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Tanya Domi:

Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project, recorded at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarships in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas, generating cutting-edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi:

Joining us today is Ashley Dawson, professor of English at the College of Staten Island and The Graduate Center CUNY. Dawson currently works in the fields of environmental humanities and postcolonial ecocriticism. He is an activist and founder of Climate Action Lab and a contributor to A People's Climate Plan for New York City. Dawson is also the author of three recent books relating to these fields, *People's Power: Reclaiming The Energy Commons*, *Extreme Cities*, and *Extinction*. A scholar with the commitment of an activist. For Ashley Dawson, Earth Day is every day. Welcome back to The Thought Project, Ashley Dawson.

Ashley Dawson:

Thank you so much, Tanya. It's great to be with you again.

Tanya Domi:

You have been really busy, Ashley. So please tell us about your newest book, *People's Power: Reclaiming the Energy Commons*, that was published last year, which is an unfortunate year for books, in 2020, because of the pandemic. But it's a very pertinent and relevant book in this moment. Please explain.

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah, thank you. I had written two very depressing books, and I decided I wanted to try and write something a bit more optimistic and something that could really give people a roadmap for what to do. So I wanted to write about the energy transition. There's great stuff out there on what Naomi Klein calls "Blockadia," in other words, on the struggle to shut down fossil fuel infrastructure, which of course is absolutely key right now, given what the science tells us about how we're continuing to pump carbon into the atmosphere. But I felt that there was a kind of lack of analysis of renewable energy and not only the kind of politics and economics of renewable energy, but how we imagine a world beyond fossil fuels. So the kind of cultural politics of the energy transition and what a kind of democratized energy infrastructure might look like. And so that's what I explored in the new book.

Tanya Domi:

So you're really talking about the public power and about the commons of shared resources that Americans really don't really think it that way. I think when I'm in a place like Europe, the view of the commons is very different than it is here. Why don't you tell the audience, what about the public owning power, literal power that fuels our homes and our cars, et cetera, And then about the energy commons. I have a very good friend who lives in Seattle and Seattle Light is owned by the public. It is a public utility company.

Ashley Dawson:

That's a great point to make Tanya there are public utilities around the country and there have been historically, but still the vast majority of people in the US get their power from investor-owned utilities.

Like here in New York City, it's Con Edison and National Grid. And they're publicly regulated, something that came out of the new deal. So they're supposed to guarantee low electricity rates. And these days, the public regulators are supposed to push them to include more renewable energy in their energy mix, but essentially there's been regulatory capture and it's the investors who are running the show and keeping us stuck in fossil fuels. And so, I wanted to look at ways that we could think about alternatives to all of that.

Ashley Dawson:

There've been examples of this historically in other places. One of the kind of primary components of struggles against colonial power in the 20th century has been a struggle for control of energy.

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely.

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah. From the Russian Revolution, where the role of oil workers was really important, a factor that's not often sort of talked about to anti-colonial efforts in places like Iran and Guatemala and Mexico. Nationalizing oil reserves has been absolutely key, those struggles and.

Tanya Domi:

Big struggles in a number of African countries too, about access to oil, which is major driving factor in the South Sudan, intergenerational war there, as an example.

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah. And right now in Mozambique, right. There are struggles around access to new gas reserves in Mozambique. So this is something that really is a kind of continuing process in efforts to decolonize and gain national liberation and popular power. In many cases though, there's something called the resource curse where fossil fuels and oil in particular is easy to extract and easy to control by elites who control the state. And so all too often in many of these countries, the revolutionary efforts to control oil reserves had not actually empowered the people in general. So I guess what I'm thinking about is how renewable energy and the struggle for renewable energy might go differently. And I think there are technical reasons to see it coming up better. And that's because renewable energy is widespread, right. Solar power and wind power, for instance, which are some of the key forms of renewable energy are widely dispersed. They're not highly concentrated in [crosstalk 00:06:23]-

Tanya Domi:

Right, in certain locations, right.

Ashley Dawson:

... geographic formations. Right, like coal or oil, for example. So there's reason to think that the kind of dispersed character of renewable energy could lead to energy democracy and popular control. It's not inherent in the structure.

Tanya Domi:

Right. And it won't just happen on its own.

Ashley Dawson:

Exactly. So kind of conceiving of renewable energy as an energy commons, which should belong to the people and which should be democratically controlled from the get go. That is absolutely essential and it has to be part of the transition. We can't just hope that politicians like Biden are going to do the right thing or that the increasingly affordable character of solar panels is going to drive the transition and that's going to make everything hunky-dory.

Tanya Domi:

Right. So it's not going to happen on its own. So how do you get to energy democracy? I mean, your book is about that. Tell us how we get to energy democracy. Maybe we have a window of opportunity before the country with this proposed infrastructure plan. That's supposed to tap renewable energy, a new grid for the country.

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah, absolutely. That's a great question. So a lot of my book explores various different efforts to get the democracy. And I want to think about all the different ways of getting there. I mean, first of all, one thing that I really want to do is to debunk what we often hear from policy walks and quite important figures in the climate movement like former vice president, Al Gore. And that is that the transition is unstoppable, right? The economics of solar and wind power, which means that they're increasingly cheap, increasingly competitive with fossil fuels, that that's just going to drive the transition. And so what I show is that, well, first of all, they're massive state subsidies in the US and in many other countries for fossil fuels that mean that even though renewable energy is getting less and less expensive, still, just in terms of market dynamics, it's not yet competitive with [crosstalk 00:08:42].

Tanya Domi:

Because of those subsidies.

Ashley Dawson:

Exactly. I also look at how the sort of bailout funds after the recession of 2008, which the Obama administration put in place, which was supposed to help homeowners and help them stay in their homes. A lot of that money ended up going to big banks and then the big banks just gave it to fracking companies. And so we have this massive boom in fracking. In the early 2000s, fracking produced a tiny percentage of oil and gas reserves in this country and now it's over 60%. So we've really had a huge transition and it's turned the United States into the world's number one fossil fuel producer, more than Saudi Arabia, more than Russia. And now the big push is to not just extract all these reserves, but to ship them abroad. And so a lot of the pipelines that activists are battling are intended to.

Tanya Domi:

Are connected to this issue.

Ashley Dawson:

Exactly. It's trying to get the reserves out of the sort of central parts of the country like Pennsylvania, or Idaho or something like that and get them to the coasts and ship them abroad, so.

Tanya Domi:

And it also, in fracking, is it not true that this has really caused great disruption, environmentally, including earthquakes, smaller earthquakes, even pollution of underground water?

Ashley Dawson:

Absolutely.

Tanya Domi:

Is that not true?

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah, no.

Tanya Domi:

That's connected, right?

Ashley Dawson:

Totally. Yeah. It's incredibly destructive for the local environment and then also Bill McKibben has a great essay about this, where he talks about fracking as a kind of blind spot in the environmental movement. Because, not only did the Obama-Biden administration kind of accept the idea that natural gas was a great bridge fuel, kind of great transitional fuel while we waited to build out our renewable energy infrastructure. But a lot of the environmental movement, all the big environmental organizations-

Tanya Domi:

Groups, yeah.

Ashley Dawson:

... accepted that. Yeah. When in fact the methane, frack gas is essentially methane and it [crosstalk 00:10:53] probably strong greenhouse gas. So we really need to shut down fracking infrastructure, both because of its local impact and because it's really massively contributing to climate change. And that's not even to talk about the impact on indigenous communities. The horrible kind of forms of femicide that affect communities as a result of the man camps that get set up where fracking is taking place.

Tanya Domi:

This particular like the pipeline in North Dakota, these issues around that, where you had a big standoff with the federal government, right?

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah. And the same thing is happening again now with Enbridge Line 3, which is a pipeline bringing [00:11:40] tar sands gas down.

Tanya Domi:

From Canada.

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

Tanya Domi:

Calgary, which is very dirty oil, right.

Ashley Dawson:

It's the dirtiest stuff, yeah. And it's going right through indigenous lands in Minnesota. And they're standing up. The water protectors, they're just as folks that's Standing Rock did in the closing years of the Obama administration. So we'll see how that plays out and we need to think about being in solidarity with those efforts. I was in a demonstration in North Brooklyn where National Grid is trying to put in a frack gas pipeline through Greenpoint and Williamsburg. And there was really strong solidarity work, with folks in that community who were threatened by the pipeline, and all the danger it brings, seeing themselves very much as connected to the people in Minnesota who are fighting Enbridge Line 3. But to come back round to your question about [crosstalk 00:12:33].

Tanya Domi:

About how do we get to energy democracy?

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah. How do we get to energy democracy? So my book travels to various different places. I look at how communities are on the front lines, like environmental justice organizations in places like Sunset Park in Brooklyn and in Detroit are really trying to set up solar cooperatives so that they can get all of the polluting infrastructure out of their communities, right. Because a key element of environmental injustice is this, all this fossil fuel infrastructure is highly polluting and can lead to much higher rates of asthma and heart disease and all sorts of other problems.

Tanya Domi:

Right. And generally located in marginalized communities.

Ashley Dawson:

Absolutely [crosstalk 00:13:22].

Tanya Domi:

Right. So they disproportionately bear the burden.

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. So these communities are... they see what's happening and they're kind of in the avant-garde in terms of setting up these very democratically organized solar co-ops. I go back to the New Deal era, the 19 [crosstalk 00:13:46].

Tanya Domi:

I was just going to ask you about the WPA and the Tennessee Valley Authority. I mean, Roosevelt really broke the ground here, did he not?

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah, absolutely. The situation was not that different from today. You had these big energy companies, many of the same investor-owned utilities that we still have around. And Roosevelt stated, the problem was that really significant numbers of folks in rural areas didn't have access to electricity.

Tanya Domi:

And running water, including indoor plumbing. I mean, this is something LBJ grew up with as a child in Hill County, Texas.

Ashley Dawson:

Totally. And it was not in the economic interest of the investor and utilities to string wires out to these rural areas. [crosstalk 00:14:30].

Tanya Domi:

So now we're talking about broadband in today's vernacular, right.

Ashley Dawson:

Very similar. Exactly. And so what Roosevelt and the New Dealers did was to set up what was called the Rural Electrification Administration, which essentially gave very low cost loans to farmer cooperatives so that they could set up their own generation infrastructure essentially, or connect the wires to places where power was being generated. And that is essentially what got the majority of this country electrified. And some of those rural electric cooperatives still exist today. So they're a really interesting example of where the state is stepping in, but it's not a kind of completely state organized and state oriented initiative. It was something for local people.

Tanya Domi:

It's more de-centralized.

Ashley Dawson:

Exactly. So I think there are interesting parallels between these kind of solar co-ops that communities like UPROSE in Brooklyn are setting. And I also look at efforts in cities to set up municipal power authorities, public power authorities. Particularly at Berlin as a really great example, because Germany is pretty famous for over the last couple of decades, having this massive shift towards renewable energy. So they often have up to 50% renewable energy in their grid, even though they're quite far north, they don't have that much solar energy. But they've really kind of made this political-

Tanya Domi:

Commitment.

Ashley Dawson:

... transition, a commitment, yeah. And they did it through something called feed-in tariffs that help to ensure that these small cooperatives popped up all around the country. So you had state help to local cooperatives very much like what happened in the US during the new deal era, so.

Tanya Domi:

That's interesting. Maybe Biden needs to go back in history and bring it forward in today's context.

Ashley Dawson:

I think that would be great in many ways. Yeah. There are technological challenges to be overcome. One thing that people who are critical of renewable energy like to point out is that it is intermittent. In other words-

Tanya Domi:

It's not continuous.

Ashley Dawson:

... the sun doesn't... Yeah, the sun doesn't always shine and the wind doesn't always blow. And so, when everyone is coming home from the office, back when we used to go to offices around 5:00 or 6:00 and they want to turn on their TVs and boil some water for tea and suddenly energy demands spike, that's right when the sun is going down.

Tanya Domi:

Going down.

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah. And you don't have as much renewable energy coming into the grid. And so in the case of fossil fuels, when that peak demand is happening, you can just fire up the local power plant and burn some more coal or gas. That's not the case in.

Tanya Domi:

Or turn on your stove, which is, maybe is gas powered.

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah. Yeah. So we need other kinds of technological solutions. And clearly one of those is batteries. We need to really develop strong storage [crosstalk 00:17:40].

Tanya Domi:

So this is one of the interesting. So new batteries that have long life and capacity. Please or tell us more about that.

Ashley Dawson:

Batteries are obviously absolutely key to so many aspects of contemporary life, including cell phones and computers, but they're going to be key to energy transition as well. So we need to have really massive storage capacity. And that's already happening. Here in Queens where I live, one of the big polluting power plants, it's called Ravenswood and the state of New York has set up some massive batteries to try and store power in the Ravenswood facility so that we'll be ready for energy transition. But there's no reason we couldn't have state subsidies for people who set up solar panels on their roof so they could have batteries in their basement that could store the power they generate.

Tanya Domi:

So when the sun goes down, they kick in.

Ashley Dawson:

Exactly. Exactly.

Tanya Domi:

So very interesting. So yes, there's been a lot of work done. Hasn't there batteries to develop them for greater capacity in general. Is that not true?

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah, no, absolutely. And we don't spend nearly enough in R&D on these issues. So we really do need a kind of another Apollo project. And I definitely believe that technological innovation is highly important and is going to get us a long way, but I also want to think about the politics of all this stuff and question the status quo and the assumption that we just need to keep going down a certain road. So just to give you a concrete example of what I'm talking about, the main component of contemporary batteries, whether they're in your cell phones or wanted by Tesla, is lithium, right?

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Ashley Dawson:

Lithium, right now, the majority of it comes from countries in South America, like Bolivia and Australia, and as listeners might know, there was just recently a coup in Bolivia after the left wing president, Evo Morales said he was going to nationalize lithium reserves.

Tanya Domi:

Of course.

Ashley Dawson:

So, going back to the politics where you're talking about earlier about anti-colonial movements.

Tanya Domi:

The geopolitics, yeah.

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah, try and control their own energy reserves, there's a danger that similar kinds of things will play out today.

Tanya Domi:

Well, even in China, you've got the rare earth minerals that contribute to really computers and all the phones that we carry around in our hand, and they really own it. They own the rare earth minerals in China.



Ashley Dawson:

Absolutely.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah. So that's another aspect to this, speaking of geopolitics.

Ashley Dawson:

Totally. Yeah. And there's the danger of a kind of, not just a new round of Imperial extractivism in the global stock countries, but also a great deal, more kind of inter-imperial tension and conflict. All of this is to say that we shouldn't assume that renewable energy transition. We have to fight for renewable [crosstalk 00:20:43].

Tanya Domi:

Well, it has to be conscious, right. I mean, it's laid out and okay from.

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah, just to see him at some promised land that we're going to get to and not have to worry about politics anymore.

Tanya Domi:

This is where we probably should talk about the new Biden administration's proposal. I mean, he seems to have really broken in many ways from the past, in terms of a pretty aggressive stands, calling for the first global summit after they put the US signature back on the Paris Accords. His appointment, it seems like people... I want to hear your thoughts about the appointments. And one is an African-American man. I think his name's Michael Regan, who, he was running the EPA from North Carolina, where the environmental movement really probably kicked off in this country several decades ago. And also what's interesting to me about the climate crisis in terms of US policy, it seems that, believe it or not, the Defense Department recognize that climate crisis is a real threat to national security way before most of the other departments of the government. It seems that Biden is taking an approach that they want to integrate a policy across the government of the United States with respect to climate change and the climate crisis.

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah. I mean, look, you're right, the Biden administration is a massive break from what came before, but what came before was absolute criminal conspiracy to essentially destroy the planet in the interest of corrupt coddling of [crosstalk 00:22:26]-

Tanya Domi:

I don't disagree.

Ashley Dawson:

... bureaucrats.

Tanya Domi:

I don't disagree at all.

Ashley Dawson:

And virtually anything would be [crosstalk 00:22:31].

Tanya Domi:

To own everything and then sell it to you.

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah, yeah, exactly.

Tanya Domi:

Right. I get it. I totally get it.

Ashley Dawson:

And [crosstalk 00:22:39].

Tanya Domi:

So this is an opportunity. So tell me, what do you think about the politics in this situation and what are activists seeing about this opportunity?

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah. I mean, yeah, what Biden has put on the table with his climate plan is really, really great. And in many ways it's going in the right direction. But what activists are saying is that it's not nearly enough, that we need basically about four times as much money to be spent in order to meet climate goals beyond the however much trillion that Biden has proposed. And that the cuts which we can make in the United States, in Biden's plan, are not going to take us nearly far enough. So civil society organizations and climate justice organizations have called for kind of climate reparations to global south countries that will put them on the transition routes so that they can be.

Tanya Domi:

To renewable.

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah. So, to renewables and to make sure that they're also engaging in policies that cut emissions significantly, thinking in that kind of internationalist vein is really important. And the Biden administration needs to do a lot more of that. So, yeah I mean, I think clearly Biden is doing better than many people thought he would. And there's a lot of possibility for pushing his administration further, given some of the folks who are in the administration, as you said, there's some real progressives. But we definitely can't kind of relax and we need to keep pushing things further. Just to give you one concrete example, electric vehicles are a key component of the Biden administration plan. So getting rid of all of the climate peeling carbon dioxide gases that come out of [crosstalk 00:24:31]-

Tanya Domi:

Automobiles, yeah.

Ashley Dawson:

... cars at the moment and trading them up for electric vehicles. But remember, electric vehicles all have that lithium in them and it takes a lot of steel and plastic to build a car, right? So there's a lot of emissions kind of baked into the construction of a new car. So what we really need is much more emphasis on public infrastructures.

Tanya Domi:

Mass transit.

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah, like mass transit. And Biden administration has put money forward, but we need a lot more kind of emphasis on how we need to essentially kind of, not just cut back in the global north, but think about forms of public community building infrastructure as the way forward, rather than trying to keep our kind of alienated and individualistic infrastructures of the past going. Like our highway systems and our suburbs, right. We really need a massive change in how we [crosstalk 00:25:36].

Tanya Domi:

So is it New York City sort of an ideal, let's try it here situation? Because when you think about a 10 block area of in Queens or Manhattan or Brooklyn, and I live in Northwest Bronx and next to the Hudson River, you're talking about 250,000, maybe I don't know, a half a million people. I mean, there's a lot of people in a 10 block area of New York City, depending on the borough. But we're talking about dense populations that are living primarily in apartment buildings. You think about that in terms of what would it be if there were solar panels instead of natural gas fueling our electrical needs in our apartment building. And I remember, the big push to natural gas was, you're right, it was during the Obama administration and all the landlords in New York, they had to go to natural gas. Now, I remember that. That's been like in the last 10 years, because everybody came in and they were installing all the pipes, et cetera.

Tanya Domi:

So anyway, isn't New York City really, I think, an ideal lab area to try these things out? You're a founder of the Climate Action Lab and you also contributed to the People's Climate Plan for New York City. And just as I said earlier, we're getting ready to elect a new mayor, which is described really as the most important election for the city in more than a generation. So speaking of New York City, how will you and your colleagues leverage the Climate Actions Lab proposal to address the climate crisis in New York City? First of all, and secondly, I mean, just to say, don't you think Superstorm Sandy was a huge wake up and have we done anything since then?

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah. Well, first of all, you're right. The New York city is an ideal place to be pioneering the Green New Deal because of that density that you mentioned. We have some of the lowest per capita carbon footprints in the country. We don't have sprawl the way many other places do. And as a result of that kind of density of habitation, we can have a really good public transportation infrastructure, right. And transportation is one of the main reasons that carbon emissions are increasing, in addition to increasing

energy generation by fossil fuels. So yeah, that kind of felicitous combination of energy transition, public transit and dense habitation is all here potentially in New York. The problem is that the politicians haven't made it happen. Governor Cuomo has had this much "bollyhood" energy revolution thing floating around throughout his whole administration basically. And the city is still below 6% in terms of the genuine, renewable energy.

Ashley Dawson:

I don't include hydro power in modern renewables in my book because big dams are objectional both in terms of the amount of land and wildlife that they destroy. But they also emit a fair amount of carbon, because you have to drown a whole lot of trees in the reservoir of a dam, right [crosstalk 00:29:14].

Tanya Domi:

Right, to build the dam.

Ashley Dawson:

So one of the controversial proposals that Mayor de Blasio floated was to get all municipal power in New York City from clean energy. It turned out the clean energy was going to be from dams in Quebec and indigenous people up there said no, we don't want our land being submerged and [crosstalk 00:29:34] up and in the past. So we have to think very carefully about this stuff. And in terms of modern renewables, yeah, New York City is still really low. And it's going to get worse because Indian Point nuclear power plant is going offline by next year. So we're actually going to have a lot more fossil fuels in the mix. And that's why the struggle against pipelines like the one in North Brooklyn are so important, right, to kind of fight these new fossil fuels. There's no reason that a new mayor couldn't set out to have all kinds of creative, renewable energy plans. Why doesn't New York City have massive wind farms off its coast? Why don't we have title power generations?

Ashley Dawson:

Why don't we have massive geothermal projects to create districts' heat power. There's all kinds of technical stuff that could be done that is genuinely green. It's just we're lacking the political will to make it happen. And we have these incumbent energy companies like Con Ed that have a lot of assets sunk in fossil fuels and are not making the transition fast.

Tanya Domi:

To renewable. What's interesting to me, Ashley, I just want to bring this up having worked and lived in Washington, D.C., where one of the currencies is, well, we just can't do that here, because of X, Y, and Z. It's one of the reasons I moved to New York, a city of cultural creatives, a cultural capital of the world. The ingenuity is here. The talent and the know-how to do this is available. I mean, this is America.

Ashley Dawson:

Absolutely.

Tanya Domi:

If you can build a spaceship to the moon and to Mars now, I mean, the know-how is here. It's been demonstrated over and over again. So I just wonder how do we get the scientists together and the experts together in a way with this opportunity with, that Biden is presenting in pivoting off of it. And

isn't it electing somebody that really has the smarts and is envisioning this as part of New York City? Interesting who the New York Times just endorsed. I could not believe the New York Times endorsement for mayor. It is she, because that too is incredible. It is in fact, Kathryn Garcia, who, is like, I don't know, six generation New Yorker. Has worked in sanitation, run sanitation and has done all kinds of environmental-friendly initiatives. It's interesting. I mean, it's a really crowded field, but we should...

Tanya Domi:

I'm just interested if the Climate Lab is pushing candidates to talk about this. I mean, have you guys thought about convening like a mayoral forum on the climate crisis in New York City?

Ashley Dawson:

I think that's a great idea. We haven't done that, but I may [crosstalk 00:32:47].

Tanya Domi:

Do you need a moderator?

Ashley Dawson:

Run away for that. There are a lot of other great organizations that are doing that kind of thing, for sure. The PSC Environmental Justice organization group has been very much involved in thinking these kinds of issues through, for sure. So yeah, I think you're right. The new mayor is going to be really decisive. I think it's also important to remember that about 50% of city council people are termed out. And so, there's a real opportunity for quite radical change-

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely.

Ashley Dawson:

... in terms of the city council folks who we elect. But for me, and that's why I was involved with the People's Climate Plan, it's really the ground swell of social movements that's important. And I agree with you, there's a lot of creativity, a lot of technical knowledge and possibility, but it's going to take massive political-

Tanya Domi:

Mobilization, yeah, mobilization.

Ashley Dawson:

... mobilization to make this up and... New York City's had a huge mobilization over the last year. A lot of it has been around Black Lives Matter, but as I said, I was on a protest a week and a half ago, where people were really making the connections between the kind of, I can't breathe refrain, which has been so important to abolition work against police violence. And the idea that I can't breathe because I've got all this toxic fossil fuel infrastructure in my neighborhood. So making these kinds of connections is very important.

Tanya Domi:

For sure.

Ashley Dawson:

And yeah. So seeing that fossil fuels are a form of ecosite for communities and that energy transition offers really important possibilities to ameliorate community circumstances is absolutely key. So the solar co-op that I mentioned in Brooklyn, it's connected to the environmental justice organization UPROSE, and they push for a green resilient industrial district on the waterfront in Brooklyn. So instead of getting yet more condos for one percent-

Tanya Domi:

Right, we're out front development, right?

Ashley Dawson:

Exactly. They're going to keep it as an industrial area, and the goal is to manufacture wind turbines there. So you'd have jobs for low-

Tanya Domi:

People. Right, true.

Ashley Dawson:

... income community that has really suffered generations of environmental destruction by fossil [crosstalk 00:35:06] structures.

Tanya Domi:

Of course. So anyway, back to my question, because I'm not sure we've ever talked about this together, but did New York City learn anything from the destruction of Superstorm Sandy? Wasn't that really the wake up call to the city? I know lots of activists were doing lot of work. That is not always true, but the storm was significant in its destruction.

Ashley Dawson:

Definitely. There's been a lot of sort of noise from the top members of society about that. Right. Under Mayor Bloomberg, there was PlaNYC, which was supposed to be a green plan for the city. And of course de Blasio has his version of that. We had the Rebuild by Design competition, which I write about in my book, extreme cities that was supposed to be about kind of adapting the city to climate change. But very little of that infrastructure has actually been built. And what we do have is the real estate industry, which really controls a lot of the kind of forms of local development, continuing to do this really kind of destructive development, kind of building out waterfront areas with high rises and displacing low-income people. So I would say, did we really make the kind of sea change that we need to make after Sandy? No, not at all. And the communities that suffered the most, which were by and large working class communities that followed.

Tanya Domi:

Sure, Staten Island.

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah. And communities in Brooklyn.

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely. And in Queens too. Absolutely.

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah, are all even more vulnerable to multiple intersecting forms of displacement, including... What we think most of all, when we think about climate change of spectacular disasters like Hurricane Sandy or Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. The thing that kills the most people is how hard it is to be in the city. The urban [crosstalk 00:37:14] island effect. And it's communities of color who have the least amount of trees in them and who tend to have their power cut off by Con Ed in the summertime. So there are a lot of issues around climate justice that the city still needs to confront.

Tanya Domi:

I remember that Cuomo's quote, unquote, "upset with Con Ed" and was threatening to basically have the state take it over during.

Ashley Dawson:

What did he do? He did absolutely nothing, right.

Tanya Domi:

It was rhetorical. Definitely it was rhetorical. These are really complex issues and I fully appreciate what activists are doing and what they're up against, but you have definitely participated alongside with them and worked with them in a way that I think it really brings something into the classroom and education for students that is, I think very illuminating.

Ashley Dawson:

Thank you. Thank you. And I would just mention, we've talked a lot about sort of bottom up energy democracy initiative, but I think there's also room for activists to push for broader scale transitions. And so I would just mention that I'm part of the Public Power campaign here in New York.

Tanya Domi:

Oh, right. Public Power. Yes. You did mention that.

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah. We have two bills before the New York state legislature right now, which would essentially take, NYPA, which provides CUNY with electricity, provides public houses and the NYCHA public houses with electricity.

Tanya Domi:

Right. NYCHA for public housing, yeah.

Ashley Dawson:

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Yeah. So it's a functioning authority that creates electricity. It's just is relatively limited in its scope right now. So the goal of the Public Power campaign is essentially to build out NYCHA as an authority that would generate a hundred percent renewable energy for everyone who gets energy right now from Con Ed and other investor on utilities that are really dragging their heels and making energy transition slow. Yeah.

Tanya Domi:

So, is it really New Yorkers pay the second highest utility bills in the nation?

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah, absolutely. So we're really getting gouged by these big utilities. And they're doing horrible stuff. So I mentioned the campaign in North Brooklyn, National grid is expanding this infrastructure claiming that the infrastructure they have is old, but one of the major reasons, activists have found out, that they want to build out the infrastructure is they want to generate higher revenues from rate payers because they have to clean up the Newtown Creek, which they polluted. They're going to build.

Tanya Domi:

And actually, I did do a podcast on Newtown Creek just recently, by the way. We have two [inaudible 00:40:00] scientists working on it.

Ashley Dawson:

Right. Yeah. So they polluted the Creek. Now they're building more polluting fossil fuel infrastructure, so they can charge rate payers higher rates in order to pay for the cleaning up of the Creek. I mean, talk about a crazy situation.

Tanya Domi:

Very interesting. I would say that there's been a turnover in Albany and it's much more progressive now. I mean, like it is, and to the state senator I have Alexandra Biaggi, is reflects that new demographic of progressives that are really pushing on the old stodgy Albany, three men in the room. They're not having it. Very interesting shift, generational shift. It's also a political shift from established Democrats to... guys that were, and they were guys that basically, central sawyer will take care of X, Y, and Z. And then sort of, I think, dialed it in. And I don't think this new generation is having any part of it. It's very interesting to watch this.

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And we need to keep their feet to the fire to make sure all these new folks do the right thing.

Tanya Domi:

So what are you working on? What's new in your world? What are you working on or are you working on something that you've been working on for a while?

Ashley Dawson:

Well, I'm part of this Public Power campaign, as I mentioned. I'm also involved with the, a working group, from Strike MoMA and making the connections between art strike and climate strike. MoMA was



established with a lot of money from fossil fuel, like the Rockefellers. It should be a public institution that is really putting forward the solutions we need and all too often, it doesn't. So I'm part of that campaign. And I'm writing a new book called Environmentalism From Below, that's looking at white organizations in the global south are doing to make transition happen. So for instance, I'm thinking in the book about agriculture and the transnational peasant organization, La Via Campesina, which is pushing for sustainable forms of agriculture, instead of the kind of fossil fuel based industrial capitalist agriculture that dominates in the United States.

Tanya Domi:

Which also includes a lot of pesticides.

Ashley Dawson:

Yeah. It all comes from fossil fuels and it's destroying the earth, which means that the soil goes from absorbing carbon to spewing it out. So yeah, these kinds of solutions, it's key to keeping people on the land, which is really an important issue in the global south. And it's also key to coping with climate change.

Tanya Domi:

Great. I want to thank you so much, Ashley, for joining us today. We want to have you back again to talk about whatever you're doing.

Ashley Dawson:

Thank you Tanya.

Tanya Domi:

Or give us an update. We really appreciate your time and thinking about your very fortunate students. Good for you.

Ashley Dawson:

Thank you, Tanya. It's been my pleasure, really great speaking with you and thank you for your wonderful questions.

Tanya Domi:

Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project and thanks to our guest, Professor Ashley Dawson of the College of Staten Island and The Graduate Center, CUNY.

Ashley Dawson:

The thought project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolf of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.