

Transcript of Frontiers of Commoning Podcast, Episode #30

Interview with Konda Mason Cofounder & President, Jubilee Justice September 1, 2022

Opening quotation excerpt from podcast:

Konda Mason: [00:00] We brought together incredible minds that I know here in Louisiana on a plantation, a former plantation, with all the trappings of a plantation, meeting in the big house, having conversations at the intersection of land, race, money, and our spiritual dimension, which is the place where our liberation lies. It is the place that connects us all.

Announcer: This is *Frontiers of Commoning*, with David Bollier.

David Bollier: My guest today is Konda Mason, a social justice activist, social entrepreneur, and mindfulness teacher who leads a small Louisiana nonprofit, Jubilee Justice, to address some problems that don't get much attention: climate resilient farming; economic equity for farmers who are Black, indigenous, or people of color in the rural south of the United States. [01:00]

Besides tackling social equity, Jubilee Justice is committed to restoring and expanding Black land ownership and stewardship, which have been undermined over generations through land theft, discriminatory lending practices, and racism.

This has led to one of Jubilee Justice's most fascinating and impressive projects: the hosting of difficult multiracial conversations about land, race, money, and spiritual life. Because these issues are often subterranean and unresolved in American culture, yet profoundly influential to this day, Jubilee Justice has initiated a series of what it calls "transformational learning journeys," encounters for social healing to explore new ways to acknowledge and begin to heal racial and economic polarization in American life.

Konda's commitment to closing the racial wealth gap in developing restorative economics and agriculture stems from her long work in broadening opportunities for people of color. She was strategic director of a microlending fund for African American entrepreneurs in Oakland and [02:00] is the co-founder of an annual community capital, or "co-cap", conference for progressive entrepreneurs, among other initiatives. Driving her work is a sense that spiritual transformation is an indispensable force for social and economic transformation.

Konda, it's a pleasure to have you on *Frontiers of Commoning*.

Mason: Thank you, David. I'm so happy to be here. It's interesting to hear that introduction.

Bollier: Maybe you could tell me how you got to this point of starting such an unusual project as Jubilee Justice.

Mason: You know, I always have to go back to the beginning and that's my family: my mother, and the children that she raised, me being the youngest of four, and having the benefit of being raised in the Fifties, Sixties, Seventies in California.

At the time, during my high school and going into college years, the San Francisco free speech movement and all that was happening in San Francisco and Berkeley back in those days, I was [03:00] there through that with an older brother ahead of me. So the politics have been in my family. I mean, I kind of absorbed that. And the main thing is that my mom was all about - she's no longer on this plane with us - she was all about community and saying that if you have whatever you have, it must be shared with those who have less. And that's how we lived our lives. That's how you stand up for those who can't stand up for themselves.

And so those were the values that I grew up with. Everything I've done has come from those values that have come from that up-raising.

Bollier: How did you, as someone in California who wasn't directly on the land, get involved in land and agriculture as a key focus for that work?

Mason: Yeah, I was always on the land actually. I was in Southern California, east of LA in the San Bernardino Riverside area, and my family, my grandparents, had a little farm, and my parents went in together with my [04:00] grandparents to raise the food that made us food-secure to tell you the truth. You know, if we didn't have it, I don't know...we wouldn't have eaten like we were able to.

And so I was always connected to...you know, it wasn't expansive, it was small, but it kept us all fed. So that has always been in my family and even though people know me as this urban entrepreneur, they think of me as someone in some big city – that's me too – but what they don't know is that underneath all of that is the person who wants to be a farmer. And so I'm kind of living my dream right now a little bit.

Bollier: Let's sketch a little bit of the larger history in the United States, of African Americans and land, because it's been a very fraught history, as you know.

Mason: Yeah.

Bollier: There used to be many more Black farmers with huge amounts of land that have basically been stolen, or they've been forced off the land through discriminatory lending practices and the like. Tell me a little bit about that history so we have the proper context for this conversation.

Mason: As we know, the history of enslavement in this country [05:00] had people who were enslaved from Africa, growing food for all of the colonies for America. That was a big part of...was agriculture. Not to mention though, but before we got enslaved over here, the free Africans in west Africa, where most folks came from, were amazing farmers and knew about land, knew, I mean, were close to the land, just like indigenous people are here, *were* here until they got wiped out. But so that was happening in west Africa. And so as the transatlantic slavery happened and Africans ended up here in this country as enslaved beings, they were connected to the land, always had been connected to the land, but it was treacherous. And there's a whole story about rice that I'll talk about later because that's what I'm doing and connect the rice story.

But that said, after emancipation Black folks managed to aggregate about 20 million acres of land to farm throughout the Southeast. That was at the height of our... [06:00] even with all the obstacles, with Jim Crow...all the obstacles [we] still were managing to amass that land. A lot of it having to do also with cooperative economics and working together. Now that 20 million acres has gone down to 2 million acres and a million farmers have gone down to forty- or about 45,000 farmers in the U.S. – Black farmers I'm speaking of. And what happened is that there has been a concentrated, intentional effort to take away the land that Black folks had amassed during that period of time, of between emancipation and the 1920s census, where we have those numbers, where those numbers came [from].

That land loss, there's a whole system that was put into place of how that happened and how it continues to happen.

Bollier: Tell us a little bit about that history and how African Americans were deliberately deprived of their land or unable to retain it. Tell me, tell us, the practical ways that happened.

Mason: Well, the practical way that it happened, there's many different doors [07:00] that happened, but one of the most basic ways is that, as we know, I think we know, is that farmers, before they plant, typically they get money from the USDA, loans, to get to plant. And then once they plant and they harvest, they give it back, and it's a cycle. Everybody does that.

Black farmers were not allowed to have those kinds of loans or if they were, intentionally what the USDA would do is – let's say planting season is [from] March to May – they would

intentionally wait until past planting season to give them the loan. They would not give them the whole thing that they needed. They[’d] give them partial and give it to them late. So now they’re trying to catch up with their white counterparts who have planted already, and they start getting off-season. They get off cycle that way. And so they give them little, they give it to them late – and they collateralize, they over-collateralize Black folks’ loans, five times more collateral [08:00] than their white counterparts. Meaning that their houses and their farms and their equipment, everything was collateralized, so that if you default on a loan, then they take those things from you, including your home. And so they would get off cycle and they would not be able to fulfill their loan agreement and they would take their land and take their homes.

Bollier: It strikes me from the history I know of this, that the USDA’s administration of these loans was happening at a local level, which is where it was able to effectively do this without much oversight from the federal government.

Mason: That’s exactly right. The FSA [Farm Service Agency], which is the organization of the USDA that gives out these loans, is very localized. And so you’d have oftentimes, particularly in the South, you’d have those people leading those organizations who were racists basically.

There was a collusion also between them and banks. There was a collusion between them and private industry. There would be times [09:00] like, let’s say here in Louisiana, a particular sugar cane farmer who was successful, generations of success growing cane, who would have a contract with the processing company, private processor. USDA would give them the loan late; they have the contract with the cane processing company who then they would default on everything, and the cane company would just say, “We’re not gonna take your cane.” So you have all this cane in the field, there’s no one to take it. It dies right there on the land. And that one season can take you out.

Bollier: So it’s difficult to blame anyone because all of this was indirect with a wink and a nudge. And the “oops it happened to be delayed,” and so it was very difficult to get accountability for this. I know there was a major USDA lawsuit that helped to settle a class action for some 22,000 farmers to resolve this.

But [10:00] I...this is a fascinating history because it helps explain so much of the inequality in land and farming between the races that occurs right now. There was a wonderful piece in *The Nation* a few years ago that said that some 16 million acres that was lost from Black farmers would be conservatively estimated to be worth between 250 and 350 billion dollars today.

Mason: And what you’re talking about, you’re talking about a kind of wealth that would be intergenerational. The kind of wealth that would make a significant difference of what Black folks have today in America. Taking away that possibility of intergenerational wealth. Not only

that, but what do we use for collateral for big purchases of land or what have you? You use your land [and] if you don't have it.... And so there's so many repercussions of what has happened. It has everything to do with [the] racial wealth gap – that they call a gap – it's bigger than a gap. That sounds so nice: a little gap. It's not a gap. [11:00] It's like, I wish they stopped calling [it] the racial wealth gap. We need to call it this big chasm that exists, right?

Bollier: Well, let's then flash forward to Jubilee Justice and its attempt to intervene in this situation in some catalytic way. You have a farm as I understand it. And you have a Decolonizing Wealth project. Tell me about some of the ways you're trying to, in the here and now and in the future, try[ing] to address some of these problems.

Mason: So we have two projects, as you mentioned, there's the Journeys, which is also trying to rectify the wrong in a different way. I would say in the horizontal versus the vertical. The vertical is the farmer's project that we have, Black farmers project that we have. So there's 30,000 acres of land that every year has been confiscated from Black farmers that has created this big...from 20 million acres to 2 million, 30,000 a year. Every year 30,000 is gone. What we're trying to do is just plug that hole. You know, let's start with plugging that hole before we [12:00] even think about gaining more land under stewardship by Black farmers.

What we are doing is a kind of crazy innovative project that has to do with rice. It has to do with what farmers do as they grow food. The average Black farmer also has a much smaller land than the white farmer does. And so what we're trying to do is take that land and maximize it with a crop that is specialty; that goes for a higher rate than most crops; and that is fine on small property, on small land. And so we're growing rice in a very interesting and different way that is also absolutely climate friendly; that it must be. Because rice is a huge contributor to methane and greenhouse gas in the atmosphere, the way it is currently grown.

And so what we're doing also is claiming Black food ways, which is rice that came over from west Africa. When the Europeans came to west Africa, [13:00] saw this sophisticated system of rice growing, they were like, uh, they targeted those farmers, brought them to the U.S., South Carolina. Rice became the biggest industry, food industry crop in America during that time, due to the enslaved people bringing their wisdom around rice growing to the south of the United States. And so what happened, though, it was treacherous and awful work. After emancipation, everybody, obviously they're like “I'm outta here.”

What we're doing is reclaiming that food ways, that rice, which is the basis of [the] African diet, and bringing it forward in a way this time where Black folks really benefit, where the farmer benefits, because we're creating a cooperative. The farmers are in a cooperative, and I'm building, we're building a rice mill so that now they own this vertical integration of this

cooperative, this rice mill, and that they now participate in a way larger upside than they do currently.

[14:00] And that money then goes within the families and within the community. And so that's one of the things that we are doing right now with the farmers, with their rice project.

Bollier: It's fascinating to me as a commons-oriented project, because it seems to be, like many other theaters of action in commoning, trying to develop an alternative value chain system so that the benefits can be mutualized and kept shared over time, as opposed to the biggest one takes it all, the way conventional capitalism works.

And I'm also fascinated by the intersection of this cooperatively driven different system of supply to the System of Rice Intensification, which [in] one of my prior books, an anthology, there was an essay by the woman you're working with, Erika Styger, about open-source rice growing, for lack of a better term. Maybe you could talk a little bit about that.

Mason: Yeah, that's so cool. Erika is like my deepest partner in this. [15:00] I love Erika. Erika is out of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. [Styger is Professor of Practice and Director of the Climate-Resilient Farming Systems Program.] She lives in Ithaca, and we have an incredible partnership. I didn't know about the System of Rice Intensification, SRI.

So I'll call it SRI from here out. SRI is, again, it was actually developed in the 1980s in Madagascar. It was some folks at the ag school in Cornell who noticed it, found out about it, and realized that this was an incredible way to grow rice. Basically, when you think of rice, you think of water, you think of paddy rice.

What this does is eliminate. And what that does is...rice is a grass. Rice tolerates water, but doesn't love water because the roots of...any roots of any plant is, is it becomes without oxygen anaerobic when it's in the water. So what happens with the rice that we're growing right now is that first of all, all that water has billions and billions of [16:00] microbes that are off-gassing methane. And so rice is a huge contributor to methane in the atmosphere, one of the biggest in ag. Okay, we know the cows are, and rice is the other one. When you eliminate the water, you eliminate that. So we're looking at a really incredible.... I think of SRI to rice growing as solar is to fossil fuels. We have to change it.

And so there's that. But also in addition to that, it makes the plant bigger and more abundant. So it's a bigger plant; it's a more abundant plant. More rice for the farmer. And so we are implementing for the first time in this country.... There are hundreds of thousands of farmers all over the world doing this through Erika's efforts at Cornell University. She's actually in a project

right now in west Africa of a hundred thousand farmers – thirteen countries in west Africa, a hundred thousand farmers learning the System of Rice Intensification.

Bollier: It's worth noting that this is a bottom-up effort that conventional, professional, and academic [17:00] agronomists said, "That's a crazy idea."

Mason: They don't like it.

Bollier: And it was a lot of self-organized, self-styled you might say agricultural hackers who shared this knowledge among each other in a bottom-up way without the professional validation that the industrial or academic world had. And that's what I also find fascinating: that you have farmers from Cuba or Madagascar or India sharing the same knowledge about how to maximize yields and avoid pests and so forth.

Mason: That's right. And in the U.S., we are not doing it here because one, you know, there's a lot of reasons. Our project, the Jubilee Justice rice project is the first project of this nature in this country. There are isolated, a couple of farmers that we know who are doing SRI. They have become friends, you know, we know them.

So what we're doing is we have farmers, Black farmers right now, and we will expand to indigenous farmers as well, coming up very soon. We have farmers in Louisiana, Mississippi, [18:00] South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, and St. Thomas. Right now, there's about sixteen farming families and they are all doing the system of rice intensification.

We are able to do this because we have the technical assistance from Erika coming from Cornell. And then on the market side of things, this whole project actually started with a conversation I had with the people who own a small, little, wonderful company called Lotus Foods. Lotus Foods is a rice company that makes rice and rice products, rice-pasta, rice-crackers, all kinds of things like that, and they're organic. And I knew that there was something special about the rice that they grow because they have this story, and I never paid attention.

And one day I was talking to the owner and asked her about it and that's when she told me about SRI, the System of Rice Intensification. So they are the company that has all these farmers doing that. And so Carol said to me the next stage in their development was to create a [19:00] domestic supply chain of farmers in the U.S. because all their farmers are in Asia, Africa. And I said, Carol, what about Black farmers in the US? And she thought, "Wow, let's do it." That's how this whole thing started. And then the next thing I know, I'm on a call with Erika because she's already in touch with Erika and all that they're doing at Cornell.

So that's how the project started. So we've got technical assistant on one hand from Cornell, and a guy named Mark Fulford, he's in Maine and he is also part of our incredible team. And then on the other hand, the market is Lotus Foods who's just waiting for the rice to come to market it. And so it's an interesting project.

We are just starting. It's an uphill battle. It's an uphill battle to do this in the Southeast. The reason why people use water, all that water: it suppresses weeds. It's only for weed suppression. And so if you get rid of water, what do you have? Weeds. And how do you get rid of weeds and be organic and you're not, you know, just killing them with, you know, with pesticides? [20:00] Which we don't do.

So it's a uphill battle, how we're doing things, but it is a regenerative....I mean, we are going for the no-till, plant in place with cover crops, you know, grow cover crops, terminate them, grow it into the cover crops, have that be the mulch, and to grow rice in a way that will allow us to stay away, to be able to sequester carbon and to grow rice that is abundant and specialty, and that will work for both the planet and the farmers. And so that's our goal.

Bollier: The concept, I assume, is not controversial. It's the implementation that's more difficult, especially in a market that's already locked up or perhaps because land is not available. Is that correct?

Mason: Yeah, it is and it's not. I mean, you know, I don't look at obstacles, honestly. Coming from California, it's so wonderful for me to be in the South now – I live in Louisiana – and to see so many Black folks with land who are ready to grow food. And so there is plenty of Black folk [21:00] who still have their land, who are interested, the pipeline of farmers is...there's no shortage of pipeline of farmers. It's our capacity [that] has to meet the actual pipeline. And a lot of these farmers are on the edge. Would they have their farm in the next five years? Some of them not at all. And so we're working against time for them to actually, hopefully get to market with their rice so that we can actually help do something to fill in that gap where they fall into.

Bollier: So there's the one side of the actual growing, which obviously requires technical attention, but do you have enough access to land and how are you trying to address that? How are you trying to reacquire land?

Mason: Yeah, so this is what we're doing right now. We are not trying to reacquire land in this moment. Step by step. What we're doing right now is just trying to stop the loss. Help those farmers who are on the edge, who are about to lose. That's our focus right now: stop the land [22:00] loss. We additionally are looking at how do we.... Down the road when we look at our strategic planning, has to do then with “how do we acquire land?”

Now, this is what we're finding out. There are folks who have land here in the Southeast, Black and white, who are not farming their land. They're not farmers. They don't want to farm the land. That's not what they do, but they've inherited. They still have it. Those people are coming to fruition in our lives because of the work that we're doing now.

And those places are the lowest hanging fruit for us to talk about being able to acquire that land with farmers who are ready to work it. And so that's what we're looking at.

Bollier: You're talking about leasing the land, at least for now, as opposed to acquiring.

Mason: Maybe some will lease and some are...there are people right now who are ready for reparations, you know. We're looking at reparations, giving the land; we're looking at leasing land. [23:00] Ideally what we want is land stewardship. We want to go towards the land trust model, which, by the way, a lot of people don't know, but it was Black folks in the Sixties, the New Communities, which was the first land trust in America, with a group of Black people who had 6,000 acres who created this land trust until it was, of course, taken away. Every trick in the book was pulled out to try to get that land from those people. And eventually it was, but it took a while. I think they had it for fifteen years. We want to follow that model of land trust overall.

Bollier: Working with the Schumacher Center for New Economics, we're very inspired by that because our founder, Bob Swann, worked together with Shirley and Charles Sherrod to get that going.

And of course the Schumacher Center is very deeply involved in the community land trust movement today. Once again, these intersecting circles of commons based activity. Because we have the co-ops, the different alternative chains, the System of Rice Intensification, and now the community land trust as a [24:00] vehicle for preventing land from being, what shall I say, reintroduced to the market.

Talk a little bit about your experiences with community land trusts and how you might see Black commons as community land trusts for securing the land long term.

Mason: Yeah. You know, the truth of the matter is that I don't have a whole lot of experience yet. I'm in the process of learning. And coming out of Oakland, California, there's a lot going on there around community land trusts, and some people that I know who...EB PREC, I don't know if people know who they are...as well as there's just lots of people that I was learning from, and now I'm here. And I know that that is the model.

I have a very close relationship with Shirley Sherrod. She is actually a part of our, those sixteen communities that I said that is a part of the Jubilee Justice rice project.

So she and I are doing that together as well as we're doing a fund together through decolonizing wealth that you mentioned earlier. So I am at the heels of Shirley as one of those people and learning from Ms. Sherrod. How did they do it as well, [25:00] as just in general, just talking to everybody I know, including you, of course, you know, David. And I know that taking the land off the market, it becoming a land trust for farming possibilities is absolutely the future of [the] anti-capitalist way that we do land in this country and how we do economics in this country and in the world. And so I'm extremely excited about going into that area of what our new model will become. I'm in a conversation right now that I'm not at liberty to talk about on a land trust, that would become a part of the Jubilee Justice family. I'm really excited about what that possibility is right now.

Bollier: That's great to hear. I mean, there's such an inspirational example from, for example, the Agrarian Trust people, or in France, the Terre de Liens, where they are creating self-styled land commons, often with young farmers [26:00] to introduce a whole new generational approach, an ecologically-minded approach, to agriculture that, let's just say, the 20th century never got hip to.

Mason: Ian, who runs Agrarian Trust, is just someone that I follow closely and the work that he's doing.

Bollier: Ian McSweeney, just to point out.

Mason: Yeah, exactly. I follow him religiously, and I'm very excited, and I, you know, whenever I can, I put a little money in to help people get their lands. I constantly do that because I know that the circle is really important reciprocity.

The work that he's doing, I think it's just, from what I could tell, it's just really awesome. I'm so happy what he's doing and how he's making possible, him and the group of people, not just him by himself, obviously, but making it possible for folks to get land and to do the right thing with land that then becomes in the commons and not private ownership.

Bollier: Maybe you could describe that process so people who are not familiar with land trusts or agrarian trusts understand what this transformation is in terms of acquiring the land and decommodifying it.

Mason: The way it works in America, right, [27:00] is that it's private property. And as private property, it continues to feed into the inequality of our country. It continues to feed into what is

wrong with how we do things. And so when you create a land trust, when you take the land out of private property and into commons, meaning that it's open to groups of people who can work the land, they can build on the land, but the underlying property does not belong to them, so it's not subject to the ups and downs of the market, of finance, the way that land is.

Bollier: Nor could it be liquidated in the future. That's a key point.

Mason: Nor can it be liquidated in the future. Exactly. It is solidly there and you can come, you can work it, you can build on it, you can leave and it stays the same. The land stays the same in terms of its value. And so, it really defies our whole system of the economy, the way that we do things in this country, it defies that system that allows [28:00] certain people to get super rich and others to have nothing. And it levels the playing field in that way. And it decommodifies, as you said, the land, and it puts it into a commons that is equal access to people.

Bollier: For the moment you're not quite engaging with that, or at least you're more focused on, as you said, stemming the losses and maybe consolidating the agricultural practices. Do you see this as really a long term and broader model for re-democratizing agriculture, you might say?

Mason: I totally do, David. I totally do. I have so much faith in...I have, you know, I don't know if I'm, you know, [a] Pollyanna kind of person, but I believe I have hope in humanity and who we are. And as we get closer and closer to falling off the edge of everything, I also see the stem of the tide on the other side, raising its head in a beautiful way.

The stuff that either we talked to, what Ian's doing....There's so many beautiful models happening right now. People are going toward: how do we change the [29:00] tide? And I believe that what we are doing is just one little piece. I mean, we're just one little piece of this huge movement, and I'm just happy to be in the stream that we're in. We're in our little stream, in our little lane, and there's so many lanes beside us. And it's so awesome to be a part of this tide. And so I believe that what's happening is going, people are looking over each other's fences and going, "Ah, I like that. I like that." And I think it's going to spread. I believe that.

And I'm seeing it. I mean, right now, even with the farmers that I'm working with, they're seeing something different and they're going, "Huh, that's interesting." I had a farmer that when we first met him, he was like, "Oh, absolutely not. Co-ops? Co-ops don't work. They don't work. They fall apart. I'm not doing it."

That was two and a half years ago. The last conversation I had with him, I was like, "We may have to put off the co-op for next year." It was like, "Oh no, no, no, no, we gotta do it now. We need to help our brothers and sisters out." I was like, "Well, right on," you know, that's what's happening. [30:00] That's what's happening. That's a true conversation.

Bollier: A lot of this is talked about in terms of the economics or the supply chains or the property rights, all of which, of course, are important. But I think it's important to talk about the social practices and cultural dimensions of this as well. And I mean, I've always been inspired, of course, by Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson who have written eloquently about this.

But tell me a little bit about how the culture plays into Jubilee Justice. I've seen on your website about the Latin American concept *buen vivir* ("good livelihood" or "good life") as a concept and the reintegration of work and life in agriculture, as opposed to maximum productivity, or something like that. Talk a little bit about that.

Mason: Yeah. Well, you know, it all begins with community, right? It's like the wellbeing of the individual is at the core of what we are about. We were asked the other day, I was in a meeting about how do we measure, quantify, how do we measure, do metrics around the work and the [31:00] impact that we're doing?

Do we measure the amount of CO2 that we are sequestering? Do we measure all these digits? And I said, "Actually, no." For me, the measurement is in wellbeing. The measurement is when we came into relationship with a farmer, it's farmer-centric. It's not philanthropy-centric or funder-centric. When we came into relationship with a particular farmer and every farmer that we do.... Has their wellbeing increased? And in what ways? Right? Do they have a bigger circle of community of people that they share with that reciprocity? What is the cultural part of what has happened since we have entered their world? Those are the metrics that I'm interested in. I don't care about the digits. Yes. CO2. We wanna do that. Yes, we want more land. Yes, we want.... But if at the center, if the farmer's livelihood and life and [32:00] community and family has not had more wellbeing, then what are we doing?

Bollier: There's such a temptation to look through the prism of market economics as if that's the arbiter of everything. And of course, one has to deal with those realities, living in a capitalist society. At the same time, we've seen how that is utterly destructive as well and introduces as much illth as wealth into the world.

This too is a new dimension in this agricultural movement of bringing these issues more to the fore, not just as a window dressing, but as an operational core of what people are attempting to do, which maybe is a nice segue to your trying to bring spiritual life and cross-racial, cross-cultural sensibilities into this conversation through your Jubilee Journeys.

Maybe we could talk a little bit about that as really a complimentary or synergistic endeavor.

Mason: You know, David, the whole thing started with the Journeys. The Journeys is where it all started for me and this, with [33:00] Jubilee Justice, and the farmer's project came later. Again, I think of it as the horizontal.

We have systemic problems, right? That we know. And the mind- and heart-set that has created the problems is also the lever that can change it, I believe. It's changing hearts and minds.

Bollier: That's very succinctly put, but let me push you a bit. How does one access that world? How does one begin to have constructive conversations, not just by yourself as a personal transformation, but as a social reality. I'm intrigued by the cross-racial healing and cooperation that you're trying to foster through these encounters.

Mason: We're doing it.

Bollier: How does that work?

Mason: David, We're doing it. We're not trying, this is what's happening. It's amazing.

It's an experiment and it's a big experiment because a lot of harm can happen in experiments. And so far, so good. We have brought together over the last couple of years, [34:00] white people with wealth, wealth holders. Okay? Who are at least turning in the direction of saying something's wrong with this picture, okay? Okay. Not knowing what they do...

Bollier: Did they come to you or did you seek them out?

Mason: No, we, it was kind of through relationship. It's all about relationship. Through relationships that I had; through relationships with the team that I was working with, and their relationships and networks. Through relationship, we had a first gathering, and it was again wealthy people on one hand who were all white and what we call wisdom keepers on the other hand, which were all BIPOC, who are wealthy, not with financial wealth, but with thought leadership, with spiritual leadership, with some of the most incredible minds that I know we brought together here in Louisiana, on a plantation, a former plantation, with all the trappings of a [35:00] plantation, meeting in the big house, having conversations at the intersection of land, race, money, and our spiritual dimension, which is the place where our liberation lies. It is the place that connects us all.

Having conversations about the economy and about capitalism on a plantation with wealthy people and holding it in a way that...with compassion, with understanding, with a bigger picture and truth telling, absolute truth telling and holding it in a way that there was a feeling of this is

pushing me to my discomfort level, but not out so far to the alarm level where I shut down. But we gotta be uncomfortable – if we're not uncomfortable, we're not doing the work.

Bollier: Well, it's a [36:00] reckoning with the past and the past as it informs who we are today.

Mason: That's right. And being here in the South, right? And on this plantation, it's like...you can't get away. And so we started with the journeys and talking at that intersection and bringing people together.

Relationships were made that would never have happened. These wealthy white folk and these incredibly brilliant BIPOC folk would have never met each other in the world but for this intentional coming together. And what we learned from each other was...it has been life changing.

Bollier: You could say that we don't have any vehicles for this, we just have this degraded social media space and degraded cable news and commentary space, and then maybe highbrow or academic treatment, but there's no vessels or coming-together spots for this in a way that I suppose one has to be vulnerable. And who wants to be vulnerable? I [37:00] haven't attended this obviously, but it strikes me as a pretty remarkable confluence of people. You must have had some remarkable moderators.

Mason: That's right. We had amazing facilitation. We had amazing facilitation. We had amazing people, even as we were coming together with a little fear. I mean we bonded. People didn't know each other. In the very first three or four hours, we, I'm gonna tell you, what we did is we created an alter together, and it took us three hours to do that because we really dealt with everyone who knew whatever they knew about their past, whether they were former...come from a family of former slave holders, or from formerly being enslaved. How do you bring these people together? And the vulnerability and how it was orchestrated by one of my key people, a woman named Luisah Teish, who is a Yoruba priestess, who brought her wisdom and brought people together. As that three hours was over, [38:00] we looked at each other and it was like, "Wow." And compassion was the biggest piece in the room.

Bollier: Apart from being a very moving experience, what do you see flowing from this in terms of the way people are going back to the world, the way they continue to interact, or...What are the results?

Mason: The results are, are really something. So we've had two of those Journeys, what we call Journeys, here on this land before COVID and then we've gone online. We went online and now that has morphed into a course called Our Ancestral Journey. A two-year course that we have

fifty people in, half white, half BIPOC. And that journey we believe is ancestral. We are taking people... We have genealogists on board who are going backwards in order to heal forward.

We wanna pretend like slavery didn't happen. All these things didn't happen. Let's just move forward. We can't do that. And that's why we are where we are today. We have not dealt with the reality and truth telling. So it's about truth telling, going [39:00] backwards, everybody together, holding each other through the discoveries that we're finding in order to move forward.

So that's what we're doing now. When I go back to the first two journeys, the kinds of collaborations that have happened. We mapped it. We have a map of the people who attended, who is in relationship to who, where money has flown, where resources have flown, where things have happened. We have a whole map of the impact that it has had.

That's just the impact that I know about. There has been, I won't mention the name, but there is a white family that was here, the first Journey, whose minds were blown, who have subsequently created a fund and are working in this area that they would never have done before; that are seeing that there's possibilities that you can actually do something without the guilt and the shame and all of the things that stop people.

Bollier: In some ways it strikes me as a bottom-up commons driven discourse that's uncontaminated by some of the politics [40:00] and the political discourses, which often have ulterior motives or impure motives. Whereas this is kind of deep in the heart without those conditionalities. So I'm really just fascinated because I think of a lot of these movements, whether it was Truth and Reconciliation, or the Mothers of the Disappeared in Argentina, or the neighborhoods in Berlin that put markers down for people who were taken away to the concentration camps, this is sort of at the root of the grassroots. And that's where the authenticity is, and that's where the conversation has to occur, not at these higher for-show levels.

Mason: You're right. And they don't happen in a boardroom. They don't happen like that. They happen on the ground in person, literally walking the ground. A part of our journey is we're here on this land, and we take it out to the land.

I mean, the roots of plant life, the root of agriculture, the soil that creates life for all of us. The health [41:00] of the soil and the health of our being is intricately connected, as you know. And what we do is we create the bridge; we create the bridge between that, so that you begin to understand, you just want your foot, your feet barefoot on the soil, and you get that your health is connected to that. And that the work that we do on the planet... we have to heal the soil as we heal ourselves. And that's the work of Jubilee Justice.

Bollier: Well Konda, I really want to thank you for sharing your insights with me about basically resurrecting relationality and getting ourselves out of this transactional individualism. It's just such an inspiring story. And I know you're a fledgling effort, but there seems to be so much rich potential that you've tapped into already.

Mason: Yeah, I think we're out the door, man. I'm just excited for the next chapter. Every, every chapter. [42:00] It's emergent in nature, David. I did not have this plan.

This is not some plan that Konda Mason had. This has been emergent in nature. And I've been able to say yes, and I've been able to say yes, because of the support and other people's vision, other people's vision, along with mine saying, "Let's do this." And it is about a collaboration. We cannot do this by ourselves, and I am in no way doing this by myself without everyone else's support and us going forward together. That's how it's happening.

Bollier: And that's why it has the power it does.

Mason: Yeah. I believe that.

Bollier: Well, thank you, Konda. We'll be keeping track of this and looking forward to your enormous achievements in the future.

Mason: Thank you, David. Thank you so much for having me on. [43:00]