.

I think we can change our economics in our community. I think we can use Philadelphia as an example, but that's an effort, an economic effort. It's not just a socialized idea. We're talking about economic exchange, not begging. With economic exchange we can make more opportunities.

CG: And it takes time to become an involved and secure marketplace business.

RAS: That's right. It takes time, but the community has time. We used to teach in class: How do you go to a store and get money without a gun? You gotta have something to exchange, you gotta have something to trade. Having nothing to trade, that's the biggest problem in our community. Mostly, what we're trying to trade now is entertainment and education.

DL: I wanted to ask a bit about the move here, to 52nd from 60th Street, and what it meant to move to this place.

RAS: Well, one reason why we moved up here was because of a program that we were involved in. The city was supposed to finance the renovation of the building. The program went out of business two years after we got involved, but we decided we would still keep the building.

CG: Was this a vibrant commercial corridor on 52nd at the time?

RAS: No, it was an abandoned building. Like that whole block across the street was abandoned. We were one of the few people who kept our properties, because everybody else didn't see themselves renovating without the program. 'Cause you have to realize it was abandoned to the degree that you could sit in the basement and look all the way through the ceiling.

CG: And what about 60th Street? Was that a vibrant area?

RAS: Well, actually I don't know. We weren't thinking about that because we were dealing with surviving. You know what I mean? We didn't have time to analyze that. The business reflected whether or not we could eat. So that was our whole basis right there. Because we used to vend at 11th and Market. You know we went through that whole scene down there, which was a whole other kind of scene. We had incidents where the police would just throw our stuff in the gutter, and send us back out here to West Philadelphia. You know, when people say business, it feels like another kind of word because you're really talking about survival over reality. People see business as being glamorous.



ACAF at 52nd Street, June 2017.



Photos: Timothy Tiebout, Philadelphia Museum of Art

**CG:** I was thinking that same thing! My daughter's an entrepreneur—she's a grinder. And people do think that it's all glamorous.

**RAS:** I love the young people's effort, but I'm really kind of sad at high school graduations because the children are so optimistic. They don't know the opposition. They don't have any clue of what they're up against in order to succeed. When you think about a young brother who's graduating from high school with a uniform on, and he's so happy that he's graduating, but he don't know, he don't have any idea, he might not ever realize [that opposition]. When he realizes that, he'll be an old man. He'll really be an old man.

**CG:** I have some other stuff that me and you gotta talk about later. What you just said about the young men and women and their optimism, what's your advice for moving on to the next? Because we gotta be able to do something. It can't be just talk, it's gotta be like a thing. It's gotta get action. It's gotta be a thing that happens, otherwise it's being set up with a smokescreen. You, having the experiences that you've had, what's your advice? I want advice to tell the young men and women that I work with.

**RAS:** Well, I'll tell you one thing. One thing I see different now than when we were twenty is that everybody is international now. It wasn't that we didn't have the money, we just didn't have the international flavor. International flavor is gonna give them a chance to see other people functioning in other countries. We're too domesticated here and we've got a lot to learn. We can't really develop from the same understandings.

I know one of the greatest experiences I had was when I went to Haiti. I'm originally from New Jersey and when I went there, it just opened my eyes to a whole other world. It's hard to explain because in New Jersey, you can't say anything. Anything. It's something that you can't realize unless you live under certain structures. To go somewhere else and not have to live under those structures, it's a whole other world. It's different than being part of a society and working. The opposition here is so tough, I wouldn't have kept coming back if it weren't for my brother. Because me and my brother had been in business all our lives together and we had to

stay functioning. Without that I wouldn't have come back here because the opposition is too hard. You're up against things—not because of your product line, you're up against things because of your color. We live with that opposition in everything. It's not like it went away. It's still going on.

We've been in these supermarkets since the '70s, right? A lot of the managers of these supermarkets are younger than we are. We've been in there longer than they have been in existence. And they still try to make pretend that they don't want us in the market. How can they make a decision when you've been in there since the '70s? There's no question about whether or not our products sell. Because if they weren't selling, they wouldn't be in there.

So you're dealing with that same opposition. But you get used to it. That's the other reality, you get used to it, 'cause that's part of your life. If you grew up with it, you don't really know a whole lot different.

**DL:** So for you is economic sovereignty about facing that opposition?

**RAS:** I think we learned something from the Civil Rights Movement. What we learned how to do was have these kind of conversations, to go to the next level. And I see that young people have more of a chance to make this change. But what I'm afraid of is that young blacks get hung up with the same things from the '50s and '60s. In other words, during the '50s and '60s, we had the hippies and the love children, so we were all in that one mood. By the time the young white people grew up to be thirty and thirty-five, they joined the system and got jobs, leaving us out on the front lines trying to figure out what to do. Before we were all smoking, hanging out, listening to music, and all that. So that's what I'm worried about is that young people don't get hung up all in the same thing. Because it's easy to be a young, white, and liberal because when you're young you ain't got no responsibility. But as soon as you get older, will you be as liberal? I want to make that clear so you can be conscious of that.

Now when I meet a guy, let's say my age—the question is, can he sign the check? Is he really who he said he was in the '60s? Now he has a chance to prove it. That's the whole conversation. And we both seventy years old. We gotta be open for conversations to go to the next level.

And that's why we're gonna need the buyers meetings at these supermarkets. Trying to have leverage in the market—that's economic sovereignty. That's what we're trying to draw out of the conversations. Not just the party, because we were not really involved in the show. That's not our real issue.

**DL:** What is the significance of the 52nd Street corridor for you? How do you respond to the framing of this economic sovereignty project on this place in particular?

**RAS:** Well I don't know how it got focused on this place. Because the thing I'm trying to develop is already going on. But my main interest is what we're gonna try to come out of it with, "cause the program must see something different than what we see".

**DL:** Well, it seems like the Sovereignty Working Group here has talked a lot about what can happen. But it's also been focused on recognizing businesses on 52nd Street...I guess my question to you is, do you see some kind of potential in thinking of the corridor as a strategic tool towards more economic sovereignty?

**RAS:** Well, I'll tell you. That's really part of our idea, and you have to realize that community will work either with the organization, or without it. We recognize that any success that we have strengthens the community. And what we're trying to figure out is how to build success with the other organizations, like we are in this project. It's like trying to join up, trying to marry.

When the tourists come to the city, they go downtown, right? Of course, we want some tourists to come out here, because we're also in business. But then there's also a social issue. So it's like, how do you blend those two? The working group for this project started having meetings downtown before we started meeting here. What I wanted everyone to do is to come here, to get out of their comfort zones, and to get into this comfort zone.

I see the corridor as very significant to the success of the whole thing. But really what is difficult in our community is the unemployment.

So we can make the corridor look glamorous, but there's still the unemployment in the community that's gonna be strong. I mean, that's just the issue.

**CG:** Gentrification is gonna be a real issue. The corridor can change, but the level of commerce in this neighborhood with the people stays the same. That's how gentrification happens. Because when the people with the money come in, it's really a delicate balance. It's like what you were saying about being married.

**RAS:** It's delicate. And it's delicate on us because we're involved in trying to make this marriage. And we're being exposed in the process. So whatever comes out of it has a lot to do with what we're involved in. So the question that we're asking is how would we make this transition.

**DL:** Yeah, what does it generate?

**RAS:** Yeah, you know, that's why I keep bringing up the idea of the party. Because the party is always easy. You know what I mean? There's illusion there. Everybody wants to party. That's why we stay focused on the other part. The urgency.

**DL:** How many people are involved in ACAF?

**RAS:** Well, that's an interesting question. That's why we always say we're a tribe, 'cause you know how many people over the years have worked here? So many people. So many different people. And we all consider ourselves one tribe. Matter of fact, what blows me out now is, people have grandchildren. And some of those grandchildren coming in, they're part of the tribe. And I don't even know them! You know what I mean? You don't know who is who because it grows out.

**DL:** Yeah, I can imagine. I've been in and out and there's always people flowing through.

**RAS:** That's right, and people in Philadelphia gave us that, our support base. Philadelphia made us a tribe.

# Hakim's Bookstore



Hakim's Bookstore is among the first African American bookstores in the United States and the oldest in Philadelphia, in business for over forty years.

210 South 52nd Street,  
Philadelphia, PA 19139

## Hours

Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, 2:00–6:00 p.m.  
Saturday, 11:00 a.m.–6:00 p.m.

Franne McNeal (FM): What's special about Hakim's Bookstore?

Glenda Cook (GC): Hakim's is really special because we specialize in Afro-American history and history novels, and most of them are written by black authors.

FM: Who typically comes into the store and why are they coming in?

GC: They're coming in because you can't find books like the kinds that we have. Some of our titles are not even in the libraries.

FM: Really?

GC: Yeah, you'd be surprised. People come here in search of their culture, or they just want knowledge about Afro-Americans, to know about their own history.

FM: If I had a child that was between, say, five and ten, what would be some books that are really popular that you find parents and grandparents often getting?

GC: I could do a whole list. As you can see, we have plenty of titles—between that age, more picture-type books. *Please, Puppy, Please* by Spike Lee and his wife. *I Love My Hair!* is in that age group. We also have a title called *Nappy Hair*.

FM: You're really close: 52nd Street isn't that far from the University of Penn, Drexel, Community College, downtown. For the college-age student, what might they find here in Hakim's Bookstore?

GC: Basically, history-type books, especially things like *From Slavery to Freedom*, which they actually use in college now.

FM: I'm here today because this is a festival day. 52nd Street is acknowledging the contribution of business people. What is the history of Hakim's?

GC: We have been in existence since the sixties. It was originally owned by the late Dawud Hakim, who actually got started with selling books out

of the trunk of his car. You can imagine back then, a lot of people knew a lot of history but he wanted people to know about their culture. Eventually the bookstore was on 60th Street, same kind of location, between Walnut and Locust. And then we were on 52nd Street, 52nd and Walnut, and then we came here. But we've been in business for fifty-nine years now.

**FM:** That's phenomenal. When Hakim started the store, what was his vision?

**GC:** His vision was to let people know about their cultural history. You didn't get it in schools then. You still don't get a lot of it now, but you really didn't get it then. His thing was to show people and teach people that they can learn about their cultural history.

**FM:** In approaching the sixtieth year of being in business, what do you and the owner see for the future of Hakim's Bookstore?

**GC:** Well, I'll tell you it's been a rough ride. We were on the verge of closing at one time. Myself and his daughter now run it. We see now that social media is the way to go. We've been doing different things to revamp the store by doing social media things, having book readings, book signings, things like that.

#### **A later conversation with Yvonne Blake**

**Dianne Loftis (DL):** So you were saying how your father opened a second store in Atlanta and was actually speaking at Morehouse College about black history pretty frequently. The vision for him of spreading the history of African American culture must have been really integral to the business idea.

**Yvonne Blake (YB):** That's correct. He became motivated to teach not only African Americans, but everybody about our culture, because at the time it wasn't being taught. And they weren't teaching it in schools—they weren't teaching it anywhere. So he got a lot pushback from a lot of people who thought he was crazy, you know? And it took a long time for the business to actually catch on, but he hung in there. He was impressed with J. A. Rogers's books: *100 Amazing Facts About the Negro* and *The Five Negro Presidents* and *Africa's Gift to America*. And he just went from there. He was just totally dedicated.

**DL:** Bringing it back to the principles of self-determination that were really building in the '60s and early '70s—were those conversations that he was invested in furthering?

**YB:** Yes, because the conversation was just starting then and it was still hard to get people to read books by African Americans about African Americans. By the time he located himself here at 52nd Street, this is where he actually made his business, and people started to say, "Oh okay, this man is selling books and these books are telling the truth and are what we want to learn." Because up until then, our history started with slavery. I attended Girls' High School, and that's all the history I got.

It just wasn't something that was being taught and it took a while, because you often have to encourage people to read. And a lot of people just didn't want to read. They were watching TV, reading magazines, but to try to get somebody to actually open up a book—especially a history book—was difficult. He would give people books. He was talking to young men and women that would come in the store and if they didn't have money for a book, I've heard many stories that he gave them their first book and that encouraged them to come.

**DL:** There's connectivity between the practice of owning a business and the content of the books that he was giving to people. That's kind of what we're looking at a lot in this project—what it means to be an entrepreneur and what kinds of freedom that can build for people.

**YB:** The entrepreneur part was a part of it, but his main desire that motivated him originally was to educate people. He just felt that there was knowledge out here and he wasn't who America was telling him he was. I mean he would tell me stories about how he would raise his hand in class, that there was racism in class, they would never call on him for the answer, but they would call on the white children and how they tried to lead him into a trade. That was a pattern back then, saying that you needed to go into a trade and not encouraging African American men to go to college. He was a bookkeeper for the City of Philadelphia. You know he was pretty much self-taught, and he did attend Cheney University for a while, but he had a wife and kids to take care of. But he taught himself Arabic—spoke fluent Arabic. He was just a self-made man.

# Urban Art Gallery



Urban Art Gallery is a venue where emerging artists can exhibit and sell their work, as well as a space for engaging youth and community programs.

262 South 52nd Street,  
Philadelphia, PA 19139

## Hours

Wednesday, 5:00–8:00 p.m.  
Saturday, 12:00–5:00 p.m.  
And by appointment

**Franne McNeal (FM):** How did you come up with the name, Urban Art Gallery?

**Karl Morris (KM):** There was a friend of mine that was going to do a festival garden; she was gonna call it Urban Rainforest. I thought that was a pretty cool name. It actually was going to be in West Philadelphia, but it didn't turn out to happen. I liked that she said Urban Rainforest. I said, "We're in an urban area. Let's create the Urban Art Gallery."

**FM:** Share with us who you are. Why this place? Why this space?

**KM:** We're right on 52nd Street, which is considered to be the main street of West Philadelphia. We've been here for four years now. I'm not an artist, nowhere near an artist, but I am an art enthusiast. For years since I was in high school, I took classes like art appreciation. I've been at art galleries throughout my travels. I love going to New York, Soho, and visiting those galleries, going down to the art gallery area down on 3rd and Arch [in Philadelphia]. When we were renovating the building, I was planning to rent this space out. I had a couple friends that were artists. They were saying that they could never get into the galleries downtown because it's like a secret society. A lightbulb went off and I said, "You know what? Let's do it here." Just to switch up a little bit what's going on in the area, bringing the arts to the community. That's one of the things in our mission statement—bridging the gap between the art world and this community.

**FM:** It's interesting that you would say there's a gap. In a lot of ways I think of African Americans as artists in their own right, just natural talent, very creative. What gets lost between a child, a teenager, and then the adult that gets to express their art?

**KM:** I guess throughout this area, there is no art in public schools. Now the kids can't express themselves through school anymore because they took that out. Then from being in this area, there's so many other things going on that are negative, that really art is not in their mind frame. Just the hustle and bustle of today's world, just trying to make it by. Bringing this here maybe refreshed their memory, or if it's not refreshing their memory, it's to let the kids see it firsthand. That's why I keep a piece in the front window.

And I see that all walks of life look up and see what's actually being showcased. I see it almost rejuvenating—kind of like, "Oh, man, that's beautiful." And that's one of our mottos: Art leads, life follows. So if they see the art and see that it's beautiful, maybe they might change their concept of how they live, in regards to just sweeping up, or just knowing that we can make this area better.

**FM:** Art leads, life follows. Very powerful. How do you get the artists to exhibit in this space? How do you find them?

**KM:** When we opened up, one of my main goals was to go to the schools. I just knew a few artists. I wasn't in the art world as in how they are around each other. I just went to the galleries. But when we opened up, it was amazing the amount of talent that just walked right past us. Then just people coming in saying they were artists and they would send me emails saying, "How can I showcase?" Really it's just been a great run in regards to them finding us. We don't even need to find them; they just come. And I really appreciate it. We're blessed with so many artists from email lists and just stopping in. I don't even need to go to the schools.

**FM:** Urban Art Gallery is on 52nd Street. When you started, what was your vision? Now that it's a few years later, has your vision changed?

**KM:** Yes. When we first got here, it was pretty much just to showcase the artists, just for the emerging artists, people that couldn't showcase downtown. As we were growing, we found that music is a form of art as well. Now we have music showcases when bands can come in here and perform live. From fashion shows, to culinary shows, to poetry, all of those are under the umbrella of art. We've expanded to include those, too. I didn't expect to do any programs for kids, but it just led to that. Now we have a free music program for kids, an art program for kids, and a jewelry-making program. Those are the things we want to continue to grow.

**FM:** 52nd Street has a lot of history. How do you fit into the historical fabric of the street?

**KM:** I've been around here for just about forty years of my life. I grew up right around the corner of 51st and Locust. There used to be a company called Philadelphia International with Kenny Gamble and [Leon] Huff, and that was part of 52nd Street. There was a lot of musical and artistic things that were going on on 52nd Street. It's almost kind of like bringing it back. And having people go, "I remember when it used to be like this," or just coming into the gallery. We almost try to bring that back and hopefully everybody can follow suit. We've got ACAF; they do a lot of art and cultural things there. Bushfire Theatre, they do their artistic thing there. Just trying to bring 52nd Street back to the artistic way that it used to be.

**FM:** In this space, you mentioned that there's art, there's music, there's dance, there's fashion shows. What's an event that you've held here that stands out in your mind as representative of what can happen in this space?

**KM:** The artwork that's up now. June is considered to be Caribbean-American Heritage Month. Me, I'm from Jamaican descent. This is our second year that we've hosted what's called Caribbean Creators. We bring in about six different Caribbean artists. Not only do we do the visual part, but we bring music, we bring the food in. It's almost getting a taste of the Caribbean. That's I think the thing I have the most fun showcasing, multiple artists, and just expressing themselves through different cultures. I think that's the best one.

**FM:** Collaboration is often important to get the word out. You're certainly working with 52nd Street vendors and merchants. Outside of 52nd Street, how are you letting this gem, this jewel, be known?

**KM:** It's word of mouth and social media. I hear a lot of people say, "I've heard about Urban Art Gallery." I work downtown and sometimes I might see an artist and I talk to them and say, "Have you heard of Urban Art Gallery?" They say, "Yeah, I've heard about it." It really feels good to hear that I'm heard downtown, in the city. I have friends of mine in Delaware County saying, "People have heard about your space." So mostly by word of mouth and social media. That's pretty much the best way.

**FM:** Are there any collaborations with some of the, I'll say, more traditional avenues of art, or the Avenue of the Arts?

**KM:** Not yet. I would love to do something with them. I guess sometimes I don't reach out too much based on my schedule. It's kind of hectic. But I would love to do something with an organization that really has a stronger name than us, that kind of will help us bring our name out a little louder. That's definitely in the making. Hopefully that happens soon.

**FM:** Tell me a little bit about why you got into this, you as an individual. You mentioned that you work. Do you open the building? Why 52nd Street? Why not another place?

**KM:** I know the neighborhood. I grew up around here. I was actually just going to fix this space up, just to rent it out. But I always tell my kid, you have to find a way to give back. You don't have to be rich to give back. You can just do something with your time to give back, a little bit of time. Like I said, just from talking to the artists and knowing that we're going to put it out here for the community, this is my way of giving back. There's not a lot of money in this, but this is a way that we can say we give back to the community. To say that the arts are something that you really need to appreciate, and see the beautiful work these artists bring out. And now my kids are involved. Now they're giving back. You know, so it's a family thing of us doing something that's our way of giving back. That's the main thing.

## Michael Rashid



Michael Rashid is a former healthcare chief executive whose work with the Philadelphia Community of Leaders cultural committee led to the 2017 launch of the "iBuyBlack" discount card, which can be purchased at [iBuyBlack.org](http://iBuyBlack.org). Participating businesses provide discounts of up to 15 percent on their products and services to cardholders. Rashid was present at the Marketplace: Seeds of Sovereignty on July 25, 2017, to speak about economic development.

**Dianne Loftis (DL):** I would love to hear your thoughts about how important it is to have businesses like ACAF participate in the iBuyBlack campaign.

**Michael Rashid (MR):** I'm gonna tell you a story. My grandfather worked for a peddler, a Jewish peddler in Birmingham back in the day, this is 1900 or whatever. And this Jewish peddler was just like you see guys on the street with a table here on 52nd Street. He was a little peddler in Alabama, and he peddled, and he peddled, and he peddled. And one day, he got a wagon, and my grandfather continued to work with him on his wagon. Instead of having just a table, he had a wagon. He rolled around with the wagon, peddling. Soon he opened a store. And the store grew and rolling the clock forward about twenty-five years, this guy had the biggest department store in the city of Birmingham. It's his department store. He ended up selling to Macy's, he made money, his family made money and all this other stuff. So it's businesses like this, on this corner, whether it's Market Street or 52nd Street—this is America. And us trading with these kinds of people, these people can grow into big businesses. But the current state of the African American person is, as I said a few minutes ago, we unconsciously or unintentionally, we boycott our own businesses. And there are a lot of reasons for it. But the fact of the matter is we don't spend money with our own people. So we started this iBuyBlack card, and anybody can buy a card—we hope all nationalities will buy the card to support Black businesses. So the idea is to give people an incentive to go and spend money with African American businesses, and we know that if that happens, it can create jobs for African American people. There was a scientist who studied the African American community, and this person said if we just spent 9 percent of our dollars with Black businesses, if African Americans just spent 9 percent of their dollars with Black businesses, we would wipe out unemployment in our community. Not 100 percent—just 9 percent.

The brother here at ACAF was just telling me that he has products that the Dominican stores around here don't buy from him. They'll go way up to wherever and buy the same product he's selling for the same price, because they don't spend money with him. Well, that has to change. That's a psychological problem that our people have that we don't realize how important that is, the idea of spending it with your own people, how important that is to the growth of community.

So we have the card, the iBuyBlack card. [Mayor Jim Kenney] came to our press conference and bought a card. The mayor endorses this program. A reporter came up to the mayor and he said, "Don't you think this is racist?" He looked to me and he said, heck no, this ain't racist. Listen, Irish spend money with Irish people and ain't nobody thinks twice about it—it's natural. You keep the money in the family, it's only natural. It's just a natural impulse to spend money with your own people. We've been cut off from that. And having been cut off from that, our communities are just going down. And they gonna continue to go down.

Can I tell you something else? I'm excited about this statistic I just learned. How many African Americans are there in this country? About 39 to 40 million. The gross national product of African Americans is \$1.4 trillion, which is almost the same as the entire country of Russia. So we've got fewer people, but with the same income as 144 million Russians. So this is what you see. The poverty, the unemployment, and the crime—this is what you see when your money doesn't circulate in your own community. When I heard that statistic, it blew my mind. We have the same amount of money. Same amount of money in African American communities. But it goes out to other communities.

**DL:** Yeah, definitely. What do you think is the potential of a corridor like 52nd Street being a space for Black businesses? What is the significance of a historic center like that?

**MR:** I mean, it used to be back in the day, it used to be. But then we got integrated and with easier transportation methods, we don't have to spend our money here. We can go downtown or out to King of Prussia, so these businesses here dry up. People have to be more conscious of where they spend their money.

These places are extremely important. Extremely important. I mean, this is culture. You can't get this feeling elsewhere. And you know there's a feeling right now. You don't get this on Market Street or in other places. It's important for our kids to see community, and it needs to be built up. This is our community.

## Brother Esau



Brother Esau is a longtime vendor of cultural artifacts and accessories. He led a jewelry-making workshop in collaboration with *Philadelphia Assembled* in May.

114 South 52nd Street,  
Philadelphia, PA 19139

**Cass Green (CG):** Brother Esau, can you tell us a little bit about how long you've been on 52nd Street, and your experience as one of the business owners here?

**Brother Esau (BE):** Well, I've sold all over America. And I've been overseas to buy. But I'm a merchant, a merchant artist. And when I started this business, I was the youngest one out here. Now I'm the oldest one out here. So we're looking at forty-plus years. But where I'm at now, I've been here maybe about ten years. I've also been downtown, had two stores in Philly, two stores in Atlanta, two stores in New Orleans, which is something I don't want anymore.

Right now, what I'm aiming to do is open up a cultural art center. Because I'm not just a merchant of my art, I make most of my jewelry. And there's some that I wanna pass on before I get too old. But I just gotta building for lease on the 5200 block of Market Street, where I plan on having our cultural center. We're gonna start out teaching jewelry making. Then we're gonna go from there to drumming, dancing, and other skills that we have in the community that our people are willing to teach. But we're gonna start off with drum, dance, and jewelry making, and that should be within the next four weeks.

**CG:** So Brother Esau, can you talk about what you've seen happen in the area over the last ten years in terms of being a merchant and business, and the community, and the businesses, and what happens here on 52nd Street?

**BE:** Well, the land always changes hands. They say African American people had a great many of these business here. But the worst thing about 52nd Street is that our own people don't support us. Black people are used to buying from other races, or other accents, or other colors and for some reason they seem to run away from their own kind. So our people have lost a lot of these businesses, because the businesses couldn't survive. And people with money, or people who was able to get loans and grants or credit, they now own the majority of the businesses on 52nd Street.

**CG:** So what do you think we could do to move forward outside of the cultural center, but to change the future and make sure we got a place in this market?

**BE:** Well, I think it's happening from what I can see. I see young people being more conscious, which is the key. I went to an affair last week that the young African American people sponsored. And it was about empowerment. So I think we have a chance because of the young generation, now they're identifying with themselves and our culture. And I see it growing. But the ones who have been in it just have to stand firm. And continue the businesses and give them a chance to grow.

In this business, I've been there—sometimes I ate, sometimes I didn't eat. But I stayed with this culture over forty years, and it's paying off now. It's paying off because not only is it good merchandise, it's in style now. But I don't know anything else, so this has been my life forever.

**CG:** Artists have the starving artist reputation. Being an artist —'cause I'm an artist too—what's your advice beyond "sticking with it" to build prosperity?

**BE:** Make the merchandise affordable for everyday people. The items that I sell that are culturally related to Black people, African people. These are my cheapest angles, because I want everybody to have it. I would try to make less profit on the things that we make, or the things that we import things that Black people make, I make less profit on that. Because it's our stuff, and if we don't make it affordable to the people, it'll never become an everyday item. And it's the everyday item that makes money.

**CG:** If you could vision 52nd Street five or ten years from now, how do you want it to look? What do you want it to look like?

**BE:** I haven't thought about that. I just like to see our people get in business, period. No matter where they are. 52nd is in our hood, but it doesn't look like it's gonna always be our hood, because there's already gentrification in here. And they call this area Walnut Hill now. University of Penn has bought everything from the university all the way up to 52nd Street and they renamed it Walnut Hill. So we don't even know how long this will be the hood. So what would I like to see for 52nd Street? I'd just like to see our people get into business more.

**CG:** Okay, anything else? Words of wisdom you want to drop on us before I go?

**BE:** Well, the main thing is, at my age, as a senior my aim is to pass everything I know to the younger generation, or to anyone who will practice it. Because I would hate to think I take all my secrets to the grave. My words of wisdom are, don't take it to the grave.

**CG:** Thank you, thank you so much. That's powerful—don't take it to the grave.



## 2nd Threadz



Kelly Townsend is the owner of 2nd Threadz, a boutique that opened in 2017 on 52nd Street.

205 South 52nd Street,  
Philadelphia, PA 19139

### Hours

Monday–Saturday, 10:00 a.m.–6:00 p.m.

Dianne Loftis (DL): Can you tell us a little bit about your store? What you sell here? When did you open?

Kelly Townsend (KT): I opened the middle of April. I started out with just five little racks trying to do high-end consignment, but it turned into something totally different. I do have some big names that the kids would like—I have some True Religion, I have a bunch of Ralph Lauren. I probably sold about all the Lucky Brand. Lightly used, some stuff new with tags at the consignment.

So I have several people in the store who consign clothing. And then I have a bunch of different brands, the self-made designers. These are the ones that we did the fashion show with. It's like trying to bring something fresh to the neighborhood and say, hey look, I'm not out there running the streets, this is what I'm doing to be creative. We did a little competition and the winner of the fashion show was a clothing line called Women Hustle Harder. She actually took clothes and kinda chopped them up and did all kinds of different, fresh things with them, some really creative cute things.

Cass Green (CG): Were they from the neighborhood or other places?

KT: Most of the guys were from West Philadelphia. One guy came all the way from North Carolina just to be a part of it.

DL: Was the fashion show something that you did in tandem with your opening?

KT: Yeah, so I did a grand opening in April. It wasn't so grand. It was cold and rainy. So, I said, well, I wanna do something else to bring people in the store. It was really nice. I did it here, from the back room straight up through the front door, and they showed off and I had a photographer and DJ.

CG: They loved it, they loved it. And your audience was a different audience. You had the young kids and the young adult audience. And they was packed out there like, we was in Hollywood right? It was really awesome.

**KT:** It was like, I wanted attention to the store, but I also wanted to show that, you know, there are young men doing other things.

**DL:** Was the appeal of selling clothing partly because of that opportunity to platform other people?

**KT:** No, but it kinda turned into that. Now I'm making T-shirts, too! Originally it was supposed to be kind of like Plato's Closet or Greene Street, but trying to bring that to the neighborhood. That kind of consignment is mostly downtown or in the county. Trying to just bring something different to the area.

**CG:** What made you come to 52nd Street?

**KT:** I grew up around here and I know people like nice stuff but they don't wanna pay for it. And when my kids were teenagers, I would take them to Plato's Closet, because it's like, "I'm not paying that much for a pair of jeans, it's ridiculous. No, here, you take \$20, get a whole outfit." Having kids, they wanted certain things, but I wasn't able to support them. I think I kind of wanted to share that. My daughter, well she's twenty-one, my son's twenty now, so I've watched them shop, and it's like, why can't I do this, start a business? People can't make it out to the counties, but we offer the same quality right where you live at, right? You could walk to it. I wanna be different from all the other stores on the strip.

**KT:** Yeah, it's really important to be considerate of the consumer here, too. I grew up shopping around here. And the biggest thing that I did was 52nd Street, main street of West Philly. Now people come in and they're like, I love this shirt. You don't have my size. So I'm like, what size, what color would you like? Can you match these sneakers? Sure, give me twenty-four hours.

**CG:** So your business is evolving!

**KT:** Yes. It's turning into something different, and I love it.

**CG:** That's awesome. I gotta tell everybody the story about your fashion show, because I know in our communities, we love fashion shows and talent and design—we love clothing like this.

And that was a space that it seemed like nobody had really touched here. So what are your thoughts or feelings about that for the future, and economic sovereignty for our future?

**KT:** So a big part is marketing, not only myself but the neighborhood. If people don't know about 52nd Street, they're not gonna know about the shop. So I mean, first and foremost, is to let people know that there's some fresh stuff going on around here. That's not always knockoffs, and stuff like that. But, I mean, I kind of wanted to do this maybe every season or maybe twice a year, have the fall and spring lines. I'm hoping that more businesses will come around, more diverse.

**CG:** Have you got any connections with the local businesses already?

**KT:** I've spoken to some people. I've made friends with some people. Yeah, some of the bigger businesses, not really, but the vendors. Everybody stays pretty friendly. And I really love the diversity of it. We have so many different cultures in my area. A little something for everybody.

**CG:** I was having this conversation with corridor managers about gentrification. What does it take to be here, to make money to live and get the price down? Have you thought about your space and ways to try locking it down against the gentrification shift? Have you thought about that at all?

**KT:** I'm just having a good time now, trying to stay afloat.

**DL:** What things could benefit you as a business owner trying to stay here?

**KT:** I'm thinking if I can get a bunch of faithful customers and they spread the word of mouth and get enough people to keep coming. Even different people from other areas, like, "Hey, let's check out this boutique." I would love for this to be a destination shop. It's small, but online I was reading there are destination consignment shops. But I have to build a strategy. I know that the Enterprise Center does have workshops and stuff like that. But I haven't had the chance to reach out and get those resources yet.

DL: So a few months in, what has your business given you so far? How are you feeling about it?

KT: It feels good to be on my own. I like being able to do different things. But I know down the line the bills are gonna start piling up if people don't keep coming in. Overall though, it's a awesome feeling.

CG: I know a lot of entrepreneurs. Would you have any advice for making sure you can take charge?

KT: I would say, stay open to new ideas. People make a lot of suggestions, so don't be quick to say no or turn it down. Think about it: it could be some good advice that you could use.

## Tha Shop on the Strip



Christopher Anderson is the owner of Tha Shop on the Strip, a local barbershop.

257 South 52nd Street,  
Philadelphia, PA 19139

### Hours

Monday - Saturday: 8:30 a.m. - 6:30 p.m.

**Cass Green (CG):** How long have you been on 52nd Street, and what brought you here?

**Christopher Anderson (CA):** Well, I've been up here for about seven years. I always wanted to be on 52nd Street because it's a commercial neighborhood.

**CG:** Seven years! So have you seen a lot of change happen on the avenue? Do you own this building?

**CA:** No, I'm still working, but my plan is to buy it.

**CG:** And how is business been since you've been on 52nd Street?

**CA:** I'm blessed. I've been fortunate to always been blessed in my business. I've had a shop on 52nd and Walnut, too, before. And on 54th and Spruce.

**CG:** And then you employ other people as barbers, right? What do you feel your impact is with that?

**CA:** Well, I take it seriously to give someone a chance to make a living. That's nothing I take lightly. And I try to keep people who really want to be barbers.

**CG:** I do community outreach and engagement, so I know that the barbershop is like the hub for African American men overall. What do you feel like your space means for the neighborhood? What's this place?

**CA:** Well, for me, myself, I know that you have youth looking at me as a young, Black business owner. You know what I mean? I talk to them about education. I explain to them about credit. I do talk to a lot of kids about life and how to hopefully become self-sufficient as adults. Because especially a lot of young men don't have fathers, or don't have male role models. So as a barber, if you want to step into that position, you do have the chance to talk to kids and maybe mold them. You know there are some times that literally kids come around here at night before you close and they're trying to do anything, sweep just to get some money to eat. I do take the position of barber seriously. I think that we are the ground level of dealing with our community, especially from the men's side of it all. I think that's true.

**CG:** What do you want to see happen on 52nd Street? What's the future?

**CA:** I would like it to stay. I don't want to get into the Black or white thing, but I'd love it to stay where it's primarily us. But I see gentrification and things like that—in the next five years there probably won't be the 52nd Street you see today. It might be like the next South Street part two up here. But I don't see it being the way that it is today. No, no. The vendors are not gonna be here. I don't think a lot of these little knick-knack stores, I think that will be gone eventually. Probably real estate is gonna change so this a little bit more open to boutiques, things like that. Right now we don't have a lot of viable store folks, but there will be a little bit more of that. We believe that in the next ten years that it'll be much more valuable to schools up here.

**CG:** So this project with Philadelphia Museum of Art and Philadelphia itself, it's about sovereignty, economic sovereignty. How do you feel like your space and other Black businesses on the corridor can make sure that we've got a place in whatever happens, so we have sovereignty and economic equity as things grow out?

**CA:** I think a lot of us don't cross our t's and dot our i's all the way. We look at business as more of a hustle. A lot of us don't have an EIN [employer identification number], business accounts, business plans. And that's something that you have to learn. I've been doing this over twenty years now, so I've learned that you need that to be a valuable business, so when there comes the chance to build and expand, you'll be legitimate on paper.

I do think that from our standpoint, we don't think enough like that. We don't think about business as a real business, we think about how to survive today and not what we could do for the future or what we could do for our kids. So we as a people have to look at ourselves, take more of an investment in ourselves. I don't think we invest in ourselves enough. It's like, we talk about the gentrification. I'm forty-three and as long as I've been around here, it's been predominately Black.

And I know beforehand it was more probably whites, but now you've got Blacks who have been living in this neighborhood for thirty, forty years and never bought the products. So when you say gentrification, I'm not blaming nobody. A lot of people don't even know how to save money in our community.

So when I see 52nd Street ten years from now, we may be pushed out. A lot of us seem to be trying to stay below the radar. But who can be successful under the radar? Everybody that's successful actually takes the chance to step out there and do it the right way, and I think we're lacking in that aspect. We don't have experience in how to do things right. Me, myself, I go back to the '70s, '80s, I look at how the Chinese people came over with the Chinese stores and now with the '90s, the 2000s, then look at Dominicans. They're on every corner in our neighborhood. There's no more mom-and-pop Black stores over here. But we gotta find a way to get back to doing things, and that must be viable. Because as you said, ten years from now, it's not going to be the same anymore. It's not.

I'm part of the 52nd Street Business Association and I've been to meetings where I've been the only Black person, and that's relevant to collectiveness. All the Asians sell the same product, they all know each other, they all buy in bulk. But the Blacks don't do the same thing: they sell the same product, but they all do it individually. You lose out every time as individuals. And crab in a barrel is true, but we need to somehow get in the barrel and not pull each other down, but pull each other up. Because everybody else does it.

**CG:** So as a forerunner in the neighborhood, if you had a chance to put in writing to say what's next about economic sovereignty on 52nd Street for Black businesses, what would be your advice?

**CA:** From the Black business side of things, I'd say be prepared. When the opportunity comes, be prepared to strike. I mean that's the best that I can tell anybody. If you wanna own a business, you know you got to have a business account, you know you gotta have an EIN, you know you gotta have insurances, so be prepared with the paperwork when it's time for it, because it will come. So for me, I would say be prepared, educate yourself, and just get yourself in line. That's the best thing I can tell anybody.

## Dynamite Pest Control



The oldest operational business on 52nd Street, Dynamite Pest Control is now run by Richard Foreman, the son of the original owner. Foreman has extended the Dynamite name to new enterprises in real estate and automotive care.

279 South 52nd Street,  
Philadelphia, PA 19139

### Hours

Monday–Friday, 8:00 a.m.–6:00 p.m.  
Saturday, 8:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m.

**Richard Foreman (RF):** This is me and my dad from 1982, outside the store. We've been here since 1969.

**Dianne Loftis (DL):** That's amazing. Look at you, running off. That's great.

**RF:** Did you see the new hair salon across on the corner? We have something to do with that salon.

**DL:** Oh, really? How old is that?

**RF:** Two weeks, July 1.. We do a lot for the community, a lot as far as to help people make more money and stability. I invested in it. They were across the street, and I own the property. And we make our money back; I'm the landlord.

**DL:** How many properties do you have along 52nd Street?

**RF:** All together in the neighborhood, five. And they're all commercial. But we used to live upstairs in this building.

**DL:** Was that typical growing up in the neighborhood? Were there a lot of business owners who lived above their spaces?

**RF:** It was typical—actually it's happening now. My neighbors there, they live upstairs. Down the street, there used to be a guy, Mr. Nick. He was a photographer. Him and his kids lived upstairs. Where the appliance place is, that's where it was. He had both buildings and then they lived upstairs on the one side of the building.

**DL:** Interesting. Do you have the impression that there's been a lot of change of ownership around here?

**RF:** Yeah. As far as right now, a lot of the Asians have sold their sneaker stores. Their kids went to college, so they're doing a corporate job and don't want to do the mom-and-pop entrepreneurship. Whereas I have children myself, a three year old and a two year old, and I'm gauging up for entrepreneurship, for freedom. And I think that's where society is going right now.

**DL:** Interesting to think of raising your kids for entrepreneurship. How are you doing that?

**RF:** Number one, they stick behind me. And two, kids are sponges so they learn what they see.

**DL:** And what did you learn from your dad? Was the idea of also supporting neighboring business, like helping people open the hair salon, was that something you learned from your dad too?

**RF:** My dad only had this and that was it. I have four different businesses. Hair salon, real estate, auto detailing and car wash, and pest control. My dad taught me about hard work, about you just can't sleep in. You know what I'm saying? Nothing's going to come to you—you've got to get out every day and give it your best.

But I learned a lot from Kenny Gamble. He's my neighbor next door, and he owns across the street, but he built up his own community down South Philly, and he lives right there. He owns the Universal schools and stuff. If you ever hear oldies songs from the '70s, he owns those songs. He was a producer and songwriter.

It started off with him just being my neighbor. And I just watched him and his philanthropy as far as his Universal companies, which is Universal Charter School in his own neighborhood and he has Universal Construction. The thing is, you provide job opportunities for your own people and your own resources. I admire that about him. And that's what I do with the Dynamite name. Everything is Dynamite: Dynamite Pest Control, Dynamite Detail Car Wash, Dynamite Realty Company—because that stands for my dad's legacy of forty-eight years. That helps open doors for business opportunities, because at the end of the day that is a long-term brand.

I used to live on the West Coast. When my dad passed away, I came back here because my family didn't have the money to keep it going. In the year 2009, this was the only rehabbed property on 52nd Street. And it wasn't 'cause I said, "Let's rehab it." It was because we were having issues—rain coming in, things like that. So I just gutted the place and updated it.

In 2010, that's when the city started the Corridor, Obama [Promise] Zones, and things like that. That's when things got revitalized.

DL: When did you realize that supporting other businesses on 52nd Street was something that you wanted to do?

RF: When I was young, I made a good amount of money. But at the end of the day, once you buy as much material stuff as you would like, there's no point in it. It's about giving back and building your community. That way you can be supportive.

DL: Yeah, that makes sense. Having worked with a new business owner here, the new salon, why do you think someone would choose to open a business on 52nd Street right now?

RF: To make more money, have more opportunity, and also to branch out on their own. Because whoever they're working under isn't paying them well enough. With my neighbors across the street, I went to them to look for people and then they decided they wanted to be the people. Then I didn't just go, "OK, it's a win-win for everybody." I said, "OK, why do you want to leave where you're at right now?" "I've been working there for nine years and none of us got a raise." I'm like, "Really?" I sit down and I educate people. I'm like, "Do you have your business insurance? Do you have this? Do you have that?" And they're like, "I'm going to go online and pay somebody \$300 to do it." I'm like, "Nah, that's free!" So I sit down with them at a computer: "Here's your EIN number. Here's the name of your salon," you know? You pay \$125 to the state. Let me show you how to fill out this form. Then there is it—you're registered with the state. Then I take them down to the municipal building. You go down here, get a tax account number, get a commercial activity license. After that, "OK, this is what you do, this is how you do it." Anything else, I'll help mentor you and make sure you're successful. I feel I would be doing a disservice if I just collect rent and let the business flop and get somebody else in there. That's not fair.

It's also a ten-year business agreement, so if they don't do good, we don't do good. Everything is a reason in the season. The thing is, you show people and you teach them so then they can teach somebody for their children, and their children's children, and they can keep moving forward.

## Brown Sugar



Brown Sugar is a casual bakery and restaurant featuring Caribbean-style pastries and a full menu, on the corner of Chancellor and 52nd Streets.

221 South 52nd Street,  
Philadelphia, PA 19139

### Hours

Monday–Wednesday, 9:00 a.m.–10:00 p.m.

Thursday–Saturday, 9:00 a.m.–11:00 p.m.

Sunday, 11:00 a.m.– 8:00 p.m.

Dianne Loftis (DL): How do you describe Brown Sugar?

Jesse Joseph (JJ): It's Caribbean food, basically Trinidad. And our main feature is the roti.

DL: I assume you're Trinidadian.

JJ: Yes, I'm Trinidadian.

DL: Do you live in the neighborhood?

JJ: I'm living here since 1976. I came right to West Philly. And I've been in West Philly ever since. I've had the business since '99.

DL: What made you decide to start a business of your own?

JJ: I was born into business. My dad was a businessman. He had pharmacies; he was a pharmacist. When I came over here, I went to school for business so it just made sense, yeah. I saw the need for this type of food around me.

DL: Were you influenced at all being here on the corridor, given that there's such a strong culture of entrepreneurship?

JJ: Yeah, because before I had my business I worked with another guy that had a business, Uhuru Restaurant up at 52nd and Market.

DL: Interesting. What did you learn there, when you were working with Uhuru?

JJ: I learned a lot about business, about the community, and about help within the community, whatever it is. I always help with the athletes when they come for the Penn Relays. I send food; I sponsor food. The people that run the big organization which runs all the athletes coming from the Caribbean, they do all the sponsoring for them. I worked with them when I worked with Uhuru. They always came to them and we always fund them. We all became friends. And then when I opened up my spot I started sponsoring their food.

DL: Do you go to Trinidad often?

JJ: I'm a steel drum player, so I go down from time to time to play the steel drums.

DL: It makes so much sense because this restaurant is always exploding with sound. It's something that's very particular about eating here. You get enveloped in the greenery and rich food and the beautiful music. It's really a trip. Walking on the street you wouldn't necessarily know how it shines inside of here. Has that been important to you, to have a certain environment?

JJ: Yeah, that's important. The quality of food, the taste of the food, the upkeep of the place, that's all important.

DL: It definitely feels welcoming. Who normally comes in? Do we have a lot of regulars?

JJ: We got a lot of people coming from all over, a wide range of people. We've got people coming from Jersey, Delaware, everywhere. I did a lot of things with University of Penn. A lot of students come up, especially since I do the Penn Relays, a lot of people know about it. We always advertise on the Drexel University radio station. Right now every Saturday they have Caribbean Day. I've tried to keep the quality of food, and also I'm the one doing a lot of the roti, the double...

DL: You're doing the cooking?

JJ: No, I'm not doing the cooking. But I can cook also. My mum is a very good cook, baker, and everything. I grew up with her always doing these things. I'm always in the kitchen with her, and would always go to the market with her to buy the stuff when she would cook. She gave me a lot of knowledge from small coming up. Then I worked in a roti shop; I worked in my buddy's restaurant, before I came to this. That's how the whole idea started. We were cooking at home. Cooking just amongst us. Cooking yesterday, than today, the other day. And then it's like, you know what? Let's put this out.

DL: When you say we, who is we?

JJ: Couple of my friends. The business is between me and my sister and my daughters.

**DL:** I was just talking with the guys at Dynamite and also at ACAF. There are several family businesses here that are passed down from generation to generation. What did you learn from teaching your daughter what you do?

**JJ:** Well, it taught me a lot about what people want and how much people appreciate what this is. Cause sometimes it's hard and you think about giving up, but then you see the need. You might close one day for whatever reason, you fold the ring up, and people will come by like, "What's up? Is you open?" We're like, "Yeah, we just had to close for one day to take care of things." We're open seven days, so sometimes we do need to close down, things need taking care and catching up on cleaning up.

**DL:** Your restaurant must mean a lot to this community on 52nd Street.

**JJ:** It's really a part of the community. It has been here for so long. The people really love it and I appreciate that, the acceptance and the love. It took the people a little more time to learn about the Caribbean foods and drinks and stuff because they didn't know about it. It's been seventeen years now.

**DL:** I don't know how much Caribbean cuisine bleeds into one another.

**JJ:** It does because every island, they have a difference in the way they cook or the way they do things, but at some point it meshes. They're gonna use the same type of fish, but one's going to make a fried fish, another is gonna make a steamed fish....

**DL:** That makes sense. So it took a while to have that taste to develop in the community.

**JJ:** Yeah, it took a while for them to understand the taste. But now that they got the taste...

**DL:** When did that happen? How far into the business were you when it was like, OK, people know who we are?

**JJ:** It took six, seven years. Sometimes I felt like giving up. They were tough years. I got like a whole diaspora of people now.

**DL:** Has it been the same menu since you opened?

**JJ:** It's always been the same menu, but I add to it. I have another one that I just added called Bacon Shark. It's made from the shark fish. But there's a certain type of shark that we use; it's called a mako shark.

**DL:** Is there anything that you think just tastes different no matter what? Is there anything you can only get in Trinidad to eat?

**JJ:** There's things that is authentic to Trinidad, but you would get it at other places. Just like the steel drum. That's authentic to Trinidad, but you can hear it in different places. When it comes to playing the steel drum, there's no bands in the world that play the steel drum like in Trinidad. So I go back to play with the big bands down there.

**DL:** That's amazing. I think it's so important to have food that reminds you of home. That's something really special about West Philly—there's so many people here and so many different cuisines. It must mean a lot to you to give that, and to have built something that sustains you.

**JJ:** That's a great accomplishment. I'd be proud and I'd really like to keep going, as long as I've got the health and strength to keep doing it. I like the response from the people and how it's growing up. We've got people who every time they come back to town, they're coming right here. Some people would come like once a month, and they would buy a whole lot of stuff and take it back with them. People come from Delaware, New Jersey, different parts of Pennsylvania. I feel really good that I'm bringing something to the community, and I'm bringing them that Caribbean flavor they really love.

## Atiya Ola's Spirit First Foods



Atiya Ola is an artist and chef who specializes in vegetarian and raw foods. This interview was taken just before her restaurant at 45th and Baltimore Avenue closed in summer 2017.

Dianne Loftis (DL): So how long have you been at this location?

Atiya Ola (AO): Eight years. I wasn't open anywhere before here. I was always a special events vendor. Then we go to the events and sell food like that.

DL: On Sunday, you were mentioning that you were on 52nd Street a lot and are from the neighborhood. Was it influential for you to be around that kind of energy when you were younger?

AO: Not really, I wasn't on 52nd Street. We were on 60th Street when we came to Philadelphia in 1969 and then over time ACAF (African Cultural Art Forum) ended up at 52nd Street. I have eight children, so I basically was always just home making things. I used to make clothes. I'm an artist, I used to paint. So I made a lot of African artifacts. We all gave up our businesses to come to Philadelphia to support the African art movement, and we all are still participating in that movement.

DL: So, when you got here, would you meet together to discuss those things and organize?

AO: We moved in commune, so we lived in a house together. We all came to Philadelphia and lived in one house.

DL: Wow. Someone was speaking with me the other day about systems of mentorship and growing up around people like you who are used to putting in the elbow grease and building things, that form of self-determination.

AO: [points] Well, there's a whole group of women, including that woman's mother, and they all had children at the same time. Different ages and what have you, but we supported each other by babysitting each other's children, taking them to cultural events, participating in the culture so they have a sense of what the culture is. I knew her mother and father before she was conceived. So when she hit the planet, we were already the nucleus.

DL: What do you think is important for young people to witness, in terms of the African arts movement and business ownership or entrepreneurship in general?

AO: First off, to know the interracial history, okay? And then to identify their gifts, skill, and talent, cause everybody comes with a gift, skill, and talent which is supposed to be their economic vehicle. That's how I feel about it and that's what I want to teach the youth. Whatever you love doing, do that and the money will come. I like using the universal principles and the spiritual laws to govern my behavior and to assist others when they're working to make a decision.

DL: That's great. What do you love about food and making food and having people at a restaurant?

AO: Well, first off, I didn't realize at the time how fabulous a cook my mother and sister were. If you open any magazine during the holidays and you turn and you see cookie after cookie after cookie, cake, pie after pie... that's how our holidays were, okay? Our turkey had two kinds of stuffing, all that other stuff. Everything made from scratch. Pound cake, minced meat pie, cherry pie, lemon meringue pie. I witnessed my mother and sister making those things, canning pickle relish. And all of that stuff, my mother did it. So I didn't initially start out to be a chef. I was actually a licensed cosmetologist, along with some art.

DL: Oh, interesting. What kind of art were you making?

AO: I'm a poet, and also I will paint and make things. I sewed for twenty years, making African culture clothing, flags, pouches, hats, all of that. Crochet. When I made the decision to change my direction, I thought, what do I wanna do? And food comes to me. I really don't have to do anything, people just bring me food. They're like, "I got these beets, do you want some beets?" "Here's a bag of carrots—do something with them." I came to Philadelphia and someone was bringing me food. So I thought, food comes to me.

Then I had a friend that had gotten married and the dish that they made for him was couscous and he wasn't happy with the way they made it, so, then I said, "Let me learn to make that." And I started making couscous. I have a friend that's been eating the foods that I make for forty years, and she said it's too wet, it's too wet, it's too wet. So, I kept reducing it, reducing it, reducing it until we came up with the perfect couscous that I sell now.

That was my first dish on the market, couscous and pita, and it just grew from there. Then I was working with a political group of people, and they had raised \$1 million worth of food and sold it, and raw food was just coming down the pike. It hadn't really moved up like it is now. Yes, and so I said, well, I have a truth bell and my truth bell rang. And so I started moving more into raw food. That's how I got to raw food.

DL: That's interesting. I like this image of the relationships sort of showing you that this would be a good business to have. Is the idea of having a gathering space also important to you?

AO: I always had a gathering space. Even before I came here, my house was the gathering, okay? The children and adults came to my house. I had the most children, I had eight, and all of them had friends. And every now and again a friend would come in and kick back and rest. So this is just an extension of people being able to come some place and relax and, if they have an issue, have a sounding board.

DL: Does food still come to you like you were describing?

AO: Food still comes to me, yes. This is a farmer over here. He grows watermelons and things like that. He'll call me up and say, "I've got greens." Every now and again one of my friends might end up with too much of something and they'll call me up and say, "Hey, I got a big bag of carrots." Or anything, it could be anything.

DL: Since you all came here back in the day, what has changed about your vision for this movement? What has been sustained? And how have the experiences that you've had kind of shifted the goals?

AO: Well, I'm grateful for the youth, because a lot of youth have stepped up. We have a lot of youth to come and support the campaign support events, things like that. My vision is just bringing more harmony between the races. To bring more understanding about being human. Just to see that through as best as we can.

DL: What has this business given to you personally?

**AO:** Personally it's given me the satisfaction of being able to do my spiritual work, which is practicing the universal principles in the spiritual laws. It's allowed me to interact with people who are experiencing challenges and help bring them some resolve. We've had lots of fun in here. It's allowed me to watch people grow and develop in what they eat and how they eat. I've had people that didn't eat avocado eat an avocado now. People that didn't like beets, like beets now. Just different foods, you know? Or they've eaten mushrooms, but they never had the jerk on it. So just being able to provide a different taste for the palate. And also to provide different energy for the body.

And also the referrals. When people get sick and the doctor tells them to change their diet, then they run over here. So just being able to know that they can come in and get a good, plant-based diet and work on their selves and have good camaraderie, good conversation, helpful conversation. 'Cause a lot of people that are studying health, that do research, they come here. And they're always willing to share.

**DL:** That's awesome. Could you tell me maybe one or two of the spiritual principles that are particularly important to you right now?

**AO:** All of them are important. 'Cause as you navigate your life you need to use some laws depending on what is happening. One of the laws is, don't be attached to the outcome. A top law is just do your best. Sometimes we have control issues. We want it to end a certain way. But the law says, don't be attached to the outcome. Another law is everything happens for your soul side good. And ever-thinking spirit first. I named my cafe Spirit First because everything happens in spirit first.

Another law, no coincidence, no accident. So we had already agreed in spirit to come and have this conversation. Because of that law I know that whoever I'm meeting is on target. Okay, another law, people come to you for season, reason, or a lifetime, okay? And as we interact back and forth, we get to unfold what it was. Some people don't stay long. Then sometimes people only come for specific moments in time of service or help or growth and development, and then they're gone. Okay? And then you have other people that have been with you forever. My girlfriends, the brothers we'll probably see each other to the grave.

**DL:** Is there anything specific that you've learned from Philadelphia?

**AO:** Yeah, keep it moving. Keep it moving. One thing that Philadelphia did for me was it gave me my laws. This is where I was given reading material, and workshops, and women's support groups to study and practice the laws. I know a law I wanted to tell you, which is, there are no victims. Okay? We're all participants. That's what I wanted to tell you. We're all participants.

Philadelphia has been good to us in the sense that we have grown up here. I came here when I was twenty-four years old. So I've participated in lots of things, interacted with lots of people and I've matured. Whatever goes on, you have to keep it moving.

**DL:** What does economic sovereignty mean to you?

**AO:** Everything is really attached to land sovereignty, so it would mean having land that you are able to have your freedom on. To be able to purchase real things to move into a building, to have a rent that doesn't make you work so hard that all your money is going to give people rent, all right? Things like that. So that you are able to live without the pressures that we, as a people, are under constantly. The land has been usurped. Then you got all these people that have usurped the water, the electric. All of this stuff is God given, so why are they super charging for stuff that's not even theirs, and then where does the money go? The government, too. You're getting tickets, you're paying taxes, but you're getting charged for picking up trash.

So sovereignty would mean being free to think, free to live, which I don't think any of us know. It don't matter what race. Okay, some races feel like they're livin' better, but in the end, there are only the same questions. And sooner or later, the pressure is on them. That's what sovereignty means to me—that we would come to a harmonious understanding that this life is a gift, this earth is a gift and we are here to share.

Any time you are able to put together a program to sustain yourself, you have a little sovereignty. Any time you can use your gifts, skills, and talents to take care of yourself. Now, how broad you can make it, all of that depends on the other forces.

When you wake up and realize your area is redlined, your money's in the bank and they redlined your area. You can't even borrow money from the bank you got your money in. All of that can be rolled out. But as long as you're using your gifts skills and talents, and even if you're working for someone, then it's a good thing.

**DL:** How do you think that a heart of enterprise like 52nd Street contributes to building economic sovereignty? I'm interested in how effective it is to talk about the significance of this one space, and what the recognition means.

**AO:** You have to look at the racial dynamics of 52nd Street, okay? And then you have to see who is in control of space, because whoever's in control of space is the people who have sovereignty. Other people are being challenged to give a up space, like myself. Right now, I'm being challenged to give up a space. 52nd Street has shifted hands, and that's, that's the real thing. But being able to have a mix of people that recognize that and are willing to assist with leveling the playing field, let's just say that's a good thing. And we appreciate it. We welcome it. We welcome and we understand you. And us harmoniously working together, we welcome that.

## SELF CENTERED

Charlyn Griffith is a member of Soil Generation, a Black-led radical gardening coalition that advocates for community control of land and food. She advocates for cooperative economics, wholistic health, environmental protection, midwifery, and doula services. Griffith was raised doing needlepoint, sewing holiday dresses and crafting with her mother and grandmother. Her new works emerge from a different necessity. Her work with illustrative storytelling, sculpture, dance, and performative lecture partner with being a scholar working toward a master of science. An educator for almost two decades, she began her nearly ten-year collaborative arts career with dance and currently straddles murals and sculpture. She has a suspicion that all things are equal.

There is a thing that happens when you take in new information.  
A conversation, a piece of writing, an image, a song-  
Can inspire the lifting of a veil, a clearing of vision;  
Perhaps it feels like an awakening,  
An implication that you have been asleep until now.

This is an invitation.  
Wake up gently.  
Arising with great discomfort in your belly  
Or tension in your shoulders or back,  
A knot in your throat...  
Is natural, and you are welcome to let it go.

This is an invitation.  
To breath now.  
Inhale. Exhale.  
Deeply into your diaphragm/belly,  
Repeat.

This is an invitation.  
If you are able:  
Step towards the wall, turn sideways and press your arm into the wall.  
Switch sides.  
If you are comfortable, press your chest and belly into the wall.  
Turning your head to one side or pressing your forehead into the wall also.  
Keep breathing.  
Turn and press your buttocks and back into the wall if you would like.  
Face the wall again, place your hands flat on the wall and push.  
If your feet can press or push into this wall, use them.  
And breath.  
Allow your body to feel the coolness of the wall, and the heat inside your body.

This is an invitation.  
Release your tensions into the stone.  
From your body allow the pain to flow into the stone.

This is an invitation to return here.  
To this place.  
To this feeling.  
To your breath.

You are now at the Center of your universe.

—Charlyn Griffith

## Sovereignty Collaborators

Kamara Abdur-Rahim  
Khdir Abdur-Rahim  
Sharif Abdur-Rahim  
Chad Africa  
Ramona Africa  
Aldolphe Alexander  
Brianna Barton  
Kirtrina Baxter  
Kamau Blakney  
Tony Brooks  
Eddie Brown  
Iris Brown  
Rodney Camarce  
Tempest Carter  
Sunshine Coffee  
Marian Dalke  
Jenni Drozdek  
Christopher Eads  
Alex Epstein  
Sonia Galiber  
Cassandra Green  
Charlyn Griffith

Jasmine Hamilton  
Dusty Heinz  
Amber Henry  
Russell Anthony Hicks  
Michaela Holmes  
Miguel Huerta  
Jeannine Kayembe  
Annette Medford-Griffin  
Stanley Morgan  
Pedro Ospina  
German Parodi  
Dozi Pate  
Fred Riley  
Christian Rodriguez  
Pat Ruger  
Tinamarie Russell  
Rashie Abdul Samad  
Amanda Spitfire  
Theresa Stigale  
Gabriela Sanchez  
Diana Larisgoitia

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Museum of Art

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PewCenter  
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& Heritage

*Philadelphia Assembled* is made possible by the William Penn Foundation, The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, The Daniel W. Dietrich II Fund for Contemporary Art, Wyncote Foundation, The Arlin and Neysa Adams Endowment Fund, Nancy M. Berman and Alan Bloch, Lynne and Harold Honickman, Mr. and Mrs. Milton S. Schneider, Constance and Sankey Williams, the Mondriaan Fund, Lyn M. Ross, and The Netherland-America Foundation.

