Name of Interviewee: L.A. McCrae
Date of Interview: September 10, 2020
Name of Interviewer: Theresa McCulla
Length of Interview: 01:04:56 minutes

Theresa McCulla: Okay. It's September 10, 2020. This is Theresa McCulla of the National Museum of American History. I am interviewing L.A. McCrae, founder of Black Star Line Brewing Company. I am at my home in Washington, D.C., and L.A. is at their home in Owings Mills, Maryland. This interview is part of the American Brewing History Initiative, a project to document and collect the history of beer and brewing in the United States. Sso L.A., when and where were you born?

L.A. McCrae: Yeah, thanks for the question. I was born March 1986 in Baltimore, Maryland.

TM: And what are your parents' names and what did they do when you were growing up?

LM: Yeah. So, my dad, uh, his name is Larry. He's from South Carolina. He was originally in teaching and then got into retail management. And my mom is Dee, and she's been involved with church work for the last fifty-plus years and currently works for the United Methodist Church Council of Bishops.

TM: And where did you grow up? And how would you describe the neighborhood or the place where you grew up?

LM: So, I grew up in Bel Air, Maryland, in a neighborhood called Bright Oaks, which was right across the, the, like, uh, street, right across [Maryland Route] 924 from DuCla[w] Brewing [Company]. So, at a very early age, craft brewing made its way into my life. And I remember around my tenth birthday, my brothers and I going out. My oldest brother's fifteen years older than me and my next brother is seven and a half years older. And of course they wanted to go to the, to the new, hip, craft brewery across the street. And so, I have very fond memories of being with my siblings as they were experiencing craft beer. And that, even as a ten year old, the, the thing that through our generations was able to, to hold us together and produce some really fond memories.

TM: Do you feel like your, these early memories of DuClaw, especially, was it, did the beer seem to excite your family by the taste? Or the kind of experience of being in the taproom or the place?

LM: Yeah. So, at the time, this was like very, very, beginning DuClaw, the beer, according to my brothers, was fresh. It was exciting. They loved the flavors. They liked the beer-infused foods. So, like, the beer pretzels. And then shortly after that, maybe a year after that, uh, a coll-, a, a friend in middle school's parents

opened Red Brick Station down in White Marsh, which was this completely new idea in our area of having a brewery and a restaurant and this, this pub right there on The Avenue. So, that was also really exciting to get to see firsthand, you know, Red Brick Station opening up. So, very early, you know, there was a subtext in my life about brewing and the brewing industry. My great uncles, as the family folklore goes, were working in east Tennessee and got somehow hooked up with Al Capone's crew and ran booze on the tobacco trucks from east Tennessee to North Carolina. Which is why my great uncle, one of them, is still in North Carolina, the other just passed away, helped me learn how to brew beer. Yeah, so there was, there was always this family something with libations. And then on my mother's side, my grandfather and aunts and uncles made that good old homebrew, right? So, this is country, Southern, Appalachian, um, you know, just folks out there in the country making libations with, one of my aunts was telling me about the various flowers that they would use. And essentially it would make like a, they would ferment it out with bread yeast, you know, and it would just be a good, sparkling, uh, delicious drink. So, I made a dandelion beer once, using a recipe that my, my aunt gave me. So, there has always been this interest in history of libations and, and family.

TM: That's a deep family history, for sure.

LM: Mmhmm.

00:04:28 TM: Where did you go to school and which subjects did you feel drawn to in school?

LM: Yeah, so, I went to school in Bel Air, Maryland. I went to Bel Air Senior High School. When I was at Bel Air High School, I was very interested in politics, African American Studies, and sociology. So, after I graduated from Bel Air High School I went to school at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Finished in two and a half years. I focused, again, on Political Science, Africana Studies, and Sociology. Donated my kidney the second semester I was in school to my uncle. And still managed to graduate early. And from there, I went to Wesley Theological Seminary where I focused on liberation theology, youth and young adult ministries and urban ministries. Uh, really this critical discourse of, uh, emergent liberation theology. While I was there, I had an opportunity to study community organizing and public narrative with Marshall Ganz at Harvard University. Uh, so, was doing both programs at once. And currently, I find myself completing coursework for my Doctorate of Ministry. Our program is on public engagement, and our track is confronting and healing communal brokenness and despair. My specific focus is on emergent liberation theology and abolition theology. And a Doctorate of Public Health at Morgan State University where I'm focusing on complex trauma and, uh, you know, carceral politics, abolition, feminism. And my third program of study at the Community College of Baltimore County where I'm in classes pursuing being a licensed clinical alcohol and drug counselor. So, there's, there’s a lot, there's a lot of things.

TM: Wow. Yeah. No. That's an amazing mix.

LM: Yeah.

00:06:22 TM: Well, and I can jump ahead a bit, but I, you know, I was curious how and when the concept of founding a brewery came about? But how it played a role in all of these other kinds of interests and experiences you have, especially related to spirituality and community engagement?

LM: Yeah. Yeah, so, the brewery actually was birthed in Knoxville. I was sitting in my office at the time. I was a financial advisor. I had just founded the, um, Knox County LGBT Chamber of Commerce and was doing some work and community organizing in the queer community and Black community, and communities made vulnerable in Knoxville. So, we're sitting in, in my office. And, uh, each Friday I would host just, you know, open conversations. Whoever'd come through. We'd have music, libations, food. So, we're all sitting in the office. It was, uh, myself, folks called me the Rev. Latte. And John Coffee. And he was also in seminary. You know, here we are, two pastors, just doing this work in the world, hosting space. Right? And hosting space with people who never would have been in the same room. We had the woman who, self-disclosed, uh, trap queen, right? So, somebody who was making a living, uh, running street drugs with one of the most well respected attorneys, who was running for Knox County Law Director. Right in this room. And so, when we were in that room, you know, we were thinking about all of the networking events we'd been to, at the Chambers of Commerce, and all of the alcohol and booze, and how there wasn't not one Black person or person of color server. Not one Black person or person of color establishment. No people of color. No Black people in leadership. And then when we peeled the onion back, we realized it was *our* presence, right, that was making the space queered, was Blackening the space, you know? All of that. And, what was core of that wasn't so much the, the alcohol, but it was the fact that we were naturally, organically, building a movement of people. Right? Who felt like they were marginalized, in communities made vulnerable, and exploited communities. And at that point, in Knoxville, Tennessee, um, the Sweet Beer Movement was born. And so, John and I originally thought about calling the place "Spirits." You know, doing the complete play on our theology and spirituality, um. But really wanting to focus on pulling folks together, gathering people together, who felt like there was no space for them in the super white, male, cis, het, patriarchal, you know, industry. Which does not even critically consider the ways that the, the very industry keeps folks like us out. Right? And so, that that's, that was really the birth, the genesis, of what became Black Star Line Brewing Company. Then I moved across the mountains to, um, Asheville, North Carolina, where I was there in the seat of craft brewing in America. And I literally applied at every, over eighty breweries. Could not get one job. I couldn't even be a janitor. So folks were saying, well, you really need to have experience in the brewing industry before you, you know, open your own brewery. But what happens when

you're Black, queer, non-binary, you know, all of these things? And you're focused more on building a movement. Sure, the alcohol's great. We're gonna make great liquid. Right? We're gonna have liberation libations. But what happens when we completely and radically change the taproom experience? And when it becomes a community room. Right? What happens when brewing doesn't just become an exercise in capitalism, but becomes a function of collective liberation? Right? So, we, I had to teach myself how to brew. Right? There were some folks that gave some advice, but I taught myself how to brew, listened to the ancestors, and then every time I brewed, I made sure it was a brew party. And that I taught more people how to brew. And they taught more people how to brew. And so, that's really how we began growing in the mountains of Lake Lure. And then we had a very interesting possibility where we could either go to Charlotte and definitely be rooted with Black queer people. Or we could go to a turnkey, um, brewery in Hendersonville, North Carolina. Well, the issue was, um, initially I had applied for a loan at Mountain BizWorks CDFI [Community Development Financial Institution] for over $375,000, because obviously I knew what it cost to, to start a brewery. Right? We had done the performers, the financials, all of that. They wouldn't approve it. So, we went to two-seventy-five. Two-fifty. One-fifty. One-twenty-five. Seventy. Anything!

TM: Yeah.

LM: Will you as the community development financial institution that has a mission to support communities made vulnerable and marginalized communities honor your mission and the federal dollars that you got to support businesses like-? No. Cool. So, there was a brewery that was going.

00:12:09 TM: What, how were they kind of, how were they explaining their refusal to fund?

LM: Oh, I have it all in writing.

TM: Yeah.

LM: Which is more, uh, even much more frustrating. They didn't think I had the experience. They didn't think I had the skills. They were concerned about my mental and emotional health. They never asked that question to any of the other people. I know for a fact, 'cause I went to go ask them after they asked me that question. And put it in writing. Right? So, um, yeah. There was an opportunity to buy this brewery. We were trying to do the due diligence. Things weren't lining up. We asked that the due diligence could be pushed back again. They gave us a, a hard, basically, “Sugar, get off the pot.” This was my only opportunity to get a brewery where, 'cause, Mountain BizWorks would not fund any of the other opportunities. Uh, so, the purchase price ended up being forty-seven-five. Mountain BizWorks gave me forty-seven-five. So, I had to finance the last five thousand dollars from the purchase, so I could take that money. So, Mountain

BizWorks gave me a check for fifty-six-hundred dollars to start my business. Twenty-four-hundred of that went directly towards the rent. Another eighteen-hundred dollars went to other things. So, when it was all said and done, I had less than six hundred dollars in my till to start my business. Um, wasn't able to get a credit card. Wasn't able to get a, this was it. And Mountain BizWorks knew that. And so, we were under-capitalized and under-resourced from the beginning. And then we found out there had been a fire in the location where we were. The equipment was faulty. There were serious plumbing issues. We were targeted. We were, just, you know, hazed. Someone called the TTB on us. Federal Agents showed up at my brewery. It was a nightmare. And then with the, you know, few, literal few hundred dollars we had, obviously I couldn't pay any staff out of that. So, I was working with other people, looking at trying to get a loan. Uh, they wanted a lot of equity. The day someone, a group of Black investors from Charlotte were supposed to transfer the money, someone from the team called them and told them not to transfer it. And so, there we were, with no resources. We couldn't go back to the CDFI that set us up. The landlord was ready to evict us. It was one of the worst winters in that area of, we just needed to make it through the winter, right? Like, we had contract brews, events coming up, uh, and unfortunately they just made the decision to shut us down. And on the day, they said, "Well, you have the legal right to be here, but we need to ask you to leave." And I said, "Okay, cool. This about rent? Let me call my parents. I'm gonna get y'all your money. 'Cause you didn't never ever tell me this was gonna happen." I was never informed. I was never served a notice. This never went through the court system. Nothing. Uh, and so, they said they, they did not wanna accept my money for rent. They refused to accept the rent money. Um, we went to the police department. They had already been there. I, the long story short, I lost almost all of my personal possessions. Uh, because they were there in the brewery and the place that I was staying was in the name of the brewery because we believed in collective economics. So, most of the staff, we were all staying at a house together. You know? And so, Mountain BizWorks CDFI worked with, and this is so odd, they worked with the sellers and the landlord to get us out of that building that day. And then they, and then, this just is mind boggling. They said that I could get my personal possessions. They would catalog them, video them, send all this information. Then they called Steve, who had to be the co-signer of the loan, 'cause they made me have a white man co-sign the loan with me. Listen to this, they called Steve, Joe from Sanctuary Brewing, and one of my former employees to pick through my personal items and take what they want. I just so happened to be in Asheville maybe the, the week that they actually got rid of my items. I was walking through The Regeneration Station in Asheville and saw my items that people made for me, with my name on the bottom of them. Christmas 2005. Right? So, um, yeah.

TM: I'm very sorry about that.

00:16:53 LM: Yeah. It hurt. And then it hurt to go to compete at Brewbound. I didn't know the rules. I didn't, as a Black, you know, I grew up as a Black woman, a Black

girl. I did not know you could talk back to the judges. No one said that was a, it didn't even cross my mind that you could talk back to the judges. All the guys, uh, talked back to the judges. We got to Brewbound. I was sharing some of my, uh, ideas in the Livestream Lounge, including starting the first, which you can see the receipts, of the first Black, uh, Brewers Build. Right? The Black Brewers Festival. Was sharing this idea. Began to work with some folks. 'Cause my good friend is Ray Berry at White Lion Brewing. You know, pulling some people together. And then the folks at Black Brew Culture. I said, well, they have a literary magazine that they're trying to get off. Let me, let me holler at them. Right? Let me try to pull them into this. As history should have it, I pulled them into the conversation, began to plan the first Black, ever, Black brewers' gathering. They took it from me, and it's now Fresh Fest. So, you know, the history of Black Star Line Brewing is rooted in Black liberation. And it hurt that Black folks did that. Uh, the name Black Star Line comes from Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association. And looking at, not necessarily being separatist, but being able to have pride. Right? And a brewery and a taproom where you can go in and hear Frankie Beverly & Maze. Where you know that the beers were made with intentionality and connected with our ancestors. Where you know that the faces that are behind, you know, pouring your beers, are reflective of the communities that are surrounding the brewery and not just exploiting. So, it was the, the very essence of what we created had never been created in the craft brewing industry. And I don't know that it could be created in that same way when you literally have spirituality and faith and collective economics and collective liberation tied into these liberation libations that are not only giving people jobs, but creating safe places for folks to connect. We're the only brewery in the area that had queer and trans people, queer, and were training queer trans brewers.

TM: Yeah.

00:19:19 LM: The only one. The only one. You know? And I think that what was really lost was an opportunity to really cement, uh, ports for Black liberation at all these places where we could've had, um, Black Star Line Brewing taprooms. So, the, it, it, the, the dream was always bigger than just beer. Beer was a liberation libation, was one of the vehicles we were using to be able to fulfill collective economics and collective liberation. So, it's, it's in many ways, I feel like the folks that unlawfully shut us down did so because they knew what a great risk it was to have something named Black Star Line Brewing. They knew that it was historical. Um, so yeah. I will stop there.

00:20:16 TM: No. No. Don't. Thank you for all those thoughts. And, so, and speaking about your taproom as a, a place with many different importances. Could you describe, what did it look like if you walked into the taproom? What did you see?

LM: Yeah, so when you walked into the taproom, we had Black art, uh, all over the walls. Our neighbors at the end of the block, their grandfather was a brewer,

an artist, somewhere overseas. So, they gifted us some art. We had, uh, "I Am Not Your Negro," the poster, on the wall. We had a big, which I, this doesn't even make sense to me, but we, I had framed a photo that my brother had taken of my parents and put it behind the taps in, 'cause we called that part Larry's Lounge. Mountain BizWorks took that. It cost me over four hundred dollars to get that framed. I never got the photo back. So, yeah, you, you walked in. There was James Baldwin, Malcolm X stamp, uh. Then people from the community had actually donated art that was community-based art. So, we had what we called Open Table. We would have free food. Um, one of the local pastors and I were there. And it was just, imagine a love feast. Right? And instead of communion, we passed each other, you know, beer, bread. For those of them that wanted to participate, there was also at the very back, um, a massage chair because I had someone that was coming in and giving free massages. And on the other side of the massage chair, there was an altar for Jai Lateef Solveig Williams. Little Jerry Williams. Who was assassinated by the Asheville Police Department. Because we carry Jerry with us. I carry Jerry with me every day. Um, so, yeah. There was altar space. There was also, um, books. So, there was a Black liberation library that folks could grab books and have conversations about. We also had an area set up with instruments. So, if you played an instrument, wanted to bring an instrument, or just jam, you could jam. And it was, it was definitely like more of a community space than a taproom. Again, this was about the Sweet Beer Movement. Not just about profits and pints.

00:22:50 TM: And I can't, have you described what the, your, the idea of the Sweet Beer Movement. I mean, it's, you brew beers with sweeter flavor profiles. Is that right? Could you?

LM: Yeah.

TM: What, what is the Sweet Beer Movement?

LM: Yeah. So, that's a good question. Um, I became increasingly frustrated in the brewing industry by all of the super, what I call, bitter ass beard beers. Right? All the Triple IPAs, the New England IPAs, the, all this super bitter, super high IBUs, all of these, you know, hop infusions. It tastes, for people like me, just straight up like shit. Like, we don't wanna drink that. Why would we pay to drink that? And when we begin to look at the history of brewing, right, we know, we meaning Black folks, Black liberationists and abolitionists, we know that brewing came out of the Mesopotamia River Valley culture. In no, uh, uncertain words, Black people. Right? And so, we had Black indigenous folks in Africa learning the medicinal purposes of fermentation. And you had women who were pregnant, post-pregnancy, medicinally using fermented beverages. We show this long history of fermentation, and then we get right up to the Industrial Revolution. And we see the exploitation of African indigenous brewing, fermenting cultures exploited around the world. Right? With the rise in factory workers, and then drinking the dark beers of the day, and the barrels that were sitting there that they

could come when the, you know, um. So then, needless to say, the quality of the beer, of the fermented beverage, suffered. But, that didn't matter because at that point, as we were transitioning from mercantilism to more stable capitalism, right, the economics of beer exploited the original fermenters. So, when we have this idea of the Sweet Beer Movement, it's going back to the African indigenous cultures. And the African indigenous religions, whether it's Yoruba, Candomblé, Santería, where we have, again, this history, right? Of liberation libations. This history of libations that are used in a spiritual container. So, the Sweet Beer Movement was birthed out of that. Right? Looking at what our palates like, right? Our palates meaning specifically Black folks, Black women, you know, it's, it's, uh, anecdotally we know that typically Black folks would prefer things that are sweeter. Right? And I began to realize if I asked specifically Black women, "Hey, do you like beer?" "No, I don't like beer." "Why don't you like beer?" "It's too bitter." "Okay, cool. Well, would you be willing to drink something else that's not bitter?" Ultimately what I learned that the bitterness of the beer turned an entire demographic off. And the industry didn't give a fuck. So, we made Dat Dere Ginger Beer. And one hundred percent of the time, women would say, "I don't want the beer. It's too bitter. I don't like the taste. I don't like the aftertaste." They would drink the ginger beer and fall in love. Um, and so, that's, that's sort of how Dat Dere started. But the idea of Black Star Line was always to have not just beer, but to have beer, pulque, wine, whiskey, and to really focus on all types of libations. And so, when we started thinking about the Sweet Beer Movement, we were intentionally using malts that had a sweeter profile. We were learning techniques for, you know, if needed, dry hopping, but definitely whirlpooling, so, we're not gonna add any hops until knockout, right? Um, and we were really on the ground in ways that, that other breweries just weren't. Like, you know, we had us on the ground with kegs in the back of the car, and, and, you know, growlers out in the streets of Knoxville, Baltimore, Asheville, Charlotte. Right? And we're hosting potlucks wherever we were. And getting real feedback, you know, using models of folks like Daymond John and FUBU. And Master P and No Limit. And literally on the ground building a movement. Um, and folks, you know, we would roll up in places, in a parking lot in Charlotte, and before we even got the, the car in park, folks would swamp the car looking for Dat Dere.

TM: Oh.

00:27:45 LM: Right? And so, people, particularly in the queer community, were beginning to share this, this excitement that not only was there a beer that tastes good, Dat Dere, right? Uh, and it had a great story 'cause my uncle named it. But, folks knew that there was integrity. It was one of us. Right? That was building this for us. No longer did folks have to drink bitter ass beard beers. Folks could learn how to brew. Folks could come to the taproom. We were housing people. Right? We were employing people. We were moving people and resources. It was an entire network. An invisible network. Of folks that were connecting, you know? Theologically we would say it was an ecclesial genesis. Right? There was a, a community being birthed. And so, the, just, mean-hearted, racist, white

supremacists were shutting this shit down. Uh, impacted so many people. And I had folks that called me for weeks and months asking about, "What's happening to our beer orders?" "What about this event?" "Well, I'm supposed to perform at your bar." And, it's just, no care or consideration while simultaneous giving without soliciting other small breweries additional money so that, assist with cash flow.

TM: Yeah.

LM: So, that was a long sto-.

TM: Yeah.

LM: Hopefully, that was.

00:29:15 TM: Well, and I had one more, um, question about, um, so, Sweet Beer, you talked about beer styles and beer practices, you know, essentially being excluded from our recent memory of brewing. And so, how did you develop re-, these recipes? You know, how did you, how did you learn how to brew, teach yourself how to brew, as you mentioned, and develop new recipes with these very, um, different traditions?

LM: It's a great question. Um, the first thing I did was just pray. So, I was praying. And I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what equipment I needed. I told my friend Steve, who was like, "Alright, when we get up, we're gonna, we're gonna go to the store." Fifth Season Gardening happened to also have a huge homebrewing section. As we went to Fifth Season off East Tunnel Road in Asheville, we got the equipment. And that morning when I woke up, I just started writing things down in a notebook, which I have somewhere I can show you. And I just got a grain bill, hops, all of this stuff. Had no clue. And it took us over eighteen hours to make that first beer. 'Cause we just didn't know what we were doing. Um, and so, when we started to, to really focus and nail in and develop expertise and go on collaborative brews with other folks and have people informally share knowledge and teach us about BeerSmith and, you know. Various tools that we just didn't know. Um, we were able to really focus on unique types of malt profiles where we didn't give a fuck if, you know, the Brewer's Build says that it should be between 1.056 and 1, we don't care. Right? So, a lot of what we did was just throwing out the entire book. We're gonna make this beer and call it the Stokely Stout. And it's gonna be a Stokely Stout. And we don't care if it's more of a porter, right? 'Cause like, that is white supremacy culture. There was never a time when my ancestors were like, "Look, we gotta add some more of this honey malt right here." It was medicinal. And the people knew. And that knowingness was enough. Uh, so, similarly, I had a lot of folks in the brewing industry coming in saying, "You really shouldn't call this, you know, a Hefeweizen." "Okay. And why?" Right? And so, we did a lot of intentional challenging and pushing on barriers. For example, we had one beer called the

Strange Fruit IPA. And the tap handle was gonna be a noose. So, folks pushed back and said, “That makes us feel uncomfortable. We don't wanna have that conversation.” “We're gonna have the conversation.” Right? 'Cause that's, that’s a reality that I can never escape. Um, and so, those are the types of conversations that were happening in our taproom that were really able to, to develop really deep, authentic, uh, relationships. But, really the core of that was the Sweet Beer. Folks loved it. And if folks didn't love it, we had some, we would always say, you know, we had some regular beard beers as well. Right? But the beers, it wasn't just in the fact that they had the sweet profile. They were intentionally made. Like, the Stokely Stout. So, I knew what that meant as a Black liberationist. And then when the police came and asked for the “cop killer stout,” that was a very particular type of conversation.

TM: Yeah.

LM: With a policeman.

TM: Mmhmm.

LM: In Hendersonville.

TM: Mmhmm.

00:32:54 LM: Coming into my bar. They didn't pay, by the way. Asking for the “cop killer stout.” Um, so we had The Lorde Honey Pilsner. Right? That's fine, with Audre Lorde, who was also from Germ-. So, it's like we were very, very, very intentional. Um, and had opportunities to have conversations with folks in our taprooms about the sweet beers and the Sweet Beer Movement, that just did not exist other places. And folks would say, "Well, I don't want that social justice with my beer." "Okay, cool." This is what’s life-giving, life-affirming, life-nourishing to us, to know that we can have a place in space. You know, we had the first ever queer dance party in Hendersonville. I was the first queer business owner in downtown Hendersonville period. I was the first Black person in Hendersonville to have a shop downtown. Ever. In 2017, 2018. So, the challenges that we faced in a county that voted over ninety-three percent for 45, were many. And it was a setup from the beginning.

00:34:07 TM: Well, and another question is, uh, so, you clearly experienced all kinds of challenges bef-, before you even opened. And then after you opened, um, you quickly became the target of racist attacks. What form did those take?

LM: Yeah. So, the very first thing that happened, I was downstairs, getting recipes ready. We had multiple things happen downstairs. One of my employees came and said, "L.A. The feds are here." Which is like, what? This isn't *Ozarks.* What are we talking about right now? And I went upstairs, and there was a federal agent. He said that in the, these were his exact words, "One of your competitors

has called to make a complaint. I need to know exactly what's going on." So, we had to call the attorneys and like, it, it just, it was this huge thing. So, that, that, number one. Right? Like, they literally called the feds. Um, folks would come in often and not pay. They would order, groups of people, and just walk out. Because they knew we wouldn't do anything. Um, folks at some point, people sent us hate emails through our website. Um, from I guess most notably, someone called, who called himself Nigger Killer, and, in one of his emails he said, "The only good nigger is a dead nigger." Um, then they broke into my brewery and ripped out some of the, uh, electronics, electrical equipment. To this day, if you look on, type in Black Star Line Brewing and look, they're still active on page, on pages, with this hate speech. Um. So, after that, the police chief came in and said, he's a Black man, from South Carolina, like my daddy, he said, "Well, unfortunately, no hate crime has been committed because that's no different than saying "I hate all tall people and I wanna help them get to hell.'" And so, here I am, sitting across from the chief of police in my brewery, where there has been a break-in and multiple threats, death threats, there was a break-in at my house, and him saying, "There's no crime that's been committed." Well, one of the local, I guess, cocaine dealers, is friends with one of the, uh, sergeant's lieutenants who was investigating the crimes at my place and never did. There's pictures of them together on, on Facebook, right now. Right? So, cocaine dealer and the local sheriff, and the local sergeant. Um, so, just the deep, deep, deep, deep inequity and challenges that we faced. And the lack of, uh, prosecution from the police department. The police department, one said, at one time said, "Well, why don't you come into the police department for questioning?" Why would I come into the police department for questioning when my business has been attacked repeatedly? People began attacking us online as well. People began to post, um, fake reviews on our Facebook and Untappd. So this one person, as an example, went in hardcore about how our, the beers were terrible and the staff treated him badly and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And so, I just asked politely for the date of service. Well, the date of service was two months before we even had the brewery. And then he's like, "Now you're calling me a liar. I know what I remember." But, it just wasn't true. And so, then got into those types of conversations. And then I'm on Untappd, even to this day, there's a group of, there are groups of people who will go on and review our beers and intentionally give us bad reviews and take pictures and say that the beer is dirty. And it's just, and what are we supposed to do? There's no recourse. You know? There was no recourse when *Vice* decided to intentionally run false information that got picked up. And, you know, was dispersed around the nation with no, um. Falsehoods, with no care or concern for the implications that has on the people and the businesses. You know, some of my, one of my employees was pushed to the point of suicidality. Another was displaced and had nowhere to live. Another employee is still trying to make his way in Hendersonville. Every time I go to apply for a job and someone Googles Black Star Line Brewing Company, or Googles my name, it comes up that I'm talking about white supremacy. So, the collateral consequences of not just owning the brewery, but losing the brewery, will rest, will last for the rest of my life. You know? Whether it's the, the complex trauma,

the flashbacks, uh, the inability to, and definitely the, just the, the sitting with the weight of disbelief. Like, they came, they unlawfully shut us down, then they sued me. Right? Then they sued me. I lost my car. All of my possessions. My community. Was homeless living out of my car. So. But, it, it, it, you know.

00:39:59 TM: Uh, craft. [Clears throat] Excuse me. Craft beer, craft brewers, and, you know, I think there's a conception that craft beer is a community. That it started with this idea of community and camaraderie. I mean, to what extent have you felt like you belong within a community of craft beer? You know, separate from the place of Hendersonville and?

LM: Yeah. That's a good question. I definitely think there are times where me and my, my team were welcome with open arms. Definitely in the Asheville Brewers Alliance. Uh, there was an executive director, Kendra Penland, who took Black Star Line under her wing. Right? And we were, she would invite us to places. Introduce us to folks. Uh, the folks at Highland Brewing. There were definitely folks that were supportive. And, when I look at it, it was overwhelmingly the folks with marginalized identities. Right? The people of color. The queer folks. The women. The folks who were differently abled. And the folks with beards, definitely, um, uh, stepped up at times. And there was so much more that could be done. You knew we didn't have any money. Right? Like, it cost, it cost breweries nothing to, uh, do a contract beer, at no cost. Right? And, out of the proceeds, you get repaid for your, like, there were so many ways for people to help us basically, um, that they didn't. And then initially when the bar started getting, uh, targeted, folks came out and supported. And then after that, they were like, "Well, we don't believe you. This isn't happening. We wanna see receipts." Definitely the internalized white supremacy culture, um. And, there were the Black folks who were like, "Hey. Let's brew." You know. “Let's do something.” Or the Black business owners in Charlotte who were like, "Hey, come down here." Or Charlotte Black Gay Pride that says, "Be our," you know, "Be our alcohol for the entire weekend." Um, so, and I found it particularly challenging with the white guys that were like, "Well, we don't understand why you can't just get along." Or, "We don't understand why your beers -." And so, there was this constant tension of having, the conversations of walking, uh, a tightrope at all times. And trying, you know, to be authentic and show up without further isolating and marginalizing myself. And ultimately it came down to, to the dollar. Right? Like, who had the money to invest? Right? Who had the money to improve the recipes, get new equipment, get this, get that? Ultimately I'm grateful that there were folks, um, that held space for us and welcomed us. And we, we dealt with a lot of shit. We just, I, to this day there's a lot of, um, bro culture. You know? It's the bro culture that happens.

00:43:21 TM: And I think about all the different links in the chain that are required to even open a brewery. You know, everything from, you know, learning how to brew in the first place. People teach others how to brew. Establishing suppliers and equipment. And then there's maybe homebrew clubs and, you know, brewers

themselves and then distributers, retailers. You know, all these different points in the chain. You know, are, do you feel like certain links are especially critical to emphasize to make the brewing industry more inclusive? Or is it kind of an effort that has to happen at every single link in the chain?

LM: Yeah. So, I think that's a great question. We're talking about systemic, systematic, institutional, interpersonal changes and just systems that would need to be addressed. This is one of the reasons why when we were talking about hosting the first Black Brewers Fest, it wasn't just about, let's get together and drink beer. It was about how we develop and sustain a supply chain network. Right? How we're looking at collectively developing networks for distribution. How we're recruiting and supporting new, fresh leadership and faces in the industry. And I say that to say, at every juncture we faced hardships. Whether it was trying to set up an account. And, and these are things that, of course, folks take for granted. You know, I don't know anything about your credit score. You don't know anything about mine. And what happened one hundred percent of the time was that the folks that had light skin like yours got credit and offers and financing a hundred times more than we did. So, we couldn't get financing for our grants. Right? So, we were, we, we had to take the money that we had in the till each day and make a decision. Can we afford the lights today? Can we afford to get more yeast? Can someone let us borrow a keg of beer for? Right? So, we had to make these decisions on the fly. And it just, we were, we were under-capitalized in every type of way. And unfortunately I see that happening with several of my colleagues who still own Black businesses, Black breweries. And what I also see, uh, for Black folks, is having to hustle and make it work. Right? There's the Rhythm and Blues [Rhythm Brewing Co.] folks, well they can do, they're just doing all canning right now. Cool. Canning and pop-up. Then you have the Black Is Beautiful beer. Cool. That's a movement beer. Then you have the Black Pe-. So, like, we as Black folks in this space have to navigate and negotiate the space differently based on, as you've mentioned, the sys-, systemic and systematic disenfranchisement.

00:46:24 TM: I also want to ask a specific question about your brewery. You worked with and also sought to serve the, uh, undocumented community in the Hendersonville area. Could you, would you mind talking just a bit about imm-, immigrants, migrants, undocumented folks in particular, you know, what, what spaces do they have currently to kind of feel comfortable, you know, if they live in the Hendersonville area and, and what did the brewery do for them?

LM: Yeah, that's a great question. Um, so, what had happened was, being queer folks in western North Carolina, we, we needed that, that safe place, 'cause there was not. One of my good friends, uh, is a Latinx organizer with SONG, Southerners on New Ground, came to the space, fell in love, was like, "Oh my god. Let's do working space. You have a basement if we need people that need a place to stay. You can provide that. Like, we can host events here." And his mind just went crazy. And next thing you know, we had, we were doing rituals in the

space, hosting worship services in the space. But not like worship that you would think of Sunday morning. We had spoken word and DJs and beer. Right? Um, we were able to host the first ever Latinx Night in Henderson County. Um, yeah, we were, we, we held space. We held and created and curated space. Since we've been gone, there has not been space. Right? And the way that we were forced out, the cover-up and lies. Because people were actually there, right? Like, on the day that they shut us down, I had to call the homie from SONG and was like, "Get as many bodies here as possible." So, there was maybe eight queer people of color that showed up that were trying to get as much of my personal items out as possible. But, you know, they had police and dogs on us. Um, so, just the way, folks witnessing that. Henderson County is also one of, I believe, three counties in North Carolina that has ICE raids. So to say again, the importance of our space as a safe space. They knew what they were doing. We had in the window that this was a safe and anointed space. ICE couldn't come into my space. And so I, I think the, the hope of liberation was too much in the face of hatred. [Pause] And we made great beer.

00:49:28 TM: What, so, we've, the brewing community and, and I guess, society in general has been, um, having, you know, an increased number of conversations about inequality and certainly the lack of diversity in beer since the killing of George Floyd in late May in Minneapolis. Um, do you feel like we are in a moment in which things will change for the better? Are you, to what extent do you feel optimistic that more people are thinking about this? And that this will result in something? Or is that not what you see in the future?

LM: Yeah, I think it would be, it would, I would be insane to believe that this moment more so than any of the other thousands of state-sanctioned murders that occur every year, would be an impetus for liberation. Right? Like, the last four hundred years haven't been. The history and legacy of, the Atlantic slave trade hasn't been. The racial cleansing of this land hadn't been. The ancestors that hung on trees hadn't been. Emmitt Till wasn't, you know? Freddie Gray wasn't. Jerry Williams wasn't. So, what's happening right now I feel is that corporations realize that there is a perception issue in their social responsibility. I don't believe that corporations are actually going to do what is necessary. Right? To heal this nation. The soul of this nation. And to bring about liberation. And I say that to say I am grateful that a few brew homies are like, “Hey, let's do this beer to support the family of Jerry Williams.” And, whereas I'm having those conversations about getting some liberation libations in tanks, I'm also talking to Black women brewers who are shutting down. And there's not a conversation of, “Hey, you know, I'm up here in Maryland. Hey.” DuClaw’s has actually been. So, I will say kudos to DuClaw's 'cause DuClaw's has at every point of the way been like, "What do you need? Let's help you out. We'll contract brew for you." You know, they've been, that's, that's what a, a form of solidarity could look like. But, ultimately, we know historically and demographically, communities of color are marginalized and disenfranchised. And are not given opportunities to get into the industry. If in the industry, they have to conform or assimilate to continue. So, it's

like, again, I go back to what I said four years ago at BrewBound. Having a Black Brewers Guild where we can actually support and develop. Right? There's a cat in North Carolina who says that he wants to create this really awesome diversity, uh, internship. He's a white dude. This het white dude. And I'm like, hey, that model of individualism does not serve to advance the cause of liberation. Why not have these folks in a cohort base learn. Right? Like, so, anyhoo, we were just having some of these philosophical and ideological, um, conversations. And it became abundantly clear that folks are still missing the mark. So, we have the Black Is Beautiful beer. Every brewery in America could brew a Black Is Beautiful beer. Every brewery. At essentially no cost. If, if right now I went to DuClaw's and said, "Hey, DuClaw's, I wanna brew the Stokely Stout. Um, you know, we're, we don't have the cash flow, but we can sell the beer." Which is what you care about, right? You want us to get out here and get in the community and get on Instagram and have the pictures and the videos and sell and distribute the beer and increase brand ambas-, brand ambassadorship and brand recognition. Right? So, if we fundamentally discard the mentality of capitalism and begin to adopt liberation abolition, the possibilities are endless. But, we're still not able to, to go into that place of deep transformation. We're still too busy tokenizing J. Nikol [Jackson-]Beckham as if she's the only Black person in the industry that can speak for beer. And so, all of us, all of our voices get muted and silenced because *she*'s the beer expert for Black people. So, there's this internal, external oppositional gaze that we have to reconcile and own beyond just conversations like this, but in our actual relationships. Because the relationships that will begin to unwind, uh, the intricate web of systemic injustice.

00:54:31 TM: Well put. And so, what, just briefly, what has your path been like since the brewery closed its doors in January of 2018? And, you are studying in many capacities and, are you, are you brewing still then?

LM: The short answer is yes. We have two beers that will be coming up as a collaboration, um, to support the family of Jerry Williams, who was assassinated by the Asheville Police Department. So, we will be doing at least those two beers. Maybe more if some breweries wanna see the Sweet Beer Movement live. Also, there's, um, we focused energies a lot on coffee. So I own a small start-up coffee roasting company. Um, and since. But, immediately after the brewery, and I believe in full transparency, within the first month I was arrested for a DUI. I was just, and the officer said, you know, he, I was polite, what have you, to my hometown. I'm not making light of it. But, you know, he chuckled at court. And he's like, "All, all she kept saying was that she used to own a brewery." Right? And I say that not because it's funny, but, like, it was deep trauma. 'Cause not only did it happen personally. It happened on a national level. Like, I ended up on the Tom Joyner Morning Show. Right? So, this wasn't even just a, a personal failure that just certain, every, everyone in the industry knew. Everyone. It was in, you know, the magazines, this, that and the other. So, after that I was really trying to figure things out. I kept trying to brew. We went through, we were going through a pretty lengthy legal battle with the former landlords. But I couldn't

afford the attorneys the whole time. It was, uh, a mess. And then, uh, I was struggling, trying to find, um, a job. And it was hard to find a job when people would Google you and, you know, *Vice* articles come up. And, um, I couldn't actually secure a job. And was homeless. Got into, I guess this could be edited out, what have you, but, got into a relationship that was abusive. And the woman, uh, physically assaulted me in front of my mother on Mother's Day 2018. And I went to jail. I spent the next year and a half in and out of jail because I was aggressed upon. And the woman was white. I'm Black. You know. Um, and so I spent the next almost two years in and out of jail, you know, eventually proving my innocence. But it was pretty shitty. You know? Losing the brewery and my car and my home and most of my possessions and my support network and friends and, um, was terrible. And I had to sit with all of that in jail. Um, for crimes that I never committed. So, while I was sitting in jail, um, was able to connect with some folks that were there that kept me safe because, you know, I'm, I'm super soft. My jail nickname was Sugar Bear. Right? Like, I'm not, I'm just not, I'm just not hard like that. So, I connected with the women in jail and really realized that, hey, I'm called to this ministry. And so me and one of my good friends from jail, Uche, were gonna relaunch the brewery. Um, Uche overdosed December 10 of that year. Um.

TM: I'm so sorry.

00:58:35 LM: [Pause] So, we took a break. Focused on my doctoral studies. And, um, really making sure that I didn't lose any more women like Uche. Since I was released as, last time, as an inmate of Baltimore City Jail, uh, there's been eighteen women I was incarcerated with that have died.

TM: Oh my god.

LM: Seventeen of them have been overdoses. Um, so, my life has been focused in building the Sweet Beer Movement differently. We've had some pop-up events. Um, and folks still regularly meet. Folks will send their, send us photos of them and their Black Star Line gear. And we had released a beer, um, in cans shortly after our closing. Um, so we're still, we're still at it because this is about the project of liberation. And you can't kill liberation. Um, so yeah. I think that answers your. So, currently, you know, in the three programs of study, doctoral program, have the roastery, and we're releasing some beers to honor Jerry Williams.

00:59:47 TM: What is the roastery name?

LM: So, it's Project Liberation. And it's built on the model of Recovery Café.

TM: Mmhmm.

LM: So, yeah, looking at a safe, sober place for folks that are struggling with behavioral and substance use disorder issues to develop their recovery capital and to hold space that churches are unwilling and unable to hold, which is a 24/7 sober space rooted in, again, community. Um, around a different type of liberation libation.

01:00:20 TM: Great. Alright, I have two quick questions to end on if, if you have time. I ask these of everybody I interview. Big picture questions. And so, the first is, uh, what do you see for the future of beer in the U.S., you know? What do you see coming in five years, ten years, if you had to project?

LM: [Pause] It's a good question. So, four years ago, when I was on the stage of BrewBound, I proclaimed sweeter beers that would begin to have more fruity profiles like orange. Literally within eighteen months we have Bud, what, Michelob Orange, or Miller. I don't know. [Chuckles] Some beer, you know, we're seeing all these orange flavors. We're seeing, um, ironically we're seeing a lot of beers that I would consider beers of the Sweet Beer Movement.

TM: Sure.

LM: White Claw. Truly. Um. There's been an increase in sales of Crabbie's [Ginger Beer] I believe. So, you're looking at the non-typical, malty, uh, hop-forward beers, starting to create space in the industry. So, what I believe in the next five to seven years, certainly, is that we will see more sweet beers. Right? Because we're starting to expand our, our marketing to women. And Pink Boots. I really feel, um, proud of the work that Pink Boots is doing to create inclusive entry ramps in the industry. And I believe those beers that are coming out of there are also more reflective of the palates of women, which do reflect more, a more positive overall experience with the sweeter beers. Additionally, I think that we're gonna start seeing, um, even more, like, micro- and nano-sized breweries. Though they may not be a financially sustainable model, I believe that these micro and nano breweries will pop up just like Starbucks were popping up in communities.

TM: Sure.

LM: And really reflect that specific taste. And be more of a, a labor of love than it is for profits. I really feel like we're gonna start seeing these. Maybe even more robust, um, homebrewing stores and things like that. I definitely also see the industry intentionally creating space to recruit and train marginalized folks. So, I hope that is true in the next five to seven years.

01:02:58 TM: Good. Alright, and then last question. A simple one but kind of a big one. What would you say you value most about what you do?

LM: [Long Pause] Good question. Um. [Long Pause] You know, I think that perhaps because I'm a trained pastor, the, the thing that I can see that means the

most to me is watching folks' lives transform. Not just because of the beer, the liberation libations. But because of the relationships. I think of, you know, my friend from SONG coming into the space for the first time and literally being moved to tears. Or we were out celebrating Juneteenth, uh, the year that we were launching the brewery, and we said the name: Black Star Line Brewing. And people were in tears, because they knew. So, I hold onto, what keeps me going, is knowing that the curation and cultivation of the space and liberation libations literally change, changes lives. Because people know they belong. People know they are affirmed. And people know that we witness their journey. So, that's, that's the biggest thing. Like, sure, we had great beers. And, like, it's the relationships, the friendships, and the ability to transform communities and individuals.

TM: Well said. Well thank you so much for your words. It's been, uh, a privilege to talk to you today.

LM: Thank you.

TM: Alright, I'll, okay, I'll stop the recording.