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Interviewer: Lina Mohammed
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LM: My name is Lina Mohammed. Today is May 12th, 2020 and I am interviewing Professor Rebecca Bartel through Zoom for the UCSD race and oral history project. Can you please state your full name, date of birth and place of birth?

RB: [poor internet connection] Rebecca Charity Bartel 2/26/1980 and I was born in Freiburg, Germany.

LM: Can you introduce yourself to me or what would you like me to know about you?

RB: Sure, so I am... how do I begin... I am a Canadian citizen and a German citizen, dual citizenship, and I am a professor of religious studies and Latin American Studies at San Diego State University. I've been here in San Diego since 2016. I moved directly from Toronto where I got my PhD and moved here with my partner and we've been here since then and I lived for 8 years in Bogota, South America, where I got a Master's degree and worked with human rights for 6 years doing advocacy work and public analysis work around the whole region of Latin America, so I was a regional policy analyst for a small non-profit human rights organization and humanitarian aid organization, and that really sort of set the stage for my further doctoral studies and the kind of work that I'm involved with now with Allies.

LM: How did you decide to travel out of Toronto? What made you make that decision?

RB: Well I'm actually originally-- so I was born in Germany. My dad's a German citizen and my parents even though they're both [unclear] doctoral work so I was born there and I moved back. We lived in Vancouver for a little bit and then we lived in Winnipeg which is where I grew up for most of my childhood and adolescence and where I did my undergraduate degree. My undergraduate degree was in theology and political science and I thought that I would maybe go into the ministry which-- good thing I didn't because I'm not-- I don't like people in... not to be a pastor [smile], but I had studied theology and I come from a tradition called the Anabaptist tradition. I don't know if you've heard of the Anabaptist. It's sort of a small branch of Protestant Christianity that began in the 16th century in Germany and really holds close values of peace building and social justice, and Anabaptist University which is where I did my undergraduate degree and spent a lot of time thinking about peace building and how and why wars happen.

My grandfather had been a captain in the German army and that experience shaped our entire lives. He wrote a book about it because when they moved to Canada as refugees he embarked on a lifetime of peace activism and instilled a foundational kind of structure in our lives for thinking about how to build peace wherever we are with all of his 35 grandchildren, and so that was an influence in my life that was incredibly formative and when I was studying peace to do Master's for graduate studies in peace building, but I wanted to do it somewhere that wasn't so peaceful. Winnipeg is a very small city and I had met some Colombians throughout my high school experience and in university and Columbia has excellent universities and at that time, this was around 9/11 happened and I became even more convinced that this was what I needed to do is to study social justice and peace building, and so my I went to Guatemala first to study Spanish for 3 months and [it was] sort of my first introduction to Latin America. I had never been to Latin America. I had no Latin American, you know, roots or connections besides just deciding to go when I was 21, and it was in Guatemala that I decided that I would pursue a Master's degree in Columbia which was an entirely crazy idea because I didn't know anybody in Columbia. I had one connection that had, you know, they said I could stay with their family which was the connection to a pastor at a church that I had been connected with, and besides that I didn't really speak Spanish. I didn't have a job. I didn't have a graduate degree like a program that I had been accepted into. I just kind of was like I'm gonna go there and I'm gonna do this and so that's what I did. I went, I got a job teaching English, and I studied Spanish for a year and a half and I started auditing courses at a local university, undergraduate courses in political science, and then I applied for a Master's program and they accepted me and I got a scholarship from the organization of the American States that had a relationship with Columbian universities and the Columbian Foreign Affairs department and the Canadian Foreign Affairs department, and so it financed my graduate studies and then I stayed and then stayed for another number of years working in human rights and working in grassroots organizing and grassroots movement building with communities throughout Latin America as I said. I became-- I got a job as a regional policy analyst and policy coordinator for a small anabaptist non-profit humani-- [poor internet connection] and that shaped, you know, that shaped my 20s. I got to Latin America when I was 21 and I left when I was 30 and I went-- that's when I started my PhD in Toronto. So it was sort of a long sort of, you know, series of decisions that brought me to where I am, but yeah I think that leaving for Latin America, there was also something that I can't quite explain there was... when you're that young and well, you know, you're not that much older, you know you make decisions because you feel invincible and you feel curious and you're excited and so you know there are all kinds of backstories to the process of deciding to move to Columbia and then to stay but yeah those are the sort of big strokes of sort of my formation the role of my family and sort of my value system and then putting that into practice and sort of having faith in the universe that everything will be okay, and everything has been okay.

LM: That's great it takes a lot of courage to be that adventurous though I don't think every young person would do that

RB: Courageous or stupid. It's a very fine line.

LM: But your reasons are very courageous. You're not doing it for fun. You're doing it for a very big reason, and I really like how your grandfather's experience in war shaped the whole family's values about peace in addition to the theology. I like how he passed on to you his desire to make the world a better place and a more peaceful place. It's very touching that your grandfather tried to do that with every grandchild so that's really nice.

RB: Yeah, yeah he was a major force, a major force in the family.

LM: That's amazing.

RB: He also lived to be a 103.

LM: wow that's amazing too. that's amazing.. is he still.....

RB: [disconnection] 5 years ago yeah

LM: Okay… I'm very sorry... but he passed on to you a lot of great things so I'm sure he lives inside all of his grandchildren and his children.

RB: Yeah.. Absolutely.

LM: Alright, so you answered this question about how has your upbringing influenced your career goals, so you don't like to add anything about that, right? or would you like to add anything else?

RB: No, I think... yeah.

LM: So you did migrate a lot and you talked about your immigration journey. Would you like to talk about anything about your immigration as immigration and not just… like... study abroad or like... how do you say it... like... how was it like to be at different places at different times and you already said that it was okay but would you like to elaborate on that?

RB: Yeah.. I mean... There's an incredible amount of privilege that comes with being a White person and having a Canadian passport and moving around the world so my-- there's a reason

why North Americans and Europeans are called [unclear] and folks from other parts of the world are called immigrants there's--
[poor internet connection]
And it's, you know, it's an incredible disparity that exists in terms of global mobility that those of us that are lucky enough to be born in a certain country and to have a certain color of skin have so much more freedom to move around the world. I think, you know, when I moved to Latin America I was one of millions of privileged White girls who go to Latin America to backpack and travel and to learn and there was never ever a question of our legitimacy or our permission to be in these countries. In fact, I think my experience in Latin America has been quite the opposite that there's a real welcome. There's a real, not just openness, but eagerness to bring people from other parts of the world to see the reality that is experience by communities in Latin America and I think I was very lucky to enter into higher education in Bogota in Columbia which is an incredibly educated country and Bogota is an incredibly educated city, 10 million people and something like 30 different universities in the city, and I studied at one of the best, and it's one of the best universities in Latin America and top, you know, in the world and I learned so much about the privilege of being North American or European and how colonialism and colonial structures perpetuate inequality when it comes to global mobility and now that I live on the border and my partner is a Brown person with a strong accent and had a Columbian passport for the first few years that we were here, I've never been so hyper aware of the privilege that I have as a White Canadian in terms of crossing borders because I've never had a problem-- well you know, I mean, okay, when I was young in my 20s and traveling from Colombia to Canada, I was often, you know, given a double check and my stuff was gone through, but there was never any fear, and my partner has fear of crossing the border because he's been detained and he's been put into jail for being from the wrong country.
And so my experience as an immigrant is marked entirely by my socio-economic and political position in the world which is another reason why, you know, I do the work that I do... because that... you know, that positionality is something that creates... that gives me also great responsibility. With privilege comes responsibility. So…

LM: yeah, I think I shouldn't really interfere a lot. But I think it's just because we studied about how in my previous class about borders and how people don't respect the borders, for example, Latin America or the Middle East, like you can go in and do whatever you want over there just like, you know, but when you come to the other borders, like of North America or Europe, and you need to respect those borders. So why are some borders respected and some not respected? And why are some people required to respect them, some people not required to come at all and everything will be okay. So it's just... I know what you mean.

RB: Yeah. Well, you can see sort of the long term effects of structures that are built up by systems of power that are fed through racism, through greed, and through colonial and, you know, systems of, of discrimination. You know, these borders were created in the service of a certain kind of global economy and global political system, right? That's been in construction for the last few hundred years, And so what we're seeing at the southern border here isn't something that's just happened and since Donald Trump became president, I mean, this is something that has been in construction since the Spanish American War and before, you know.

LM: Definitely. even like the US itself stands on land that was stolen from Native Americans.

RB: Absolutely... Absolutely.

LM: All right. So Just because you already mentioned this, but since now I know but I will ask you so I was gonna ask you if you have a connection with the immigrants and detention, but I know that your partner was even a victim of that too. So that is your connection or do you want to elaborate on that?

RB: Well, that's one connection. That's a close connection but... there's a saying in Spanish "uno no lucha donde uno naces si no lucha donde uno esté." You don't fight where you're born, you fight where you are. And whatever the struggle is, wherever you are, is the struggle that you take up because that's the struggle for justice. And of course in San Diego, there are many different things that we can fight for, that need to be fought for... food justice, healthcare, education, all of these things, I mean, living in the United States. It's just appalling and overwhelming how many social struggles are so urgent because of the way in which this country operates and has operated for a long time, but because we're on the border, and because I have a connection to Latin America that runs so deep, immigrant detention was, you know, was the, the issue that, you know, just, I became very, very concerned with, especially because we got here in 2016, just when Trump was elected, and things just got very, very ugly very, very quickly. And there was a network of people connected through the university, like Joanna and Kate and those folks from Allies who invited me to be a part of the movement. So…

LM: That's amazing.

RB: It also connects to another major concern of mine which is related also to my research, which is the political economy of structural violence that people are profiting off of. So the fact that these places are run by for profit corporations was another thing that really, you know, drove me to want to be involved because it's not just the injustice of people being detained when they're refugees or asylum seekers or, you know. It's the injustice of how much money is being made off of that suffering and how much money is being made by the government and by these corporations and agencies and the shareholders that make it so... appalling... is the word.

LM: Yeah, I was gonna ask you about that later. So, I will come back to that because it's a very important topic too.

RB: Okay.

LM: So now I know, like, we already talked about the organization, but can you define what are Allies to End Detention?

RB: Allies to End Detention is a grassroots organization, a collective of individuals who are committed to the idea that a world without borders is possible and that migration is a human right. and that movement is something that should be, a movement of bodies of places, of people of ideas of culture. of tradition, all of these things, when there is more movement, the world is a better place because we learn from each other. And we're committed to doing our part through letter writing, which is a tiny, tiny act. But we write letters to people who are in migrant detention. And we send them a little bit of money in order for them to be able to buy commissary, and pay for phone cards so that they can call their families, because they can't usually do that, and to buy paper and pen to be able to respond to our letters. And in part, I think it began just to let people know that we are-- there are people on the outside who know that you're there, who care that you're there, and who are doing a little bit to try and change that. It's evolved into a high of over 2500 letters, because people respond to us, and they tell us their stories.
And so the other part of what allies does now because we've been, you know, we've been given this, this gift of, of people's stories, we, try and very carefully and ethically (as ethically as we can) to amplify those voices of the people who are who are telling us their stories. And we do that through writing reports, through doing advocacy at all kinds of the civic level, the municipal level, the county level, the state level, the national level, the international level, we write opinion pieces for local news, we give interviews, we participate in Coalition's throughout San Diego and California in the US. And our small grain of sand in this larger movement for Migrant Justice is to amplify the voices of people who are inside and who are telling us: tell our story. Nobody knows that I'm here to tell my story. This is my story of migration. This is my story of my experiences in here. This is my story of my relationships in here. This is the story of my family that-- they tell us stories and we get letters from people from 45 different countries around the world. It's not only Latin Americans. So that's what Allies to End Detention is, and that's precisely our name is precisely what it is we're trying to do is to end migrant detention completely. Because it is unethical, immoral and it's inhuman, and, and to, you know, to try to try and create a world without borders.

LM: Since you mentioned the letters, I know that writing reading letters is emotionally draining, so how do you take care of yourself?

RB: How do I take care of myself? Mmhmm. You know, that's such a funny question. It's a great question. It's a very good question. But I remember the first time I was asked that question, for a job interview for a human rights organization in Colombia, they were like, how are you going to take care of yourself because you're going to be dealing with people who are going to tell you about massacres that they lived through, you're going to be dealing with people who tell you... umm... you're going to be dealing with war and massive degrees of corruption and how to

address those things. And the violence of war is not just armed violence. It's the violence of all of the political structures that create the possibility and prolonged war. Like the economic structures also.... So one of the things that my partner and I talk about often is that here... you know, there's not a war going on, like there was in Colombia. you know like it's a different kind of violence. And I think part- one of the ways that I take care of myself is remembering... that I can always leave that-- there's real comfort in knowing that I can always go back to Canada, and many, many people can't.

I take care of myself by gardening. I have two garden plots where I grow vegetables and I have plants in my house and on my patio. I cook a lot. I sing, I sing in a choir, so I do music. I have a guitar. I do embroidery, I paint, I write poetry and journal. I do a lot of yoga. I walk a lot and do a lot of exercise. My partner and I try to go for runs a few times a week. So I do a lot of things to try and take care of myself, because... I've been in a situation where I haven't taken care of myself in Colombia and the toll on your mind and your body in this kind of work can be devastating. And there- you're no good to anybody if you're rolled up in a little ball crying on the floor and can't get up, because you haven't done what you need to do to sort of create strengths in yourself and around you.

Another thing is I have to know when to say I can't right now. You know, right now I need to stop or I need to focus on something else or I need to take a break. I need to take a vacation. vacations are important. Rest times are important. We... [internet disconnection]... how do we do something that's gonna have an impact because nothing is changing, you know, and that's one of the hard things about this kind of work is that the results are never immediate, you know, it takes a long time for things to really change, and so you need to be prepared. This is long distance running. this is not... these are not- sometimes it's sprinting, but it's a long game and, you know, taking care of yourself is very important. I also talk on the phone a lot. I went to therapy for two years in Toronto to sort of deal with PTSD and all kinds of, you know, things that I brought with me from Columbia... so a lot of things, a lot, it's not just one thing. It's a lot of things.

LM: Yeah that's great that you are doing all that because you're dealing with this for your whole- like- your career. not just out-- so some people have jobs and then they help with Allies to End Detention outside their jobs but this is your job as well so you're surrounded by sorrow and suffering, so I'm glad that you're doing all that…. but I agree with being-- I think the worst part is being so powerless, like you read the letters, you know what's going on, but you don't have the power to change it right away and you push for it but you don't see the results right away so that's very stressful.

Okay, so from the letters, what do our friends in detention want us to know? So for example why do they leave? Why did they choose the US?

RB: Well like I said there are over 2500 letters, right? so there are 2500 different answers to that. Some of the things that I… [disconnection] The letters to get others to move, the reasons that are shared by a lot of people... lives and the lives of their children at risk... many letters, especially letters from Central America and from Mexico and some places in South America, from some countries in Africa, from some countries in Asia tell stories of political persecution because of the political war that individuals were involved with... I read a letter from Eritrea, [from] someone whose parents had been involved in a dissidence movement and they had to flee then to

Ethiopia, and then they had to flee to somewhere else and then this young man's life was in danger because he carried on the political work and he had to flee from Sudan in the dead of night with a fake passport to Brazil where he arrived and miraculously was able to make it through customs and they didn't-- and he tells his story that he was so scared, didn't speak Portuguese, and then from Brazil journeyed all the way through South America over the Darien Gap which is notoriously-- that gap between where Columbia and Panama begins is an incredibly dangerous-- not just because physically it's dangerous but because it's full of all kinds of different armed groups in narc-- ,you know, drug traffickers, and then all the way through South America, Central America, though Mexico and arrived to the border of the United States because the United States... has for a long time, I think, sold itself to the world as a place where there's freedom and there's opportunity and this is the myth that Americans tell themselves and tell the world about what their country is about, the statue of liberty etc, etc. And I think at one time it was that. I think one time the United States did uphold some of those ideas in some ways. I think our Native American friends would tell us a different story. I think our African American friends would also tell us a very different story.
But so, you know, this young man from Eritrea tells his story. This is why he left and he came here because he thought that this country that promises opportunity and freedom and etc would be just that and he had no idea that applying for asylum as someone who has such a strong case to become an asylum seeker and to be welcome into this country would end up essentially in prison.
Stories from Latin America, from Central America tell stories... Many stories that are similar, that gangs have created such violent conditions and have threatened lives of people or have killed family members, and so the family that does come to the US is coming because their daughter was threatened, they were threatened, their children are threatened, their parents were killed... They're leaving because they're impoverished. They're leaving because they have been promised work. They're leaving because they have to. Nobody leaves everything and risks everything just because. And I think a lot of people are also coming to the United States because they have convinced themselves that this-- they have, or they have family here. A lot of people already have, you know, cousins and brothers and sisters and other relatives here. [coughs] excuse me. And a lot if people don't even romanticize the US so much. It's just the place where they think they can start a new life because that's what they've been told... and I know part of the discussion with some folks in the United States is... well... you know... we're the best. It's the best country. That's why everybody is coming. And I don't think it's so much the best country. I think it's that-- it's a lot of people have been to other countries before they come here and a lot of people would much rather be at home, but they can't.
[Poor Internet Connection]

LM: No one, like, me included, no one would leave home if home was not livable, if home wouldn't kick you out of home. If you could stay, you would stay because I mean-- aside from just going for education and going back, people don’t start a new life just out of the blue. It's just-- it's not the best option, and I think...We spent a whole class debunking the myth that the US is a "nation of immigrants" because that's what it sells itself as so I think that's one of the main rhetorics that people choose the US for because like, you know, the statue of liberty and everything is just like... the rhetoric that we accept everyone and everyone has a new chance and the American dream and all that so I can really agree with you.

RB: yeah and I mean living here now that we're here, I mean you see that-- I mean it is a nation of immigrants in a lot of ways. It's also a nation of people who were forced to come here for slavery. It's also a nation of people who were forced to come here for labor. And immigration policy becomes de facto labor policy because who are the people that are sustaining this economy especially right now in the midst of COVID? the people who are the most vulnerable are also the people who are stacking the grocery stores and who are driving the Ubers and who are still doing delivery and who are still working in the fields farming our food, and those are the people who are, you know, the most vulnerable to this pandemic but also are the ones for whom this promise of the American dream is, you know, is a lie

LM: Yeah that's why it shouldn't be, you know, when it says a nation of immigrants it ignores slavery. It ignores people that were forced to come here. It ignores people that the US brought because of war. It's just-- it ignores a lot of things and mainly, like, it counts Native Americans as immigrants and it's not-- they're not immigrants. It's their land so there's too many things wrong with that statement.

RB: Yeah, back to the letters what are in the letters-- what people are telling us also is that their stories reflect a bigger story of the Americas. Their stories reflect political systems. Their stories reflect economic systems. Their stories reflect a contemporary crises of climate change because also people are fleeing because the climate has changed, and their farming has changed, and they haven't been able to harvest when they had, you know, an entire crop was flooded or some disaster struck and now they have no other choice but to leave, and so like many of our Haitian friends in detention are here because of the effects of an earthquake that happened 8 years ago but, and the devastation of that earthquake-- I was in Latin America when the earthquake happened. I had friends in Port-au-Prince and was on the phone trying to get through and talking to all kinds of folks who've been affected, and the earthquake was a natural disaster, but the conditions that existed in Haiti that allowed 200,000 people to die were entirely human-made, right? so what these letters are telling us is much more than just-- it is individual stories and each one of those stories is a precious gift, but it also reflects larger systemic problems. That is part of the work that Allies does so not only are we responding to what people are telling us in letters that's immediate, we're also able to interpret larger systems of power and injustice because these letters reflect, you know, how those systems affect individual people.

LM: that's amazing, so do you feel any other emotions when you're reading the letters other than sadness?

RB: I feel anger often... sometimes the letters are really funny. Sometimes they're beautifully written and I appreciate just-- you know, when you read a really beautiful poem or a really beautiful book... or you see a beautiful piece of art, there's something sublime about that. I don't know if sublimity is an emotion, I'm not sure [laughs] but deep appreciation, I think, I feel… I'm

impressed by the experiences that people share, who these people are... they, you know, they are business owners, they are political leaders, they are religious leaders. We have a young a Buddhist monk who is writing us letters. They are... you know, farmers and agriculturists and they are also poets and writers and... and artists and so I feel amazement when I read the letters. I don't feel-- I think I've worked with folks-- I learned enough from people to know that most people don't like other people to feel sorry for them. I don't feel pity I don't-- I feel sadness but I mostly feel like these are just humans who are exactly the same as I am but are in a very, very devastating situation and so I read these letters as though, you know, they're sitting in front of me, and they're telling me this story. And so I feel also connection, and I hope that when our letters are received, they also feel that. I like feeling like we are in an exchange. And I think we could-- that's one of the things that we can do better at Allies. I think we can-- we should start responding to these letters also, not only like triaging and responding immediately to crisis, but also thinking about the relationships that are being formed, even if momentarily because these people, they are equal to us. It's not a question of, you know, of course they're victims, but victim doesn't mean Less than, or someone who we should feel pity for or sorry for. Victim just means that they've, you know, they're in a situation that's difficult. they need help, but, you know, so that-- those are all the things I feel. I feel all kinds of things when I read the letters. Yeah.

LM: Yeah, I know what you what you mean when you say, like, it should be more like a conversation rather than just, yeah, we'll help you and that's it because I think that there's more connection and, like, people want someone to talk to most of the time not just someone to help them with the commissary and other stuff. So we can do more of that.

RB: yeah and not only that, I think we have something to learn. You know, we need the help also. We are all a part of this sick society and we need them also. They don't only need-- And that's a weird thing to say, but it's based in sort of, I don't know if you're familiar with sort of, Paulo Freire's pedagogy in South America and activism and social movement building. The idea that every human has something to teach you, and that the poor or the marginalized are not just poor and marginalized. These are also teachers. These are also people from whom we must learn as people who tend to think about ourselves in such privileged terms. And so for me, the detainees, you know, these are people that I've met in Guatemala and Honduras, in Mexico, in El Salvador. I've met these people. I've walked with these people on their farms. So they are also our teachers. Yeah.

[coffee break]

LM: So now tell me about detention centers because we didn't talk enough about that. How, how many are there? Do you think, and are they building more right now?

RB: How many detention centers are there in the United States?

Well, give me one second. I'm just gonna Google it. I should have-- I knew this question was coming. I should have done this before. I should have my homework.

LM: You don't have to know an exact number. it's Okay.

RB: I don't know an exact number. Okay, so tens of thousands of immigrants are under detention. How many centers are there? Well, thousands, I would say, I don't know the exact number but I would say thousands and I say thousands because detention centers for migrants are often also county prisons. They also serve as federal prisons... All kinds of different buildings are used for migrant detention. There are centers that are especially for children. There are centers that are specially for women. There are centers that are especially for migrants who have some sort of a violation of a law, a traffic violation or maybe something more serious, and then they're picked up by ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] and they're, you know, set for deportation, and they go into different centers. ICE itself has centers where they are not legally allowed to hold people for more than, I think it's 48 hours, and we know of many people who have spent weeks in these centers. These are the places they call heladoras or like congeladoras where they turn the heat off and they make them in freezing conditions which, which are practices of torture, right? These are the practices that go on because they're clandestine because they're not supposed to. They're not set up to hold people for long periods of time. So all of these different buildings make up the detention center network. And detention centers, some are, many are run by for profit private companies that are contracted by the US government. And that goes also for regular prisons also, they're run by, not all but many, are run by for profit, prison corporations which creates something called, you know, the prison industrial complex and the detention industrial complex and a whole sort of political economy that is run. This is a multibillion-dollar industry that profits off of detaining people, incarcerating people and migrant detention centers.
The two largest corporations that run the migrant detention centers in the US are a company called GEO Group and a company called CoreCivic. And between these two companies, they also outsource contracts to hundreds of subcontractors, so all of the food services, all of the weapons armory services that give these people guns to hold people in their cells. All of the, you know, the... Those... What are they those, those metal blankets? You know, they're silver. Like, they're like emergency blankets.

LM: Foil?

RB: Yeah, the foil, right. Those are the companies that make those, the companies that provide their toilet paper, the companies that provide their cleaning supplies, the custodial company. So all of these companies are outsourced in this, like, in this web, this economic web, which is how, you know, these kinds of industries operate. And every one of those companies also is profiting off of the private prison industry. And so it's not just, it's not just these CoreCivic and GEO Group. It's also all of these other industries, and the government itself profits off of these companies because they are shareholders, so members of Congress, Senators, they're shareholders in these corporations, and because these corporations are publicly traded, there's

also millions of shareholders who are also making a profit off of prison detention. So off of prison detention, same thing, off of private detention.
So as I said, not all of these institutions are privately owned, a lot of them are state run or federally run by the government. But more and more, they are run by private corporations. And just a side note the CEO, for example, so the chief executive officer, like the boss of CoreCivic, for example, his base salary pays about a million dollars and on top of that base salary, so that's his annual salary. This is what this man makes in a year. And this is from his tax information that I was just researching this this morning. And in addition to that, you know, there's all these benefits and then there's extra perks and other fringe benefits and so on. So he takes home about, you know, well over a million dollars every year. When, you know, these companies expand and they are expanding, so California is different because California just passed a law: AB 42 or something, I can't remember exactly what the law is, which prohibits any further state contracts with private prison corporations to build more detention centers. So technically, there cannot, and I don't know the specifics of the law, Jennifer would be able to answer that question, or you could Google it. Because there's some specifics about, you know, court. So the Otay Mesa Detention Center, which is the one closest to us here. They are on land that they have bought, so it's not county land. So they technically can expand because they are on their own privately owned plant, which is different if the-- if they wanted to buy more land in order to expand, they wouldn't be able to do that, but because they have their own land. Secondly, what we've been hearing about what's going on Otay Mesa is that they had, for example, an outdoor space and as the tensions were increasing, because of the policy changes that came with this administration and the crackdown on immigration, they needed more space. And they didn't want to spend all the money to expand the actual building. So they took over that outside space, and to put in, you know, more beds, so that they could hold more people.
So, and in other parts of the US, of course, there are more, there are more detention centers being built. Each one of these new detention centers, especially if it's run by private corporation, makes some people a lot of money. And so there's real interest, and I have some quotes, you know, of Damon Hininger who is the CEO of CoreCivic saying in 2017 2018, that the changes that the government was making in terms of its policies towards immigration, meant very good business for these corporations. And, you know, he's been quoted as saying that to shareholders, as saying that to his board of trustees, and so I think one of the ways in which these companies justify their-- what they're doing is by saying they're providing safe and humane housing [sarcastic laugh] because on this guy's, really, on this person's, Damon heninger's, professional profile it's-- he describes himself as in real estate... because he's creating housing for individuals that need it. So this is the discourse that they employ. I was on his Twitter feed this morning and sort of reading the way in which he frames what his company does, what CoreCivic does, is-- and so there's a justification for building more of these because more people need safe places to stay while they're waiting for their asylum hearing.
So yeah, so I think that the states can do really important things like California passing that law, which is great, because nowhere in California now can they expand. States (other states) should follow suit. But it also-- but it doesn't change the carceral, the carceral system itself, because now we'll use county jails we'll use different jails we'll, you know, there will be-- because the problem hasn't actually been stopped, which is: ICE needs to be abolished, and people should not be criminalized for seeking asylum. Because this is, you know, this is also part of the criminalization of migration...You know, which, which is a relatively recent phenomenon. And

that's why these systems will, you know, we need-- that's what needs to change in order for there to be fewer prisons for migrants.

LM: Yeah, I was gonna ask you about the criminalization of migration actually. So what are your thoughts about the shift? Like, why do you think this is changing? Why do you think people are seen as criminals more and more and which is something that didn't exist before? Like, why? Why do you think-- this is just a philosophical question, so just your thoughts.

RB: I feel like it ebbs and flows over history. Foreigners have been treated in different ways depending on the historical, political, structural moment, right? The foreigner is something that's as old as biblical literature, the sacred texts of the great traditions talk about the foreigner. And so I think in terms of the long kind of look at people who are from away, as we say, in Canada... there's, you know, there's-- there are different historical moments. Now in the, like the recent history of the criminalization of migration and the way in which the United States specifically is expanding on a long tradition of criminalization of certain kinds of protests activity, economic activity, religious activity, cultural activity that didn't fit within the hegemonic interests of, the US as it's, as it is as an, as like the Empire, right? And so in terms of creating and being part of a [poor internet connection] those people, you know, then leaving their countries because of contacts at the United States has been a part of, of creating... there I think there's a fear, there's xenophobic fear by the dominant economic and political castes in the United States that the US is changing and it doesn't look like it did 50 years ago. It doesn't sound like it did 50 years ago. And the balance of, of power, I think, is changing. I think on the one hand, we're seeing sort of in the bigger picture, the beginning of the fall, or maybe we're right in the middle of the fall of the US Empire. It's crumbling. And people get desperate when things start to crumble.

I also think that economically because of the changes since the, you know, when business is booming, when the economy is strong, immigration is encouraged a lot more because there are more jobs, because the farms need more workers, because there's more, you know, opportunity because, you know, more companies need undocumented labor. Which just is, like it's just a race to the bottom, right? because the lower, and lower, and lower you go and the more, and more you outsource, because all kinds of jobs have gone overseas, this is not something that Obama did, or Trump did, or even George Bush did. This began with Ronald Reagan. This began with the new liberalization of the economy. And when you send all your manufacturing jobs overseas, and your working class is left in the dust, you create the kind of fundamentalist, nationalist ignorant kind of uniting against the common enemy, which is the guy who looks different than me and has a job that I wanted to have, even if I'm not qualified to have it, even if I actually wouldn't want to do that work for that little money, but there's that reaction.

And so when you hollow out the working class, you create a system that is very fragile and is very prone to the kind of extreme xenophobic reactionary nationalism that you're seeing now. And it's also combined with a hollowing out of the education system. I think the public education system here is abysmal. And I think that a lot of what we see in terms of reactionary, White supremacist right wing Neo-Nazi nonsense has a lot to do with sort of an education system that's been... sort of repeatedly attacked... and whittled down because of lack of funding and resources and privatization, etc. Right? And so the criminalization of migration just becomes one easy way for the government to respond to a much bigger crumbling picture, right? So in the midst of all

of that, the criminalization of immigration, gives really good photo ops. It makes a lot of people a lot of money, and I think it also responds to the fact that there aren't- since the last, the latest economic crisis, there just aren't that many jobs, and there's a need to stem that flow, and the government doesn't want to spend any money on social programs, and sort of the safety net that you require in order to create the conditions necessary to humanely welcome refugees and asylum seekers. Right? You make the budgetary decisions on what your priorities are. And if that's not a priority, then how do you stop people from coming? Well, you put them in jail, and then you let the rest of the world know that that's what happens when you come here... If you're coming here without the proper documentation. Now, we can talk about proper documentation also, because that's a whole other thing. But, you know, but the criminalization of migration itself, I think, is connected to all of those things. It's not just one reason that that's expanded, but all of those,you know, it's historical, it's political, it's economic, and it's cultural.

LM: Yeah, as you said, if the government doesn't want people to be angry at the government, they have to scapegoat someone. So it has to be the common enemy.
So, yeah. Um, so I will ask you about COVID after this, but I want you to tell me, what do the letters say about detention centers like the conditions but aside from the current COVID condition?

RB: Oh, well, we have a report that we put together based on the letters that came out last year. We're about to put out another one. Because we code the letters for all kinds of different things, including the conditions of like the food that people are getting, the kind of medical attention that they're getting out aside from COVID. But in general, if people are sick, if women are pregnant if, You know, anyone has any sort of health conditions that they need attending to. We document how the guards-- how the people are telling us how the guards are treating them. We're documenting how people tell us that ICE is treating them. We document how people tell us that border patrol has treated them. We are documenting what they're telling us about the working conditions. About, you know, the fact that they'll-- detainees are expected to do a lot of the custodial work in the Otay Mesa Detention Center, and which is one of the reasons that it is a low cost center because it doesn't cost the company very much money and they-- so the migrants, the detainees get paid $1.50 a day for work. So think about that, and think about the fact that a phone card could be charging you $5 a minute to make a phone call depending on where in the world. So they tell us about those kinds of labor conditions, or lack of conditions. They tell us about being separated from their families. So if their children were taken from them, or they were separated from their spouse, or their parents, or their uncle, they tell us that, you know, there are some that also tell us everything is great. I'm really glad that I'm here. And, you know, I'm sure that you've come across some of those letters too. And, you know, they, so they, they tell us all kinds of things and usually they tell us those things spontaneously. So we, you know, we give them sort of a welcome package and say, you know, this is who we are, this is what we do. If you want to tell us your story, you can and there's no specifics about how to tell us that story. And so, the fact that people are telling us about these conditions inside the detention centers, I think goes to show also that the conditions are-- those conditions I think are horrifying. And yeah, so that-- those are those are the things that they're telling us.

LM: Yeah, for some people, I think even being in prison is better than being home because, you know, if they're home, they would have been killed or something like that. So, yeah, it's just horrible that they-- that, that someone's life conditions are so bad that being a prison is considered good.

RB: Yeah, I think that's exactly the way that we should be thinking about it. I mean, people also tell us about what they're feeling so a lot of people tell us about the loneliness. People tell us about being sad, being depressed. They tell us about being scared inside the detention centers so the mental health toll that's being taken on folks inside these centers, I think is something that we don't talk about or think about nearly enough, because those are long term-- that's long term damage that's being done to people in terms of their physical but also in terms of their mental health. And all of those people, all of these millions of people, especially the children, I mean, I can't even-- we know that's a whole other, that's a whole other thing. But these in-- we're creating a generation of people who are going to be-- who are traumatized because of these experiences. And that has long term, you know, repercussions and consequences, no matter where they end up, you know, back in their home country? And we also know when people are deported, we know that people have been killed as soon as they get home. So in that sense they are safer, a lot of them, here, but they shouldn't be incarcerated. Right? So yeah, so this is-- these are other-- all these are also things that they tell us about their mental state.

LM: Okay, how is COVID affecting the immigrants in detention right now?

RB: COVID is like a wildfire in detention centers across the United States. In Otay Mesa Detention Center, I think we're at 170-something cases. A week ago we were at less than half of that. The US Marshals and guards that work there also, there are 20-something cases confirmed that they are sick, so there are almost 200 people right now in Otay Mesa Detention Center. That's almost-- that is a third of the population of the entire population at Otay Mesa Detention Center that is infected with COVID and one individual [Carlos Escobar-Mejia] has already passed away. And we knew about Carlos and CoreCivic knew about Carlos and the warden knew about Carlos. And they had been asking for help for him for weeks before he was sent to the hospital, where he eventually died. And more people will die. More people will die if Otay Mesa Detention Center is not emptied now, and more people will die in other detention centers in the United States, just like in the prisons in the United States, and so there, COVID has been not responded to in accordance to CDC guidelines from what we're being told by folks Inside by the detention center. Staff and management people haven't had access to masks. people have not had access to disinfectants, to soap, to gloves. They've, they have been isolated in their, in their what they call pods with, you know, 100 other people or 50 other people, if one person in that pod tests positive, instead of extracting that person, they're kept in the pod with all of those other people, inevitably infecting other people... other vulnerable people. We know that 70 people were set for release last week, thanks to an ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] lawsuit, and that's a win. That's a very important step in the right direction and we're very grateful to the

ACLU for their excellent work. We've been in contact with the ACLU, we share letters with them. And we, you know, we help them when we can with information that we're getting from the inside. But COVID... COVID-19 is-- it's also being exported now by the United States through deportations from detention centers. So another way in which the detention centers are responding to the call from politicians, from grassroots organizing, from legal, you know, actors, from NGOs [Non Governmental Organizations], is to say: Well, okay, well, we'll deport people, then. And so they're deporting people, and we're reading cases of you know, 60% 70% of people on a deportation flight to Guatemala, to Haiti are being-- are infected with COVID and then taking that into the countries where they're being deported to, who have much weaker, you know, health infrastructure and capacity to respond and very-- and fewer sort of ways in which to sort of monitor where people are going and what people are doing. And [they are] infecting more individuals in those countries. And so the detention centers and COVID, it's a perfect storm that people have also been warning the detention centers about. And it seems to me at this point, that there is just this-- the kind of cruelty that we see at the level of the federal government, we're seeing that reflected in the ways in which detention centers are dealing with COVID-19. And it seems intentional, and it seems it's absolutely unnecessary, and it's inhuman. And this, this will be recorded in history as the kind of banality of evil, where guards will say they were just following orders, and marshals will say they were just following orders, and those orders are leading to, you know, so far, nothing in comparison, of course, I'm making this comparison to the Second World War, nothing at all in comparison to the human devastation of the Holocaust. But we could see many, many people die if action isn't taken immediately to release them.

LM: It also-- talking about the deportations reminded me of the time when the US quarantined Haitian immigrants in Haiti because of HIV, and they also claimed that they have their own kind of HIV so that they would also blame them for the disease, not just like, keep the infection. It's just repeating itself now with COVID.
So what are they doing in response in the detention centers? I remember there was a hunger strike. So can you tell me what else is going on inside?

RB: Yeah, so there was a hunger strike here at Otay Mesa. There's a hunger strike in Adelanto, I think their hunger strikes in various different detention centers... folks on the inside, we connected them with lawyers or with, with journalists to give their own testimony of what's going on inside Otay Mesa, and some of those were published in, in the local newspapers here. And so they're speaking to the press, a group of detainees organized into what they called the United Immigrants at Otay Mesa Detention. I think there were like 30 people who were part of this coalition that they had created, and they issued a press release that we tried to get published in the local newspaper. And they are, they're making phone calls to different organizations. We know that people have been making phone calls with the lawyers, is connected to different partner allied organizations here in San Diego, like Pueblo Sin Fronteras, like Al Otro Lado, like, you know, a whole host of other organizations who are recording freedom for immigrants who are recording people's testimony and putting them on social media. So the folks inside are trying to get their voices heard. They're contacting their families and asking their family members to petition for them. A lot of the folks inside also are working with attorneys and making requests for humanitarian release based on, you know, pre-existing conditions or other kind of immune

deficiencies or any other kind of vulnerability. So they're doing a lot. They're doing, I think, you know, the courageous stuff. They're also writing us letters. And so we were worried, a few weeks ago when we got-- there was sort of a first kind of buzz about what was going on in Otay Mesa Detention and we used, we're using some quotes from some of the letters to sort of raise awareness. And other organizations were beginning to step up their social media work. And then we had a week where no letters talked about what was going on with COVID. And we were worried that the letters were being read beforehand, or people were suffering consequences for having spoken out about what was going on inside. And we know that that's happened before in the past that people have been reprimanded, and that's a constant concern. But, but yeah, they're doing They're doing all kinds of stuff. And when we were there for-- we did a... a car protest in front of Otay Mesa Detention Center a few weeks ago, and we all went in, you know, had signs and honked our horns for 15 minutes, and the people inside, you know, they could hear us. And so they started screaming and yelling, and they were throwing up a basketball. And so there's a little bit of communication there. So, you know, so they are doing all kinds of different things. I think the hunger strike is-- I don't know what's going on with the hunger strike right now, but the hunger strike was happening, and people were being reprimanded for that too.

LM: Yeah, there was a video that was published about people being sprayed with pepper spray just for talking on the phone, refusing to sign some waivers because they were required to sign waivers in order to get the masks and...

RB: That's what people on the inside were telling us and CoreCivic has denied that.

LM: Of course, right?... of course.
So what are we-- other than voicing their concerns or like raising the- amplifying their voices, what else are we, are Allies to End Detention doing?

RB: Allies to End Detention is working on a couple of different fronts. One is we're quite involved with the Free Them All campaign, which is a nationwide campaign to free migrants from detention. And that's sort of spearheaded by... what is the organization called the detention something network? The....

LM: Detention Resistance?

RB: No, Maybe, I don't-- I can't remember. I-- there are so many names and of organizations and I usually am taking notes and I can't find my notes right now. So that's a nationwide movement that we are a part of..... Detention Watch Network, with the Detention Watch Network. And so that's a national network that is sort of heading up and so in all across the country there are-- different organizations are participating in this Free Them All campaign. And so Allies is there and through that, Allies is doing also we do targeted advocacy with different levels of

government. So at the city level, at the county level, at the state level, we write letters, we have meetings when, you know, when we're in times of being able to meet with representatives. We had a series of advocacy meetings and phone calls and letter writing when the report came out the first report last year, and I went and met with different staffers of different members of Congress, Senators, and now with the Free Them All campaign, we're writing letters to those same senators, those same members of Congress, those same representatives, making phone calls, and trying to get this on the agenda. So we're also involved with the San Diego Immigrant Rights Consortium, which is a San Diego wide consortium of organizations that work on Migrant Justice. We attend those meetings. We engage with the press. So we have sort of a standing relationship with San Diego Union Tribune, with KPBS to be sharing stories, when they can come up when people tell us. We collaborate with organizations like the ACLU Jewish Relief Services, the San Diego Rapid Response Network with, you know, other like entities and when we can we share information. We share what people are telling us. We share portions of redacted letters. We always redact the letters before we make any of their information public so we're never putting people's names or A numbers or any sort of identifying information to the public sphere. We, you know, we coordinate with all kinds of smaller, like, church groups and school groups and you know, different unions and organizations that want to be involved. So they, you know, we have school groups writing letters and drawing art and we collaborate with university courses and classes and have, you know, a whole network of interns and volunteers who write letters and read letters and redact letters and, you know, work on all kinds of different levels of the letter writing. We work with local archivists too. We're trying to figure out how we can properly archive all of these letters. So there's sort of a cultural element to what we're doing also because we want to make sure that the letters are preserved and can be an archive that's used and reflected on for a long, long time. So we, you know, so we're doing all kinds of stuff in terms of trying to amplify these voices. We're also looking at sort of exhibits, how we can exhibit these letters and the stuff that comes with them, right? All of the artifacts that people send along with the letters, crafts that they've made. Beautiful, crafts, so creative out of, you know, a cross made out of used chip bags, or the or, you know, or the dream catcher, right? I'm sure that you've seen at least images of this if not the actual dream catcher, you know, made out of Q tips and tooth floss, and paintings and artwork and, you know, all these kinds of things. So, thinking about how to exhibit that also that's another part of the work of amplifying these voices.

LM: Okay, yeah, I think the art that you're saying, we're gonna try to put it as background to the letters that we're going to read in the project so that people see how creative and how amazing the art is and what they create in these conditions.
Yes. Okay. So the last question about this issue is, we already talked about, like the dehumanization of immigrants, but how like, what do you think-- (It's just another philosophical question) So why do you think the wardens or the people, the guards can treat immigrants this way in detention in these conditions? And do you think, you know, because we're pressuring elected officials to do something, Do you think that will help Change the attitude or the way the guards treat the immigrants inside the detention centers where they don't have any regard for their health or their wellbeing.

RB: I, there are three questions there, right? So the first one, why are the guards…. Hannah Arendt, after she's observed the Nuremberg trials and came up with this brilliant analysis of the banality of evil says... She says something along the lines of people don't choose to be evil. people-- that's not a choice that people make. I don't think any of the guards are evil people. I think that they are people who found themselves in this job for many, many reasons. And they themselves are, are not evil. I think there are guards who have quit and who have not been able to do the things that they are expected to do. And there are other guards who have become emboldened, I think, to treat people in really cruel ways... and even enjoy that perhaps. But people generally don't take responsibility for their own actions, and many of these guards will say what many of the guards in Dachau said which is: I was just following orders. It wasn't up to me. It wasn't my choice. I think also there's a sense of... permission. When people deal with folks that somehow have been deemed lesser than, illegal, That gives permission to some people to mistreat others. And... I think some of them think that what they're doing is really good, actually, that they're taking care of people. And there are probably some wonderful people who are guards. There are probably some folks who are trying their best. So I-- yeah, there's no easy answer.
And the Second and third questions. What were they again?

LM: I think you answered two of them at the same time. So the only question left is do you think, I guess, yeah, you already answered this too .Like, do you think that pressuring the elected officials or like pressuring ICE would help change this treatment inside because we're trying to free them, but for the time-being, how can we make the conditions better? It's because freeing them takes longer than…yeah

RB: I think.... I mean, this is connected again to this larger sort of question of a broader social shift. We can pressure CoreCivic to tighten up their regulations and their accountability measures for the behaviors of guards and the abuse that guards are, you know, the abusive kinds of things that guards are doing, the warden could be pressured to improve the working conditions. And those things are things that we could fight for.... but what we need is a societal shift in the way in which we think about immigration so that it's not even possible to consider that you would incarcerate someone for seeking asylum and who is seeking asylum who has committed no crime. That should be inconceivable. And until it's not, you're always going to have people who justify their behavior by saying, well, it's illegal... Just because something is illegal, does not make it wrong. Just because something is legal does not make it just. The legal system is part of the problem. Right? And so I think to change the way that guards are treating individuals, yes, they should be treated differently, of course, and we should be pressuring CoreCivic and ICE to treat people better. But the problem is that their institutions are founded on a basic principle that is violent and does not allow-- It is contradictory for ICE to do humane immigration raids because an immigration raid is inhumane. So, yes, sure, guards should probably get better training. Guards should probably be paid more. Guards should probably be unionized, CoreCivic should have a clear code of conduct, etc. Yes, the food should be better. All of these things should be improved, and we want those things to be improved. But the pretense upon which private for-profit immigrant detention operates is contradictory to the values of social justice and an ethical treatment of humans.

LM: That's a very nice answer, actually. Thank you.
So last thing is from this interview, what is one thing you want people to take away?

RB: I think one of the things that no matter what the struggle is that you're a part of, no matter what the fight for justice is that you're a part of, no matter what the change is that you want to see in your part of the world, first of all, know that it is possible. Everything in the system that is unjust also justifies itself by telling everybody that it's just the way it is, and it's just the way it's always going to be. And that's a lie. Ursula Gwynn said something, I can't remember the quote exactly, but there was a time when the idea of kings not existing was an impossible idea for people to comprehend. And, you know, here we are today. So the idea that capitalism has no end, the idea that, you know, for profit migrant detention is just something that we're always going to have to live with, that the difference also of being someone like I'm a Canadian, we don't-- we have different realities than people do here. Universal health care. It's not impossible. It's what I grew up with. It's completely possible. It's the way in which most of the world works. So this idea that there's no other way is a false idea. It's a fallacy. And so you need to remember that change is possible.
Secondly, change can take a really long time. And so whatever it is that you're doing, you're just putting your grain of sand in, you know, in the beach of social change [laughs] I've been in California for too long. That, you know, you're planting a seed, you know, and you're part of a long story of social change makers, cultural change makers, political change makers, that are all sort of participating and watering that seed. You're not alone in this.
The third thing is that relationships are incredibly important, that this is not work-- migrant detention isn't going to change without, you know, a network of people that are also committed to each other, you know, as radical, different kinds of relationships create radical different kinds of societies. And so that's really important and it's also a part of sort of the self care that's required to sort of be-- have the stamina to keep on doing this work.
Migrant detention itself.... I want people to know that, you know... that... you know... There's nothing... There's nothing different about a migrant than the fact-- except for the fact that they were born somewhere else. There's nothing fundamentally humanly different about someone who is coming seeking asylum… Or a better job or a better life for their family or safety, or whatever. There's nothing fundamentally different about that person. And when we create differences like that, it's just a reflection on the fear that we have about losing something. It's not about that other person. And so yeah, so I think that... I think there's a world that's possible, where migration will be celebrated.

LM: Thank you. Thank you very much.