

# Text Transcript of “Off the Shelf” Podcast Season 4, Episode 1, with Naomi R Williams

## Augustus Wood:

Greetings, comrades and community. Welcome back to the long-awaited fourth season of “Off the Shelf: Revolutionary Readings in Times of Crisis.” I am your host, Gus Wood. We are sponsored by the Humanities Research Institute. And I'm just so happy to be back, especially at a time of such working class labor militancy across the country. Since we have last done this podcast, we've had a general strike by the low wage workers, we've had multiple wildcats as well as union strikes, I mean, there's just so much happening and a lot of it is coming out of the passionate fire of the Black working class. So I am so happy to have my guest here today, who's doing pathbreaking work on the Black working class here. Naomi Williams, thank you so much for being the season opener for “Off the Shelf.”

And for those that are unaware, let me let me just give you... so you're talking about somebody who is really gearing up to be kinda like, you better look out for them. Naomi Williams is coming out doing some amazing work that does exactly what we here at “Off the Shelf” have often promoted—scholar activism, actually doing the research while also on the ground, while both sectors are informing each other. In other words, a dialectic.

Now for those that are unaware, Naomi Williams is Assistant Professor of Labor History at Rutgers University, and they also research working class urban politics in the late 20th century. And I'm gonna tell you now, we're gonna have a fun conversation about that, because of because of my back, my work as well. Naomi has served in various union roles, including being a steward, contract enforcement, one of my favorite aspects of union work, because you know that the first thing they do after you sign a contract is they violate it, so you have to enforce it.

Naomi was also treasurer, delegate to the CLC, and has just been elected to the leadership committee of the AAUP, AMT, local 6323, New Brunswick chapter. Congratulations on that. I'll definitely be asking you about how that came to be. Naomi also centers workers' voices in their, in their research and teaching through life histories and testimonials. Their manuscript, which I cannot wait, cannot wait to come out: *A Blueprint for Worker Solidarity: Race, Labor, and Community in Wisconsin* examines the transformation of class identity and politics in the second half of the 20th century. So yes, again, you're talking about somebody who has so much work coming off the ground, as well as new frameworks for how we can rethink our understandings of the Black working class. Then yeah, this is this is a dream come true for this to be an opening, an opening episode. So Naomi, welcome, how are things going with you?

## Naomi Williams:

Gus, thank you so much for that warm welcome. I really appreciate it. Super excited to be here with you this afternoon and to have this conversation. I've been waiting to talk with you for a minute now. So

glad that we can do this. Things are going pretty well on the ground, things are going pretty well on the ground. Let me just, a couple things about my bio: and it's an important piece that I think we can have a conversation about as we go forward too, right? So, I have a colleague here at Rutgers in Labor Studies Department, and she likes to say you're activist scholars, right, we're activist scholars, not scholar activist, activist scholar. So let me put that there. Right. And while the official title is labor historian, I like to say I'm a historian of the working people. And just for the reason that you said, right, that, you know, centering the voice of working people is so important to the work that I do. And so I don't really study institutions as much as I study people who move through institutions and use them in very creative ways, right, to do some amazing things. [LAUGHS]

**Augustus Wood:**

Yes, exactly. I think that's one of the most important things about the work that we do is that we want to challenge the work that comes out that positions institutions as the social engine for processes, how history moves. Whereas then we argue that no, no, no, it's the workers who are moving history, it's the people who are moving history, you know. It can't just be simply this idea that, no this, you got to look at the city transforms. It's like, no, no, no, let's not forget now, the ruling classes have to respond to the people. That's how history works. So therefore, we must center the voices and actions of the people if we're truly going to understand history. Right?

**Naomi Williams:**

Exactly right. And it gives us so much power. It lets us remember, it reminds us actually, right, it reminds us of where our power lies. Working people's power lies in community. And if we know our history, and we know our stories, then that gives us the hope to keep fighting, to keep going forward.

**Augustus Wood:**

Exactly. So this is something wonderful, we're going to talk a lot about that current fight in a minute. But the first thing we want to know is we want to know about you, and how you started on this path to activist scholarly work. Like, how did you begin in this in this struggle? You know, most of us, you know, we grew up in working class backgrounds and so that informs the work that we decided to do. So give the listeners a kind of a kind of a, just an intro into your perspective and how you developed over time?

**Naomi Williams:**

That's a big one, Gus. [LAUGHS] Yeah, so definitely, right. My dad was in the army from a military family, more broadly, right. And so that that sense of service is kind of built into our family, a sense of honor, and pride and responsibility and, and how we move about the world. So that was really important to me. But actually, I'm going to jump ahead. And let me, well first I gotta rep Louisiana. My parents are from South Louisiana. And I, you know, in my teenage years, I was in Baton Rouge, and really just that energy around community members getting together and getting stuff done was something that felt very real to me. And the fights there, like the chemical workers and teachers, postal workers, all those folks who are, you know, actively engaged in their unions, and just really an

interracial group of people working together for common good. And so that's my background. But that's not what I saw when I got to college.

In my college classes, right, um, poor working-class communities are described as deficient. And, you know, Black families are described as problematic, like, what, you know, everybody's asking what's wrong with Black families? Like, you know, none of this sounds like my lived experience. And it wasn't until, you know, I started taking classes, you know, my history classes, my political science classes, that I started to see, you know what, there are systems in place that are, you know, there's actual policy in place to keep certain people in certain places. And then I took a class with Dr. Lu Ann Jones, on oral history, and she she, it was an oral history methodology course. And all the books we read were about Southern labor history. And for the first time, I was like, oh, here are my people. Here they are. Okay, okay. I remember reading *Civil Rights Unionism*. I was like, okay, all right, these tobacco workers in North Carolina, I feel it.

**Augustus Wood:**

That's right.

**Naomi Williams:**

You know, I see what's happening here and, and that it really spoke to me and it actually changed the trajectory of what I was going to do. And, and I switched my major. And, you know, that history professor convinced me that I could actually make a living as a professor. [LAUGHS] That was a lie. I'm making it work. I'm making it work. But but it was, it was actually, for the first time actually seeing myself in a college classroom transformed the way I thought I could move about the world. And it really pushed me to pursue a PhD and to make it my job to tell these types of stories. And so that's, that's, you know, that was the focus since I started my master's program actually, and then moved to, at the University of South Florida, and I moved to University of Wisconsin for the PhD. And I was able to work there with Will Jones and, you know, a whole faculty full of scholars trained by labor historians and just doing great work in the community. So it was really a good fit. And I wanted to tell a story similar to the story that was my lived experience. And I found that in Southeast Wisconsin, and that led me to this research project, and to write the book finally.

**Augustus Wood:**

Now that's really amazing, though, I like the way you show the trajectory because one of the things that is, to kind of jump into the current crisis right now, and we talk about some of the Supreme Court decisions and the stuff with affirmative action, etc. When you look beyond the actual, the actual wording of how affirmative action has worked, what we're actually talking about is something that you brought up: the access to space. And that particularly for Black working class people, it has been one of the biggest grinds historically for Black working class people to get access to college. And so when you have these protections being removed to where you're basically allowing the agency of historically white supremacist spaces to determine who gets a chance, particularly when you're rising the cost of living, for attending colleges, whereas in Black working class, people do not hold a significant portion of

generational wealth for those things, then what you're doing is, again, you're restricting Black working class people to specific types of labor spaces. And we'll get into that more often there.

And so again, just hearing you talk about how you going to college, and using your experiences, when you were growing up to kind of propel the kind of scholarship you want to do, that's one of the things that we always want to try to make sure that we protect, is that we want people to be able to use their experiences to build some type of intellectual or scholarly rigor so that they can combine activism and scholarship, we want those access to spaces. So I thought that was really insightful that you let that you showed that trajectory, particularly in this current issue, this current crisis.

**Naomi Williams:**

Right, right. And, you know, it's, it's very disheartening still today, right, to, to have students of color coming to me, particularly the Black students, and saying that I'm the first Black professor that they have encountered. Right? And so that also plays a huge role in you know, what, what people think their options are. And really, you know, part of my work is expanding the options.

**Augustus Wood:**

Well let's talk about that, then, let's actually talk about it. Let's talk about your research, though. So how did you... you talked a little bit about how you got to your project, but can you just give us, give us a bit of a kind of, you know, skeleton or shell of exactly what you're looking at. And how, how you see it resolving or looking at historical or contemporary issues.

**Naomi Williams:**

Right. Um, so actually, it it started with a particular strike. Some nurses aides at a hospital in Racine, Wisconsin, went on strike against SEIU's, you know, I don't know the word, um, against their wishes. That's, that's not the word...

**Augustus Wood:**

Oh, so it was a wildcat strike, then.

**Naomi Williams:**

No, it wasn't a wildcat. It wasn't a wildcat. They actually, they got permission, and you know, they did all of that. But it was really against the union president's wishes. So the workers themselves, though, were really inspired by the community around them. And there are great pictures from the strike of them walking the picket lines, and they're mostly Black and brown women, Black and Puerto Rican women at the hospital, you know, the lowest paid, right, workers at the hospital. And also in the picture in the newspaper, there are UAW workers, mostly white guys, but not all white guys. But lots of white guys walking the picket line with these women, Black and brown women, for the most part, in 1970, in the mid-1970s. Let me put it right there.

And so that story, right? UAW workers on a picket line with low wage service workers in the mid-1970s— that is not the story we know about labor in the 1970s. So my question was, how are UAW workers out here, you know, they're supposed to be more concerned about plant closings and holding on to the little bit that they have and, you know, fighting back against concession bargaining. But here they are, with these people making, you know, \$20 an hour less than they are, you know, and they're on the picket line. So what's happening? So that was a question that, that prompted the book. And in order to answer that question, I did a broad look from World War II up through the 1980s, really just going deep into the community to understand what did they do to put themselves in a position to show that type of solidarity in the middle of the 1970s in southeast Wisconsin.

And what I found was generations of workers, right? There's a core group of workers who have this wonderful radical idea about what solidarity looks like, and how to build a community. And they do, they talk about it all the time. Right? You know, this is our, this is our community. And this is how this is how we want our city to look.

**Augustus Wood:**

Exactly.

**Naomi Williams:**

And they made that city into a little haven of worker solidarity right there between Chicago and Milwaukee, right? So just about halfway between right there. They're like, oh, Chicago doesn't have anything on us, Milwaukee can't have anything on us. We, this is our working class city right here. And so that type of energy really fueled generations of workers to push and push. And really what I found is the turning point there is coming out of World War II, and leading up into the 1960s, there was a core group of Black workers who very skillfully pushed a racial analysis into the class community.

They work really hard together, and they work with their, you know, their close allies across different unions. So this is a very mixed industrial city. So there are lots of different shops, there are lots of small car parts places that are supplying the auto manufacturers. There's garment workers and tractors. So the the biggest union is, they're making J.I. Case. Right. Right. Before the merger with International Harvester. And so it's huge, right? And but, but they're I think, I'm pretty sure there's over, there were over 30 different UAW locals. Public workers have been organized, right, Wisconsin has the earliest law on the books supporting public workers' collective bargaining rights. But even before that in the 1930s, public workers are organized in the city—county workers, public works, buses, school custodians, engineers, as they're called. And this diversity of unions really helped because you had key leaders in different unions all coming together, saying, Okay, what are we going to do? How are we going to, how are we gonna fix housing? How are we going to desegregate the schools? How are we going to expand the free lunch program? And so they're constant bringing all of these community issues, right, to the work, help them create, you know, what Bob Russell calls the total person unionism, coming out of the UAW in... oh help me out, it's a great book.

**Augustus Wood:**

For which, which issue... you gotta give me the name. I'm usually good with names.

**Naomi Williams:**

Total person unionism. I know, right?

**Augustus Wood:**

Oh, yeah.

**Naomi Williams:**

I'll add a note to you.

**Augustus Wood:**

Yeah. But um...

**Naomi Williams:**

We'll get tied up here. But, but just but just that really, really just saying, bringing all of these issues, all of the workers' family issues, into their bargaining with employers into their class politics. They elected union members to city council, they had the mayorship for decades. And it really just created an atmosphere of "we can win," and so even when they lost, they complement each other on the struggle. And they took what went well, and they learned from it. They learned from their mistakes repeatedly. And it really just grew into a community that stood for all working people. Right?

**Augustus Wood:**

Yeah.

**Naomi Williams:**

And by the time you get to the 19, so 1970s, they're in a good place to stand up for low wage service workers. In the 1980s, they're standing up for immigrant workers. You know, President Reagan's second election campaign, there's lots of anti-immigrant sentiment going on in the Midwest, in particular, and you know, there's all these news reports about this menace, right, this alien menace. And right, you know, we had INS at the time going in, raiding factories right during contract bargaining time, right?

**Augustus Wood:**

Just a coincidence, of course.

**Naomi Williams:**

Just a coincidence. Right, right. Detaining people, sending them down to Chicago, holding them. And in mid-1980s, you have steel worker, the steel workers, local president, you know, standing right there saying I, we know what you're doing, we're gonna fight for these workers, and they got 17 of the 19 people who had been detained back to work. And they're used to, you know, the unions like you can't fire on due process, let it go through. And they work with community organizations and churches and immigrant worker rights' groups, and they got all the paperwork that they needed, and really made a really bold statement at the time, saying that it was employers' efforts to crush the union. And to reassert the right for all workers to have access to jobs, pointing out that the people had been at, most of them had been working there for over five years. You know, right. So I mean, it was a clear attack, but but again, setting themselves up to do that kind of work. And it wasn't always perfect, right? They never... they never solved the housing issue, right. So still a very segregated city. Even, even the most famous Black unionists in the city, who had over 40 years of union activism, president of the NAACP sat on, you know, sat on the school board for a term... couldn't buy a house in the neighborhood that he wanted. His father, you know, they, they migrated to the Midwest during the Great Migration. And his father came because the Case Company was recruiting down from Mississippi. And when he got there, he realized that they were recruiting Black workers to break a strike. He refused to take the job. He's like, no, no, no, I worked in a coal mine in West Virginia, I am not crossing any picket line.

**Augustus Wood:**

As most Black workers did in history, despite the non-understanding of that, like the vast majority of Black workers, when they found out they were, it was a strike, they refused to cross the line.

**Naomi Williams:**

Right. And that's why the stories that we tell matter. Because, you know, the narrative says one thing, but when you drill down close, you can actually really see what's going on and what's happening. And understand how people are actually making a difference in their communities. Right, you know, if we, if we constantly tell the story about Black workers, you know, fighting to get access to the union and right, racism is everywhere in the United States, I'm not trying to diminish that fight. But I am trying to point to the fact that these workers weren't fighting to get into the union, these workers were using the union to bring forward, right, liberation for everyone. And they're like, look, if we can support the most oppressed workers, we're all going to win. And so William Jenkins, one of my heroes, from, from the city, you know, he, he, that's what he did, you know, he, he saw himself being used by union leadership to kind of battle back and forth. And he had a very key position, he was the only Black worker in his section of the plant. And, you know, they're like, Hey, if you, you know, if you if you sit down everybody else'll sit down to you know, they knew how much power he had. And that's how they did their collective bargaining right after World War II is, you know. Okay, we'll figure it out, you know, and so the foreman comes over and says to him, you know, what, you know, why aren't you working, and he's like, Well, until you handle our vacation pay that you're trying to take away, I'm just not gonna work. And so the

foreman goes to all the white guys and is like, hey, you know, are you gonna let him do this? And they're like, no, we're with him.

**Augustus Wood:**

He thought it was gonna be different, like that scene in the Wire, he thought was one way, but it's the other way. [LAUGHS]

**Naomi Williams:**

It's the other way. [LAUGHS] Yeah, go ahead. Go ahead.

**Augustus Wood:**

I want to kind of touch on one thing you mentioned, though, that I think is so crucial for how we intervene in the ways in which Black workers are represented in scholarship, because there seems to be, historically, this tendency to say that Black workers were trying to enter institutions as a primary goal. But as you just mentioned, if you actually know the stories and you're on the ground, they're in community meetings, they're in union halls, they're in these spaces saying we recognize what this institution is, but we can strategically use the access to it to serve as a point of struggle for our other community needs. That's what was happening in Atlanta, too, in mine work, is that no, they weren't just saying we want to be a member of the union, they want to use this, the resources and space that the union holds to benefit Black workers. That's where you actually get to, when you actually see the race part in the class position struggles stuff, it's like, because we are Black workers, we have a different goal than white workers because of our oppression. And I think that what you just laid out is a huge contribution to pushing that argument, and really revolutionizing how we understand the history and current contemporary issues of Black workers.

**Naomi Williams:**

Right, right. Because you know, nothing drives me more crazy than every time Black workers are saying, Hey, these are the issues that we're facing, then you hear some, you know, somebody giving commentary saying, Oh, well, you know, they have a racial protest. Wait, they clearly listed out their class demands, their economic issues, and you are reducing it to race because you have a very narrow understanding of class. And that's, and that's what that's what those Black workers were doing, it's what they're doing everywhere, right? They're saying, you know, if you if you take this analysis that we're giving you from our position, then you can have a different, more useful, more working understanding of the class struggle, right.

**Augustus Wood:**

Exactly.



**Naomi Williams:**

Yeah. And it drives me crazy, because it's like, wait, wait a minute, how come... how come Black workers have to be always talking about just racial issues?

**Augustus Wood:**

Well, again, though, you know, from your research as well, that that is a common... and we're gonna, this is the next question. This is a common form of the repression or the or the reaction to this kind of collective social movement action, like this is again, because you because you talk about the blueprint. And the blueprint includes how did the powers that be respond, and as you just mentioned, they know that if we cast it as a race issue in the media, despite the class positions here, we can turn the white workers against them, particularly in this quote unquote, "we don't want to be woke" period of today. You know, I mean, again, today that again, and mind you, we know this, that that's the same tactic they use back in the 1800s when they when they got the Chinese workers out. It's the same tactic they used against African American workers when they were trying to form the porters unions. We know that they were doing this throughout history, and now it is back up again. So my question for you is, like, what were what were ways in which the workers in Wisconsin faced the kind of backlash, the repression, because again, you talked about the strategic nature of it. So as time goes on, what kinds of things with were Wisconsin powerbrokers doing to try to kind of subvert what the Black, what the what the what the workers of color were doing?

**Naomi Williams 28:12**

I mean, you just hit it. Right there, right. And so so so that's, that's, that's exactly what happens. And, right, everybody talks about Wisconsin as a swing state. And you see it, right? If you drill down to Racine County, you can see how it moves. Because how we're seeing county votes is often the way Wisconsin votes. And it goes back and forth, depending on you know, what happens. But I really do think that there, there's a core group of white workers who understand and who are fighting for a more inclusive class analysis and doing that work, and where it falls apart and where it continues, right. And I think this is the problem that continues for days, right? It's the political will of those in power to listen, and to move in that direction. And you know, in the late late 1960s, what happens is a conservative group from the rural areas of the county take over a lot of the local area, leadership positions, and they do it around finance, right? Oh, taxpayers dollars, and all this tax money. And what happens is, there's a continual like pulling funds from the inner-city schools and, you know, the public works around, you know, trash pickup and upkeep of roads and all that thing, all that money starts to, because the people who are in power have moved out. And so now they're pulling the funds with them as they go. And so there's a huge battle, right? And they and they make it about, oh, well, we need to watch where our tax dollars are going, right? But then the labor community jumps up and is like, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, you're closing these schools where these Black and brown kids are. And that's not right. That's not what you were supposed to be doing here. Let's do it. And you're right. And they actually create a counter campaign and push back against the conservatives who are saying stop spending the money, you say, no, no, no, we actually need money. And so it shifts, but in between in the late 60s into the early 70s and so in the early 70s, they get back control over a lot of these positions, and they were able to make some moves, but it doesn't, it doesn't last, right, because the economy is falling apart, plants

are closing, jobs are disappearing. And the population decline is pretty serious, as with the plant closings, and things like that. And so that's, that's the part where we continue to get stuck, right, is that when we have a good coalition of working people, you know, saying, Oh, we have to protect our jobs, we have to protect our schools, we have to protect our families. Without the political will, the real policy change? Nothing's gonna happen. Right?

**Augustus Wood:**

Yeah. And I think that one of the things that we often talk about as, we talk about working class politics in general, is that this is something that when you hear the, you hear the people talk at ALEC, or CPAC, like they're constantly hammering down we got to take over local spaces, we got to take over local spaces. The Conservatives are often talking about, let's take the school boards, let's take the city councils, let's take the Chamber of Commerce, let's take this or that. So there is this, so there is this necessity for the power brokers of local spaces to further gatekeep and restrict access to those policies to change. And that's kind of all, that's been their thing since the 80s, right. And so, as you saw Black workers, particularly in the 60s and 70s, actually making claims at the point of production, that we have to not just revolutionize the workspace, but we have to do it at different levels. That is when you get that backlash, as you just mentioned, to where you start seeing more and more of the groups during the Moral Majority wave, taking local spaces, and taking policy spaces, etc. And so I think you're bringing up a very important...

**Naomi Williams:**

And that's so exciting right now...I'm sorry, go ahead.

**Augustus Wood:**

No, no, I'm saying I was gonna say, I think you bring up a very crucial point that we today have not fully discussed in a comfortable fashion, is where, what is our vision moving forward, now that we know what the levers of power are, because again, the anti-worker, anti-union groups, they are more than happy to tell you what they're doing. They're always talking about it, whether it be in public, whether it be in the Wall Street Journal, in business, in all these places. And so we know what they're doing. So just going back...

**Naomi Williams:**

I just want to point out that we're doing it too, right. I think that it's a trend I see over the last, I don't know, five or ten years, and maybe longer than that. But this growing sense of a changing of the guard in local labor communities and in their political activism. And it's been beautiful. And I actually go back, right, to Occupy.

**Augustus Wood:**

Yes. Very much so.

**Naomi Williams:**

I go back to Occupy, and, and Move Forward. But there are amazing new union leaders coming into power at central labor councils, at state federations. And they're really working with their local politicians, and bringing in community groups and doing the, you know, the real, hard work of bargaining for the common good, and linking campaigns together. And we're going to see... I'm hopeful, right, I'm hopeful that some of this local organizing is going to take off. And that's what happened to like, if you think back to SEIU and how it transformed itself, right, it really started, it didn't start from the top down, right. There was this... this this fury, you know, there's a great quote from a guy who I interviewed in Wisconsin, and I was like, So what do you think was going on with SEIU at this time? Why weren't they really supporting these nurses aides? And you know what's happening, because I follow those nurses aides, you know, through several different campaigns for the decertification of the union in the 1990s, unfortunately. But he's like, You know what, you know, we had to do, we had to Racinize SEIU, right. So they brought that local politics, local political energy from Racine, and you know, it was a statewide local of all nurses aides and nursing home workers. So you know, it's 7,000 members across the state, and they're like, so, you know, we're gonna start right here in the southeast corner, and we're just going to transform the union. So that kind of movement, right, so to make our institutions adaptable, to change, and to me, that's the blueprint. What they needed in in the 1940s was one kind, one kind of labor community, what they needed in the 1960s was a different kind of labor community, and they moved and shifted. And so by the time they get to the 80s, it's not a problem for them. They see they see what's happened, they went through the savings and loans crisis, you know, you get a Republican governor elected to Wisconsin, and you know, a huge shift in the politics of, you know, Wisconsin at that time. And they're like, no, no, we got it, right. Like we dealt with McCarthy, we can we can do this, we're gonna make it happen right here. And they were so hopeful and ready. And then of course, right, the economy just falls right out beneath them. And so that's the point. The point is that workers know, workers know what needs to happen. And right, you know, why have we been fighting for full employment for so long? Why are we fighting for universal health care? We know what we need, right? We just need the political will of those in charge to follow through. And we do that by organizing where we are. In our communities, and then spreading it out from there, growing it up and getting out of the way, right?

**Augustus Wood**

Yes.

**Naomi Williams:**

Step back, sit down. You know I saw Julian Bond give a talk for Black History Month. And he's like I'm old, it's time for me to sit down.

**Augustus Wood:**

[LAUGHS] Yeah, he's not gonna be a fan of my book, I can tell you that, uh. Yeah...okay.

**Naomi Williams:**

You better talk a bit more about Atlanta.

**Augustus Wood:**

Yeah. But you but I love what you just said, though, because I think that we don't often talk enough about that—the workers know what to do. If you actually look at those histories, you look at *Black Milwaukee*, you look at *AlabamaNorth*, you look at *In Their Own Interests*, you look at *America's First Black Town*, you look at all these books that emphasize the working classes, they're often always expressing a blueprint or a platform or something that's related to what they know should happen. That's always there. But yet, and you know, there's just in particularly in the history field, there's been a move away from that over the past 20 years. But I think that, and this is going to go into the work we're currently doing on the ground, I think that we're gonna see an upsurge in this kind of labor and this kind of labor studies, working class community studies work that starts happening in the next five to ten years, because the history field was pretty was pretty much global and institutions. That was it. People were not involved. And when I say, about '88 was the year, '88 was the year where people were like eh... But no, but because of the work you're doing, both as an activist and as a scholar, and the works that we're putting out and things, and plus the surge of the workers all over the world right now. I mean, these things, there's so much there's so much action happening everywhere, that there's going to be people are asking questions, what is happening. And particularly you being at Rutgers and me being at Illinois, two of the biggest research centers for Labor Studies, I mean, the potential is immense for us to really be that kind of local movement center area where you have activist scholars doing the work and transferring it across different spaces. And so let me ask you this, right.

**Naomi Williams:**

And it works, right? Oh, go ahead. Yeah.

**Augustus Wood:**

That's what I'm gonna say, and you're gonna say this anyway. But I was going to ask you this. Let me ask you this. How do you feel about your role as a, because like me, you're active in unions, etc. So how do you feel about your role in your current union spaces and all the work you've done, how do you feel like it meshes with your scholarship? And I probably know the answer to this, but I want the listeners to hear from somebody who does this awesome work.

**Naomi Williams:**

Right, I couldn't I couldn't do the research that I do if I wasn't doing the work that I do, right. It's it's they are, they're tied together. And if I wasn't an active union member, I wouldn't I wouldn't produce this type of work. And but it's also the energy, right, being able to talk to other workers all the time and to do the labor education extension work. You know, I'm teaching labor history for workers on Monday nights. For next week, you know, it's a six-week course that we do here at our learning program. And that energy in the room is what fuels the research that I do. And the questions that I ask about the work that I do. It's hard, you know, there's lots of meetings. Being council of the union.

**Augustus Wood:**

Oh, yeah. No, but that's the fun part, though.

**Naomi Williams:**

It's the fun part. Because it's exciting, right now that, right, we have, since I've been here. I've been at Rutgers since 2018, and we have been building our union and our coalition of unions working to protect all campus workers, students, right. Rutgers just raised tuition, why? They don't need to raise tuition, Rutgers got plenty of money. They're just throwing it away in the football program. And they're putting it on the backs of working class students. Come on.

**Augustus Wood:**

Sounds familiar.

**Naomi Williams:**

I won't go too deep down that line. But but but these are the fights that are happening all the time on the ground, and if you're involved in it, and and right, you know your history, because I have to go back to that—and you know your history, then you know that, you know, other people have been fighting, and we've been growing, and we've been working towards something. It's not perfect, right. But but we have a plan, and we have a vision. So that, right, across the United States, campus workers have secured job security, and living wages, and academic freedom. And community members understand that the university is working for them, and they're not working for the university. Right. So that's the kind of fight, but you know, I do want to go back a little bit and highlight something, too, because Crystal Moten just came out with a new book on Black workers, Black women workers in Milwaukee, it's called *Continually Working*. And let me just say, I am so glad that that book came out before my final manuscript got to University of Illinois Press. Because what Crystal Moten does in that book, and you should probably talk to her, but what she does in that book is she shows, right, that, you know, everybody talks about, oh, it's so hard to do this history, right? Because they're not in the archives. And what Crystal's doing, no, no, no, they're everywhere. She's like I read all these books. And they didn't just didn't tell the story. They just covered over this, missed it. But her analysis, and she she does have a couple of case studies, or few case studies, in that book that really kind of just pinpoint the way Black

working women in Milwaukee helped shape community. And I was able to kind of bring that back in and kind of work it into the blueprint, you know, because that's what's missing. Right? Couldn't get a single woman, regardless of race to sit down for a formal interview with me for this book.

**Augustus Wood:**

Wow.

**Naomi Williams:**

So I have all these male perspectives, I was able to go to the archives and there were a couple of oral histories from women workers, you know, a couple generations ago, but actually, you know, every time I talk, they're like, no, no, no. It wasn't until 2012 and we were protesting at the capitol that I finally got to talk to some people who have retired from Racine and who were there with us at the rallies and stuff like that, but nobody would go on record with me, right. So, um, yeah, it's it's a challenge. But I'm also very proud of, to be able to tell these people's story. And hopefully I've done it in a way that shows that that respect and honor that I have for the work that they've done, and they continue to do, they're still doing it.

**Augustus Wood:**

Definitely. I mean, just just the way you described it today. I mean, it goes to show that you have approach, not just a respect, but you have a kind of an admiration of how... because again, those of us that do this kind of work, we see the people as the engines of history, you know, the living archive, the people that would the transferring the circulation of resources, information, struggle, we see that. And so just by having that perspective, when you go in to start your projects, etc., you're already contributing a vast, honorable, and powerful depiction of putting the people's voices first and foremost before everything else, which of course, we know has been one of the biggest struggles for Black History or Black Workers in general, is that people think that they can tell their stories for them. You know, one of the one of my favorite things that I learned is when reading Du Bois is that he would always start with the worker struggle, like, every time, every chapter everything, something the worker has done, right? And then again, just just just by doing that, letting them lead, letting them lead the narrative, it does a lot. And just by you talking about these really important examples in Racine, and also how it connects to the broader struggle for workers. Yeah, I'm, I honestly cannot wait to read this book. And I'm sure a lot of other people. I mean, if it comes out before mine, you best believe I'm gonna be quoting your stuff. [LAUGHS]

**Naomi Williams:**

The 2024 production line. [LAUGHS]

**Augustus Wood:**

Well, mine is, too, I don't know if I can make 2024. We'll see. But I'm just saying, though, like I just I honestly like, this is this is why we came up with "Off the Shelf," is that we wanted to connect with scholars who are doing important, grassroots on-the-ground work to talk about these crises. And then lo and behold, we started this before the general strike started, we started this podcast, like 20, 2019 2020. And then all of a sudden, all the labor stuff really just ramps up. And so we came right at the right time. Just like your work and your your work is coming at the right time. Because people have those questions. What is going on? They need to know. And so we're doing that. Yeah.

**Naomi Williams:**

Yeah. Thanks so much, guys. It's great talking with you.

**Augustus Wood:**

So, to end to end our episode. One last question, real quick. Give us one book or article that we need to be reading right now. Based on what you've been hearing all over the news. I mean, just one, it ain't got to be, it ain't gotta be your favorite one. But just one that you've been that you've read recently, or before that has been like, Oh, this is so what's happening right now in the news right now, this is so important. Just like if you read a news story, what pops, book or article pops in your head like, this is what's happening right now. This scholar said this.

**Naomi Williams:**

Ah, oh, Gus, you've put me on the spot. [LAUGHS] So I'll tell you it's um, Erica Smiley, and it's Sarita Gupta, have a great book. I can't remember exactly the title. But I think it's *The Future We Need*.

**Augustus Wood:**

Why, why that one. What's, what's with that book?

**Naomi Williams:**

Because it's really talking about, it's talking about a new way, right? And it's not new. And that's the point, right? It's not new. They're taking, right, the lived experiences of working people and they're saying we already know what to do. If we're going to save democracy, then we need, then we need to even move beyond bargaining for the common good. We need a new way to bargain. We need to bring everybody in, right. And it's really about building people power. To hold true to the promises, right, of the United States. Right. So we have yet to live up to the promise. We had a moment, right, after the Civil War. We had the 14th and 15th amendments, that that could have opened the door, right, to some real people power.

**Augustus Wood:**

You've got to come back because we got to have a discussion about that, because I love talking about the post-Civil War Reconstruction period, about that potential, because there was so much happening at that time. You have workers owning collectives of farms, actually, you know, cutting out all that corporatization stuff and because they got the land, but then they lost it. And I know we're running out of time, but that would be such a great conversation in terms of the potential, etc. But the name of the book is *The Future We Need: Organizing for a Better Democracy in the 21st Century* by Erica Smiley and Sarita Gupta. So that's that's a great pick.

**Naomi Williams:**

And it's so inspiring. The stories in it are still, are so inspiring, but also the message, right, the message that and I'll keep saying this, workers' power is in the community. Workers' power is in the community. And that's, that's what we need to live by. And that's how we can win. I know it.

**Augustus Wood:**

Just like our strike slogan was, *I believe we will win* because of that very idea. That is the best way to end it. This has been just an absolute pleasure. Like I said before, Naomi, once I learned about what you were doing, I became a fan of your work. And I'm so excited...

**Naomi Williams:**

I'm a fan of your work, too.

**Augustus Wood:**

I'm trying, but what... I cannot wait, hopefully we can have you back on. And we would definitely love to invite you to campus in the future when your book does come out and do some talks and pan— etc. So, because again, I think this is such a crucial topic.

**Naomi Williams:**

Yeah, let's keep the conversation going.

**Augustus Wood:**

Yeah, we need to have more Rutgers, Illinois kind of collabs, too, like, we can't be just two separate labor research institutes and we got to do more collab work.

**Naomi Williams:**

Right, bring it together, all right.

**Augustus Wood:**



Most definitely. So again, thank you so much, Naomi. It's been an honor.

**Naomi Williams:**

Thank you, it's been my pleasure.

**Augustus Wood:**

...opening the season. Thank you so much. You have been listening to "Off the Shelf: Revolutionary Readings in Times of Crisis." I'm your host, Gus Wood. shout out to the Humanities Research Institute for the sponsorship. We will see you next time. Naomi, power always to the people.

**Naomi Williams:**

To the people. Thank you, Gus.

**Augustus Wood:**

Take care.