

“Invitation to the Species” with Jabari Brisport

Learning from Our Parents

Sarah Riggs: I am Sarah Riggs, and this “Invitation to the Species.” This moment of our present invites us to pivot with the knowledge of the past and our feeling of the future. Nothing less than transformation is occurring to the often further detriment of many, to the contributed profit of some. And every transformation, in deep and resounding positive directions, depends on movement, many of which are already well underway, even have been all along. And some which come from or are nudged by intellectuals and artists. Here we are, Tamaas, the word for “connection” in Arabic, that has worked, from 2004, between the U.S., Morocco and France, in film, poetry and dance, translation and with Moroccan girls. This is our new branch, Earth Arts Justice. We have launched a series of podcasts with interviews, sometimes with reading performances, with thoughtful members of communities of artists and people at large. We are asking folks to think about what thoughts of their parents and grandparents’ lives could bring to the present moment, and how their own work and lives connect to collective ecosystems, health balances and to our climate. Each participant receives one or more questions that is specifically connected to their work and experience. Welcome to “Invitation to the Species.”

Jabari, I’ve been following your trajectory in politics, and I’m interested in what it is about your grandparents, and possibly your parents, that you feel is with you, and something you wanted to draw out in the present moment going to the future.

Jabari Brisport: I love this question. I’ve been thinking about my parents and grandparents in the time we’re in now. I lost all my grandparents even before the Covid-19, so I don’t have to worry about them suffering from the virus. My mother is around 68, staying by herself. If it were any other crisis, I’d be taking care of her, but this is the one type of crisis where we shouldn’t be near her. A sense of resilience and experimentation is carried with me. Talking about experimentation, almost throwing caution to the wind, and seeing where the journey takes you, my dad grew up in Guyana, South America, and dropped out of high school because he preferred to play around. He would work and do agriculture in the jungle of Guyana. When he was 19, he got a student visa to go to the States, and study for about a year. When that expired, he just stayed here, undocumented for twenty years, before marrying my mom. In the 1970s, bouncing around from job to job, having a little apartment in somebody’s basement in Harlem, and making ends meet—one of the hardest-working guys I know—he trusted he’d be fine, even if he had to get roughed up a little bit. That’s one of the main influences of the campaign. No campaign is alike. This is my second time running, and it is very different from my first time running for City Council—I’m running for state’s senate now. You never know where the wind takes you. I met you two months ago, at a fundraiser, in Park Slope, for myself and Bernie Sanders, and here we are, wearing masks and interviewing, in a backyard, a few months later. This campaign is also about understanding that you can go any which way at any time.

All Politics Start Local

SR: How did you come into politics? What is it to be representing your beliefs, and, to stretch that out, to be representing other people's? How do you go from being an individual to being connected to these communities in a way that would speak for them, and that you could vouch for them?

JB: They say, "All politics is local." You could extend that by saying, "All politics is local to the self." I came to politics through personal struggle. I'm queer. I'm super queer. My first hard political action was to fight for same-sex marriage in New York in 2007–08. Fighting for that, I studied acting in college, and making spoken word over same-sex marriage. It came up in a vote, in New York State Senate, in 2009. I started organizing my friends from high school. I looked up all their addresses, and who their state senator was. I started reaching out to them, giving them a script, saying, "We have a vote coming up for same-sex marriage. It would mean so much to me if you could get your senator on board. Here's what you could say. Leave a text message if you can. Read them the script. I've got you covered." I didn't even know what the phrase "whipping vote" meant. I just did it because I believed in same-sex marriage. To be able to make a difference like that. Unfortunately, we lost that vote in 2009.

Same-sex marriage didn't pass the New York State Senate. We voted again, in 2011. This time, I got involved with the Human Rights Campaign. I didn't want to feel like a second-class citizen. I wanted to feel like I was equal to others. Other people could marry the person they loved, so why couldn't I? In 2011, we were on the phone banks with my friends, whom I'd asked to volunteer, and we won. It felt great to win a victory that made me feel like a whole citizen, equal to others. A few years later, I got involved in the Black Lives Matter movement, fearing that, at any moment, I could become the next hashtag, because so many of the men that were shot by the police looked like me. I formed a group with friends called Artists for Change. We did a lot of street demonstrations. Sometimes we'd lie down and make a chalk outline of ourselves, and write the name of somebody who'd fallen, to spread awareness about them. We did a walk through various historical black churches in Harlem, singing songs from the civil rights movement to raise awareness. In 2016, with Bernie Sanders, I looked into democratic socialism. I started seeing how so many of our struggles were interconnected. I started seeing capitalism as this overarching force that fans the flames of sexism, racism and nationalism. I'm running as a full-time socialist now, because I believe that, once you start fighting for your own liberation, you start to see how other people are in chains too, and you want to fight for them as well. Because of my own personal struggles, I feel like I'm fighting for the values of my community.

SR: That's amazing. I guess that, in this process, you learned how to keep trying and being connected. What about your background in theater? Do you have an anecdote, in your theatrical experience, that connects to your political work?

JB: My friends and I, in undergrad, made a group called The Glass Theatre Company, centered around gentrification. We were NYU students. When we found out how bad NYU was, buying out properties through Harlem, Manhattan, pushing out residents, we collaborated with local communities to push back against the local re-zoning. We did street performance in Tompkins Square Park. We had free food from local business owners, and got people from our community to sign up our petition to push back against the local re-zoning. It was my first time getting involved with the community board in college. It's nice to know that you can rally people to fight against something in their own backyard. And then, lo and behold, ten years later, I'm in the Democratic Socialists of America.

One of the main reasons I joined was because, the first time I went there, somebody said, "I want to organize something against the Bedford Union Armory," an old armory in Crown Heights which is now empty. What the city wanted to do was to convert it into a recreation space, which people in the community wanted, but subsidizing it with a lot of luxury housing and condos. The middle of the Crown Heights neighborhood was seeing thousands of evictions a year, hemorrhaging the community that was there previously. I spoke at this DSA meeting and said, "We had to fight against this. The local council is not doing anything. It is in the pocket of real estate." These were organizers fighting for something in their own backyard. A central thing of my 2017 campaign was fighting against that nasty development deal. I was arrested protesting it. The cops told us to get out of the streets. We didn't want to, so they handcuffed us, and took us to the precinct. Talking about our struggles are interconnected: when we were detained in the precinct, the cops asked us why we protesting, and they were on our side too. They told us they had to take us in for obstruction to traffic, but they agreed that housing was all about money, profit and business. On our way out, they said, "We hope you win." That was an interesting form of solidarity, because I didn't expect cops to say that. They were with us, because they understood what was going on.

Climate and Social Justice

SR: I listened and spoke to one of the leaders of UPROSE. What kept coming up was the relationship between any climate issue and social justice, how deeply connected they are. It's important to have people of color in leadership positions, which you've been doing and striving to continue to do further. Could you talk about working as a leader and a person of color and connecting to these aspects of the climate crisis that everybody feels but not equally.

JB: UPROSE is a fantastic climate/social justice organization in Sunset Park. I've had a chance to meet with them. They're doing great work pushing back against the nasty rezoning on the Sunset Park waterfront. I rallied with them at a hearing of the Brooklyn Borough President in January. One of the ridiculous things about that development involved the construction of hotels in an area that's seen extreme loss of affordable housing. People in this neighborhood don't need hotels, but housing that they can afford, or that their children can afford when they grow up. That's not the case. When we were rallying, people got up and made cases. We know that, every single time that we make this rezoning, it ends up pushing out more black and brown people from their neighborhood. It's important to have somebody in the state legislature, or in government, that recognizes it. On the campaign trail, I am the only person in my political race that is even talking about the climate. As I mentioned, climate is a social justice issue: the effects of climate change impact black and brown communities the hardest.

When we think locally to New York, Hurricane Sandy hit Red Hook hard. There was so much flooding. This is a Black and Latino-American population. The Upper East Side was fine. Bay Ridge was fine. These more heavily white communities were fine. That's the way things are structured. People of color are more likely to live in areas that are more precarious. The climate is a social justice issue. Think of Hurricane Katrina and what happened to the Wards of New Orleans. What happened in Puerto Rico recently. It is a social justice issue. My campaign looks to center people of color in that discussion. For example, when we're retrofitting buildings to make them more climate-resilient, it is important to make sure that the people from these communities, especially if they are black or brown, or from other marginalized communities, have first say in the jobs, or the training, or the apprenticeship program. As a person of color myself, I feel honored that I have a chance to fight for that angle, and making sure that, in any climate strategy we have, people of color and the marginalized are centered.

We Need Teachers of Color

SR: Let's talk about your public school teaching. What is it like to be a teacher while running for office?

JB: I love public school teaching. I came into it through the NYC Men Teach program, that aims at getting more men of color into our New York City public schools. The majority of teachers are white women, while the majority of kids are black and Latin-American. Only 2% of public school teachers are black men. A fun thought experiment on social media said, "Can you think back to how many black teachers you had growing up?" I had one, in middle school: my seventh-grade English teacher, who was amazing. We used to make these journals at the beginning of class, which we were supposed to pick up. I'd made a Pokemon card, which was my favorite, but I forgot to pick it up. I reached out to him, ten years later, and he gave me my seventh-grade journal as a present. He'd held on to it for ten years. I also remember him strongly because I saw myself in him. It's nice for me to do that for my students. I don't know how many black teachers they have, especially for math.

So few black kids go into engineering, math or astronomy. Maybe if they had more black teachers teaching them math and science, they could say, "That could be me when I grow up. It's not just basketball. It's not just hip-hop. I can be an engineer. I had a black teacher showing me how to do physics." A lot of my kids like math, especially girls, even though our society doesn't encourage girls to do math as much as it encourages boys. My girls get excited by math, and that inspires me. Teaching while running for office is so hard to do. I was already time-strapped as a teacher. I already thought that teaching was like two full-time jobs with all the prepping. And running a campaign is also a full-time job. I feel like I have three jobs now, but I do it because I care about the students so much, and I want things to be better for them too. To go back to the climate, I can't imagine being a politician who is near kids every day, and not have a climate platform. If you're around kids, you've got to think about what the climate will look like in twenty years. I want them to be able to breathe clean air when they're my age.

SR: That's the question I've been asking everyone. Do you think about the future? In practical terms, in twenty or thirty years, what is the kids' future? Again, things that may not seem interconnected are: the heritage that you've brought from your parents and grandparents, and the way you've come to interpret and apply their teachings, but also the variety of crises. People would not necessarily connect gentrification to the climate crisis, but I'm sure that you do. I know that you're vegan, so there's another connection to the climate.

JB: It is all deeply connected. A lot of people will tell you that veganism or animal rights is a white bougie thing. In Arizona, in large pig farms, they disperse the pig shit in huge reservoirs of water. The aerosol of that pig shit goes and drifts into the water of the poor communities. I don't know what came first: were the poor people already living there, and they decided to put giant pig farms next to them, or is it that the only place where they could afford homes were near big pig farms? Right next to these farms are low-income black people with respiratory and health issues, because there's pig shit wafting in the air into their homes and communities. It's violence against these communities.

I do see all these issues being interconnected. People don't think of housing and education as being interconnected, but when a kid doesn't have stable housing, he can't learn. I have students that can't pay attention and fall asleep. For some kids, it's because they watch too much YouTube at night or play video games. For others, it's, "Sorry, I was up late because I had to go and sleep at my aunt's house." If I had to be in a different bed every night, I don't know how I would function during the day

either. That's a basic need: having a home. This girl is lucky to have an extended family to help her, but we as a society and our government need to make sure that she has a home, a place of her own that she can call hers, that she goes to every night and that's stable. I've had such a window into my students' lives during this crisis, because they're all at home now. I commend them. I can see the home situations for some of them. I can see how loud it is in their home, because there's so much going on. I just wonder how they get any homework done, with the dog's barking, two siblings screaming in the background and their mom on the phone. I feel for them. It must be so hard, but they persevere. I had one girl, too, who was so sick. She had a fever. I sent her to the nurse, who sent her back up. I said, "Did your mom send you to school?" She said yes. I can't blame the mom. She probably works a job where she can't leave to take care of her daughter. She might lose her job, so she's forced to send her sickly girl to school. It's very unfortunate that we don't have enough resources for parents to have child care and protective services, so that they don't end up in situations like that. Health care, housing, the climate, animals and education are all deeply connected.

The End of Capitalism through Collaboration

SR: My last question has to do with this quote, "It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism." It seems that you are in this pivot place where you try to move us out of capitalism. The artists and poets that we've been interviewing either have been doing that for decades or are going deeper now. Could you talk a little bit about that, given that you have joined the Democratic Socialists, and talk about where we are in relationship to capitalism, and where we can go?

JB: Capitalism has managed to entrench itself in our psyche so deeply, in the past several hundred years, that people can't imagine any world without it. You can watch these apocalyptic sci-fi movies about the world ending every day, and say, "I understand what it means for the buildings to be burned down, and people wandering around looking for food scraps." However, the end of capitalism is hard for people to imagine. I spoke about getting interested in democratic socialism during Bernie Sanders' campaign, but I didn't tell you how I came out of the closet as a socialist to myself.

In the summer of 2016, I was in the shower having deep philosophical thought, and it dawned on me that slavery was an example of capitalism. It was human beings who were slapped with price tags, sold on open markets and traded as commodities. That's what capitalism is: slapping a price tag on things that shouldn't have one, whether that's people, in the case of slavery, or something like health care. To me, the value of insulin is zero dollars, because I don't need it; to a diabetic, the value is infinite. How do you put a fair price on that when to one person, it's worth nothing, and to another, it's their entire life and they'd do anything to have it?

When I was fighting against the Bedford Union Armory, often it was brought up this quote from a Native American called Tecumseh, yelling at people for putting a price tag on land, "Sell a country? Why not sell the air, the great sea, as well as the earth?" That was revelatory to me, because that's the bedrock of our societies: property, ownership and value. To say, "This is my parcel of land, and this is yours. We can trade and sell them." This is as ridiculous as saying, "This is my parcel of the ocean, my cube of the air." It's land. Nobody made it. It's here. How can you own it? When it comes to imagining the end of capitalism, it's so infused into our psyche that people think that if it ends, there'll be nothing left. We have the alternative to capitalism: it's solidarity. I'm fortunate enough to be in the Teachers Union, I love it there, but you know what solidarity is in the workplace. Did you have a chance to interact with any type of worker coop? Have you ever shopped at your local food coop? You put in a little of your time and efforts. It's collaborative. It's not distanced and isolating the way capitalism is.

In this crisis too, we're having a chance to see a little bit about what the end of capitalism is. Look at the stock market, which somebody called a "graph of rich people's feelings." When the rich are feeling good about stuff, the stock market's going up, and when they're feeling nervous, it goes down. The stock market is just tanking, and yet, on the ground, you see all these Mutual Aid networks spring up that are self-funded. I participate in a group called Bed-Stuy Strong, which is around 2,000 to 3,000 members doing food drops and medicine deliveries for vulnerable people in the community. It's all self-funded and volunteer-oriented; it's not top-down, not a for-profit structure. Our communities are still able to take care of themselves in a way that doesn't involve the traditional, "This is the boss. These are the workers. They own this property. Here are their hours." We still take care of each other. We've started to see structures, during this crisis, that inform us what the end of capitalism would look like.

SR: I love hearing you speak. It's wonderful. Thank you so much. And we're looking forward to doing a poetry jam with you and some other poets from these areas in a couple of weeks later this spring.