Fairness First podcast, episode #6 transcript

ALEXANDRA [00:00:04] This is Fairness First, a podcast dedicated to exploring issues about health equity in the southwest with a special focus on North in Arizona. I'm Alexandra Cameron. Welcome and thanks for listening. In this episode, we present our first health equity chit chat, a new segment where we honor the work of queer people and women of color who have produced knowledge that can nurture and guide our actions in advancing health justice in our communities. For each health equity chit chat co-host, Carmelita Chief and myself will introduce you to readings or literary work from nontraditional, community driven and visionary thinkers to guide our conversations. Join us in reflection and learn with us how the arts in non-Western ways of Knowing can inform health equity work and research.

ALEXANDRA [00:01:04] Hi, Carm. How are you?

CARMENLITA [00:01:07] Hi, Alexandra, I am doing good. I am Carmelita chief. I go by Carmen or Carm and I am a citizen of the Navajo Nation, so I identify as a Diné woman.

ALEXANDRA [00:01:19] Thanks Carm. OK, so today we're going to read the work of scholar Gloria Anzaldúa, and the piece is, "La conciencia de la Mestiza: Towards a new consciousness." She was a sixth generation Chicana who was born in 1942. She was born in a ranch or rancheria in the Rio Valley of South Texas, which is known as El Valle, and basically, she was the daughter of farmworkers. She herself worked as a farmworker with her family. There was some inconsistency, sometimes growing up in her education because of as farmworkers, they had to migrate to different locations in Texas and in the Midwest, and so her father decided that it was time to move the family to Hargill, Texas, to provide a better education for his children.

To learn more about Anzaldúa and her work read: The Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, 2012

CARMENLITA [00:02:17] I do have stories about how my dad's side, my grandmother and my aunts and uncles. I think they were small at the time, but they would actually go through my migratory farm work experience, like traveling from here in Arizona, northern Arizona and then making their way up towards Idaho. So my dad was actually born in Idaho. They went up. Yeah, they went up there to pick to harvest potatoes. And my dad was actually born in Idaho. Yeah. So, you know, I can find some similarities between just her experiences and some of the experiences in my family as far as, you know, being a Navajo person.

ALEXANDRA [00:02:57] On my end. I am a Mexican immigrant who came to the U.S. as a teenager, but most of my life, I grew up in Mexico. I've read previously and now we read this piece. There are so many things that I connect with the way she's thinking about identity and living in a Mexican household and living in the border. When I came to the U.S., I came with my mom and we lived in Tucson, Arizona, which is one hour away from the border. That sentiment of isolation kind of just feeling like you don't belong, especially in school, is something that, you know, I connect very strongly to some of her own experience. In terms of the context where she grew up, El Valle is pretty much an area characterized by a blend of cultures between the U.S. and Mexican culture. However, these areas particularly also known as profoundly racist and isolating. For instance, some of the experiences she went through it was pretty unusual for children, Mexican children to

be physically punished for speaking Spanish outside and inside of the classroom, Mexican culture was considered inferior to the U.S., and identity was pretty much focused on assimilation to U.S. culture and pretty much dispossession of Mexican culture and language. You know, I started reading some articles about how... how the region of South Texas, specifically El Valle, was one of the hardest hit by COVID 19, and the region is pretty much more than 90 percent Latino, and a lot of these communities didn't have health insurance, were living in overcrowded housing and were part of engaging in essential work (Solomon, 2020).

CARMENLITA [00:05:04] I think what I do want to add for the listeners, first of all, thank you for giving us some time and some space just to break down our, you know, how we relate to the knowledge and the ideas that she is bringing forward Gloria Anzaldúa to the work that we do. We, Alexandra and I are both in the field of public health and we also are very engaged in community engaged research with communities here in the Southwest. And so we wanted to look at and read and absorb experiences and knowledge and philosophies that are being brought forward from scholars, you know, who are people of color and what they can do to inform our way of approaching the health equity work that we do. Are there new ideas that we can glean? Is there something that we're not quite thinking about that other scholars have? I've already posited fourth, because there's a lot of breaches in those, and we also want to use this as a space to really, you know, help others feel comfortable and having these conversations and maybe creating a new understanding how health equity work, how the research that is being done for and and with communities in the southwest, how that, you know, impacts people like us. Because at the end of the day when we we're leaving the institution, we go home, you know, I'm a Navajo woman. I have, I interact in different ways with the world. Rather, you know, apart from how I am here and how people receive me here.

[00:06:44] [MUSIC BREAK]

CARMENLITA [00:06:59] I first want to start off also by just saying that I think this was a good article to start off with because it does talk a lot about consciousness. What does that mean when you are coming from a culture that is not the dominant culture? And how do you function? How do you interact? How do you see the world? How do you interpret the things that are going on around you, the things that are being said around you and about you and toward you? And so I think a really good example. We're in a space here at Northern Arizona University, this academic institution where we have very smart, brilliant people who are bringing their skills and their knowledge and, you know, their their time and their their heart to wanting to build healthier communities. But the thing to understand is that if you come from the dominant culture, I think when you wake up in the morning, you don't have to think about what kind of face you're going to put on, how you're going to talk in order to gain validity and about what you're saying to get people's attention to, like see you as valid as a valid, you know, person in academia.

ALEXANDRA [00:08:12] I think the way in which and Anzaldúa, is kind of trying to bring in this Mestiza consciousness is a consciousness of what it means to be a woman, what it means to be a woman who might be transgressing gender and national borders. But my first question, Carm, basically is what does psychic restlessness mean to you as an Indigenous or, for me, Mexican woman in public health and health equity research?

CARMENLITA [00:08:49] That's a really good question! [LAUGHS] I'm Navajo. I carry with myself a set of experiences. I have had entanglements, you know, regarding race and discrimination before. So it really like it really sets how you are going to approach the day,

how you're going to talk with people. And so you're constantly like, she says, constantly having to shift from a certain particular type of consciousness about the world. How you operate, you know, in your own home, that's you. That's your comfort space, and then you're going to work to this institution. And then I have to communicate a certain way. I have to say things a certain way. You know, the code-switching that's involved. That's what that question makes me think about from the get go is that there just needs to be like common understanding about even that. What what is it, what what is entailed in even just getting up and getting ready to do this work?

ALEXANDRA [00:09:44] Yeah, no. I love that you you share that in connection to this thing that she calls the psychic restlessness to me when I was reading this particular paragraph and I'll read it. Anzaldúa says "The ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity, internal strife, results in insecurity and in decisiveness. The Mestiza's dual or multiple personality is blacked by psychic restlessness." When I read that particular section, I was like, Oh my God, yes, when she's talking about these multiple personalities and thinking of how much work that has taken, for instance, in my case, to be able to learn how to navigate the academic space and health equity research, which is predominantly dominated by white women. It is tiring. Sometimes I think in in my head, I feel that restlessness, that cloudiness cluttered, that sometimes I just don't know how to separate each of those voices that she's talking about. She's kind of coming to terms that all these voices, all these personalities have to come to like a fluid, cohesive shape.

CARMENLITA [00:11:16] I think that's what I gravitated most towards. And you know, this discussion about the psychic restlessness and these cultural what she calls cultural collisions, or these incompatible frames of reference and beliefs. You know, even even with languages, the clashes that that are entertained there between English and, you know, other languages that are not considered the dominant. She says it forces one into a state of perpetual transition. And I think that is that is what it is. You're constantly abuzz, constantly having to be hyper aware of how you are. Expressing yourself, what kind of face are you bringing forward as a person of color who is also, you know, an academic and then vice versa when you're going back into the community because you know how the equity work is very much community engaged and should be community engaged. Even on that front, you have to change to kind of like, remember, oh yeah, OK, this is how I act on the rez. You know, when I go back home, this is how I'm supposed to sound. I have to dress a certain way because I want people to hear what I'm saying, rather than being focused on all of these other things that, you know, detract from the message or detract from that trust building that I'm trying to initiate with them so that we could work together

ALEXANDRA [00:12:40] in that sense of constant transition. One thing is to be this one researcher of color or from a historically marginalized group conducting health equity research and engaging in this academic space and the decisions you have to make to thrive within that space. That's one thing. But then the other thing is that you end up being racialized in very specific ways that inform the responsibilities you're given, the way your role is defined within the institution. And you know that constant insecurity on my end, constant questioning and doubting, Oh, am I here to function as a community liaison or am I here because of my research skills? What is it that my role is? And then you go out in the community and the intention is to build trust, but then it's this weird dynamic because you're trying to create breach between principal investigators and other students and the community... that bridge entails so much internal labor that it's not often visiblelized, precisely that internally labor is this concept of consciousness, Mestiza consciousness that

constant shift in thoughts and voices and questions, and, you know, so much that happen at an internal level.

CARMENLITA [00:14:31] Yeah, this this actually makes me think about how, you know, if you're if you're a PI or co-PI or, you know, somebody who is in a leadership position overseeing a project, I'm hoping that you know, you're internalizing this conversation because it very much like impacts the students who are coming from, you know, different cultures, ethnic groups because it reminds me of not too long ago, I want to say it was just like just last week, I had a meeting with a group of predominantly Navajo students who are assisting on a research project in which, you know, there's various aspects of cancer prevention to it, and we're working with Navajo communities on it. And right now, we're trying very desperately to just get recruitment activities going, which is super difficult during the COVID pandemic. You know, the Navajo Nation has done an incredible job of getting that into control. But you know, there's still a lot of aspects of trying to make sure everything is OK with family also trying to be there for community. And I think that really does impact what students of color are trying. You know, they're trying desperately to stay on top of their activities. You know what, I need them to do as far as recruitment on this study. But you know, we just used our time last week during our meeting just to have, you know, a heart to heart. And I'm like, Can you can we just have some space where we can share about what, you know, what is going on? Why are we having such a difficult time with recruitment? And then like one by one, the floodgates just started opening like, Oh, you know, I'm just so busy worrying about what's going on back home. You know, I have to go back and forth from like Tucson or Flagstaff, back to the reservation, back to the homelands and help out there because my commitment as a Navajo person is in that community as well as much as it is, it is here at the institution on this project because I'm getting paid for it, you know, or I'm a part of some program in which, you know, they're paying for my time to be a part of this project to gain experience and knowledge and all of that. But at the end of the day, you know, we shared that and we still have responsibilities back home, and it's that. Constant like tug on your consciousness. Yeah. From the research project to what's going on with your cultural expectations, your responsibilities back home.

ALEXANDRA [00:17:05] Yeah! It's that constant balance between honoring that commitment that you have to community and these weird expectations of how things are done in research that may not match where communities are at sometimes. And then the lack of reflection and how that impacts whatever researcher of color or community liaison that it's in between the institution and the community... to engage community requires so much relationship building that what we're saying here, it should not just fall on this particular community liaison, but actually researchers and students have the responsibility to engage in relationship building in whichever community they are conducting research in.

[00:18:04] [MUSIC BREAK]

CARMENLITA [00:18:12] They wanted to draw your attention to this other aspect, she says. You know, she focuses a lot on cultural collision to this psychic restlessness, this constant being in a state of perpetual transition, as she terms it. But at some point she does say, you know, we can't be forever locked in this combat between the dominant culture and the oppressed culture. She provides us with this visual of, you know, shouting at each other from across opposite banks. But to make this relevant to me, since I come from, you know, Navajo Nation, it would be like shouting at each other from opposite, mesas. So at some point, she says, we'll need to, we'll, meaning, you know, people who represent the dominant culture, the dominant way of thinking and also over here on this

other end, the non-dominant cultures. We have to at some point stop shouting at each other from opposite banks. And she says, at some point we'll need to arc onto both sides of either the bank or the mesa, we need to either try to see through both lenses that we have to offer. You know, when we're looking at a particular issue or she says, or we will need to disengage from the dominant culture and venture into a whole new territory. So I guess that makes a segue way into this Mestiza consciousness using this new blending of ideas, thoughts, concepts from various cultures, what they have to offer and not just from the dominant, but from what the local communities have to offer in order to create long, sustaining appropriate, respectful solutions.

ALEXANDRA [00:20:02] Yes, I think she there's a section where she talks about being comfortable with having a tolerance for ambiguity. And you know, when I was reading this section that you just reviewed, I was having a lot of reflection, but also a little bit of pushback because she was talking about. Yeah, that constant reaction that we may often have, which I think that the majority of my time doing public health and health equity research, it's come from a place of reaction, meaning that I'm constantly fighting back or creating resistance to very western, white centric way of conducting research. And I'm constantly like reacting to it, instead of, I think, what she's trying to say. There's the sentence where she's like the possibilities of what you end up deciding to right are numerous once we decide to act and not react. What does it mean for me to act and not react? How does that look like for me in health equity research? It really pushed me to think about, OK, if these are all the ways in which people are conducting research, what could be some ways that I can take more ownership based on skills and knowledge that exist within communities? How can I act instead of constantly fighting back and dedicating so much energy to being reactive and investing all that energy into actually being creative and being more inventive about how I want to create research, how I want to document inequity and push for social change. Like, if you're in, you're constantly engaging within these spaces where you're reminded that you don't belong. How much time left and energy do you have to actually have a little space to act or to explore what that looks like?

CARMENLITA [00:22:17] Yes, I look at that as it's taking time away from your own survival, your way of thriving.

[00:22:23] [MUSIC BREAK]

CARMENLITA [00:22:30] Alexandra, where do you see us as researchers and public health being, are we still shouting at each other to like [ALEXANDRA LAUGHS IN BACKGROUND], say, no, actually, you know, listen to us because we have this to offer? Or do you feel like we're at a point now where we're kind of toning that down and we're actually trying to understand each other and see through each other's lenses? Or do you think that actually like she says, trying to disengage from the prescribed way of, you know, public health and doing public health and trying to venture into a new territory.

ALEXANDRA [00:23:05] In the general sense, maybe, you know, after 2020, I think public health is attempting to engage into these other ways of knowing in an attempt to open up possibilities and act, right. Sometimes I feel like I just want to disengage and write everything off like she's saying, and I think that will constantly have to be a question that needs to be addressed in any kind of health equity research projects. I guess this Mestiza consciousness is kind of helping us think about what are you going to do to find solutions and advance health equity in this case? Are you going to keep uplifting the dominant culture, keep doing things as they are? Or are you going to completely write it off, as Anzaldúa says, or are you just going to explore some other possibility?

CARMENLITA [00:24:17] Definitely depends on the group. I'm working with the dynamics at play during that day. Like which where am I at with this? Are we trying to reach common ground and trying to, you know, respectfully look through each other's lenses? Or am I just done like, I'm just done. I'm not being heard. You're not like respecting what I have to bring. You're just choosing to see from one reality. I think, you know, I try to be hopeful because you know, that consciousness is embedded in our Navajo philosophical way of living our lives. We always aim for that positive mindset, grasping for hope. I believe that all we have to cling on to is hope or, you know, healthier communities for justice, for a balance to the way that our communities are operating and how they're benefiting people, making sure that those benefits are equitable. I feel like with my generation, we're starting to turn the tide on that and really trying to advocate for our cultural ways of doing things a problem solving, creating solutions, teaching others how to do things the way that our ancestors have learned to do. So I'm hopeful, and I want to say that we're a little bit beyond trying to see through both lenses that can be very complicated. You know, just just thinking about self-determination. And, you know, from Indigenous sovereignty perspective, I think what we're trying to do with our generation is trying to shift it back to say, Hey, we have riches in the way that we can solve these problems and examine them and put a stop to the systemic continuation of why we experience health disparities. Why? You know, it's such a struggle to even attain health equity.

ALEXANDRA [00:26:14] I agree with you. I think at a level within me, I yeah, I am ready to engage in creative, open possibilities. You know, when I was reading this section, she described, "all reaction is limited by and dependent on what it is reacting against because the counter stance stems from a problem with authority outer as well as inner. It's a step towards liberation from cultural domination, but it is not a way of life." [LAUGHS] And you know, when I was reading that, it just kind of made me reflect about, yes, like this constant reaction that I've been engaging in, especially in the work that I've been doing at the community level that often communities who experience inequity are functioning in a state of reactivity to crisis. Again, not leaving enough time for communities to reinvent. Be creative, explore how is it that communities want to be healthy because there's one crisis after the other. It's such a great burnout, and I think I realized that in all of the spaces in my life, either at the community level or academic level, I'm constantly reacting to what's coming at me and not really understanding, who am I really within this space with all of the identities that I need to bring in? You have to just embrace all of the good and bad parts of yourself in this Mestiza consciousness to really fully understand how is it that you will act?

[00:28:08] [MUSIC BREAK]

CARMENLITA [00:28:16] We're starting to wind down now with our final questions. I think what I would like to do is just, you know, use this moment for you as you're listening to also think about like when was the last time that you were unquestionably yourself? What elements contributed to that?

ALEXANDRA [00:28:36] Yeah, I think, you know, it is hard for me to think about a time when I was fully myself within the context of public health and health equity research because of COVID, and all of our interactions have been predominantly online. Before COVID, we were working, I'm part of this project, where we engage with hotel housekeepers in Flagstaff to understand their occupational health and safety. And this was a very community based participatory research. The hotel housekeepers supported us in the design and implementation of the research project. And so every time we would have our meetings, you know, they were all in Spanish. I think that's a huge component that

allowed me to feel unquestionably me. You know what I mean? I think language, it's a big thing. It is huge. It really adds other levels of cultural relationship depth, a lot of humor. Yeah, we would just be constantly laughing and cracking jokes. And I miss that. I miss that. All Mexican immigrant women. And you know, I was able to relate to them from a common experience of migration and having an experience of growing up, you know, with a mom who used to work as a housekeeper and engaging with them and all the stories they had, it was just a very fulfilling and very motivating experience every time we would meet with the housekeepers. And it really like just opens possibilities of what this work can look like.

CARMENLITA [00:30:29] Yes, exactly.

ALEXANDRA [00:30:30] And it it almost reminds you what the purpose of health equity research and work is. Yeah. So I guess in terms of the components, its language, culture, being surrounded by people that speak like you look like you and that are not constantly questioning who you are, but are just embracing all of you.

CARMENLITA [00:30:56] And maybe that's where we're trying to move, where that is, like, this is what health equity research looks like can feel like, sounds like makes you feel like that also triggered a memory where we on another project. We're also working with Navajo community health representatives or CHRs for a lot of them, it was their first time like actually being a part of a research team, a public health research team out in the community. And we had so much fun joking provided that a lot of the students on the team were also Navajo, so they were able to like exchange their kinship clans, establish those relationships. So based on certain types of relationships, you can joke with people a certain way. And it just makes it so fun and like, you know, you're, taking off the armor, I guess, of being an academic. And so they just see you as somebody that they can relate with, and it just makes for a more positive, fun, fun loving, I guess, if you want to call it that environment or, you know, just this atmosphere that you're creating. And I think one of the highest forms a compliment that I heard from, not just one of them. There was a few of them who said, "This is so much fun. We're, you know, we're out there having conversations with people about this issue and trying to better understand it so that we can, you know, come up with some solutions. But I had no idea this could be research and when can we do this again?" So I think that's what, you know, PIs and leaders of research projects who come from dominant, you know, training on how to do research needs to take that into consideration. When you get that buy in from the people that you're working with and you create an atmosphere where it is fun, where people are laughing, you know? You know, in what do you call it, respectful in a respectful manner when it's appropriate? I'm not saying that it should be, you know, fun times all the time because we're dealing with different, very serious topics. There's a time and place for that, and the more that you engage with the community, you'll know when those times are.

ALEXANDRA [00:33:04] Yeah, if you are a researcher that is engaged in health equity research, you need to build those relationships with the communities that are impacted by that particular issue and really seeing community as your partners in research and your partners, and collecting data in analyzing the data and really thinking that all the information in your research doesn't necessarily belong to you, it belongs more to a collective. And and what that information tells us about the realities in which some communities live. To finalize things, this last section in the reading called El Retorno or the return. She's basically saying that any kind of issue and let's think in the context of a health inequity that we want to change. She's proposing that we really have to come back to the root, and that root can be a place, can be a group of people. That is such a helpful

exercise for health equity research projects, for PIs, research assistants and coordinators for community members to collectively engage in a conversation about why do we need to return in advancing health equity? Why is that needed to return to the root? Where do you return when feeling lost in public health and health equity research? What are the things that you miss? That's like one question with five in it.

CARMENLITA [00:34:52] You're very good at that. [LAUGHS] OK, so I'm going to let my my heart in my mind briefly guide me through your question because I really liked the way she ended this. Because, you know, we do need to think about what that home base is for everyone involved in health equity or who is vested in wanting to advance health equity for everyone. To me, this makes me think about how in Navajo culture, when a child is born, we have this practice of the umbilical cord, you know, after its being, after it has been separated from the baby and the mother that that umbilical cord is buried somewhere, you know, around the homestead. If you want the child to be very good at like raising animals, you would bury it here near the sheep corral, the horse corral or if you want them to be proficient at farming, of course, he would bury it near like the farm, the cornfields. So that always signals at some point wherever, you know, wherever life takes you, as even if you're taken like far abroad, away from the homelands, you're always going to come home at some point and you're always going to remember. How that contributes to your identity and how it also reminds you of what your responsibilities are to provide back, you know, all that you need based on your experiences, your knowledge, the things that you have gained. How are you going to give back to your family, to your community and to the next generations? But as researchers, you know, in my own experience, like when I just get so inundated with like the bureaucracies, some of the cultural conflicts that causes tension, and I just need to break from that. And the way that I do that is I will go out and take a walk into the forest. We live here in Flagstaff, so we're surrounded by the forest. And but I need that in order to ground myself and to remember that connection. Aside from, you know, all of these things that are imposed on me by the institution and how I am supposed to go about my work, it helps ground me to remember that relationship that I have with the natural world. And so she does talk about that near the end about how the only constant in all of this, as we progress forward, is always going to be the land. And I think that relationship to the land, because that relationship helps kind of not dictate, but it influences our values, our beliefs, our the way, the ways that we do things. I think. Final note What can we contribute or share with people who are a part of like the dominant culture? And I think really, like I said earlier, it's about connection, connection, back to community connection, back to the land. And that's very important in health equity work in doing CBPR. Community based participatory research is being able to connect, leaving your comfort zone, leaving this institution, leaving the lab, actually going out and creating and forging those relationships, getting to know people, getting to know what they laugh at, what they delight in, what they eat, like what are some of their dreams? It's getting at that Mestiza, like developing that Mestiza consciousness of embracing that there are different realities. Let me immerse myself into this one, and what can I learn from it?

ALEXANDRA [00:38:45] Yeah. Embrace ambiguity. She says, "Many feel that whites should help their own people rid themselves of race, hatred and fear first. I, for one, choose to use some of my energy to serve as a mediator. I think we need to allow whites to be our allies through our literature, art, corridors and folktales. We must share our history with them. So when they set up committees to help Big Mountain Navajos or the Chicano farmworkers, or los Nicaraguenses, they won't turn people away because of their racial fears and ignorances. They will come to see that they are not helping us, but following our lead."

CARMENLITA [00:39:33] Is just so on point. I think my favorite part in all of this and this is probably going to be my final tidbit just to offer to the conversation is, of course, like why do we like what resonated with me the most? And I'm in this space now where I am all about thinking about like future making and how do we make a future that benefits us and is respectful of our ways of living and knowing and being like me? Speaking, speaking as an Indigenous person and Indigenous woman, I'm very interested in the work that it takes and the research that will help inform future, our futures. And so I just want to read from this little part here because I think she just hits it like just straight on and I just love this. It talks about the importance of the new consciousness, the Mestiza consciousness, the blending and accepting and being flexible, being comfortable with ambiguity and all of that. So she says, "The future will belong to the Mestiza because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms. It depends on the straddling of two or more cultures, and by creating a new mythos that is a change in the way that we perceive reality, the way that we see ourselves and the ways that we behave. La Mestiza creates a new consciousness.".

[00:40:58] [MUSIC BREAK]

ALEXANDRA [00:41:13] This is it, you all for our first health equity chitchat? I hope you enjoy our discussion. Please follow us on Twitter, Instagram or Facebook and let us know your thoughts, ideas. How can this episode inform the research and community work you do? Thank you for listening and until next time.

[00:41:40] The South with Health Equity Research Collaborative, Community Engagement Core and the Media Innovation Center at NAU produced this episode. It was edited by Alexandra Semarron longorio. Music from https://filmmusic.io, song titled "Fearless First" by Kevin McCloud, licensed by https://creativecommons.org.

[00:42:00] Special thanks to the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities grant number U54MD012388 and Northern Arizona University Southwest Health Equity Research Collaborative for funding this podcast. Thanks to our Fairness First Team Carmelita Chief, Dulce Jiménez, Alexandra Nicole Olin from the Community Engagement Core, and Brian Rackham, director of the NAU Media Innovation Center. Thanks for making this podcast possible.

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