

# CREATIVETIME

***The Last Stand Podcast*** Episode Three: Rhizomatic Networks and Mutual Aid

*[musical interlude]*

**Diya Vij (DV):** This is *The Last Stand* podcast, a mini-series on the social life of forests, reparative land management, and just climate futures on the occasion of Creative Time's newest public art commission, Kamala Sankaram's experimental opera of the same name.

Over the past four decades, Creative Time has commissioned and presented ambitious public art projects with thousands of artists throughout New York City, across the country, around the world, and even in outer space. We work with artists to contribute to dialogue and debate on the most pressing issues of our times, and to foster dreams for our collective future.

Kamala Sankaram is a composer and performer, moving freely between the worlds of experimental music and contemporary opera. Expanding over five parts and ten hours, Sankaram's *The Last Stand* invites us into 300 years of sonic history told entirely through field recordings. As the years unfold, the human impact on the forest becomes visceral: species disappear, storms intensify, and the drone of highways and planes becomes constant. At the heart of *The Last Stand* is the fundamental truth that our planetary survival depends on collaboration with our natural neighbors.

Welcome to *The Last Stand* podcast. I'm Diya Vij, Creative Time's curator and your host.

This episode features a conversation between activist and writer, Dean Spade, and radical mycologist, Peter McCoy. The two speak on what humans can learn from mushrooms.

**Dean Spade (DS):** I'm Dean Spade. I live in Seattle on Duwamish land and for like more than 20 years, I've been involved in different grassroots movements related to, like, prison and border abolition and queer and trans liberation and feminism and anti-colonialism and things like that.

I've recently wrote a book about mutual aid, which why we're having this conversation about mutually together and, um, cause I've been involved in movements doing that work for a long time and mutual aid is a term that some people use to describe the part of social movement work, where we're meeting each other's direct survival needs based in a shared understanding that the crises we're in were actually caused by the systems -- not by the people in crisis, which is the way that people are often treated -- and like social services and charity. And another key thing about mutual aid is that it is like we're meeting people's immediate needs with an invitation to collective action. So it's like, "let's give you support in housing courts so you don't get evicted,

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and would you like to join like our work to organize tenants generally, or to organize for housing justice or more to like, you know, do an action at this landlord's house" or whatever. It's about building, it's an on-ramp to movement building to actually get to the root causes of the crises we're facing. Root causes like capitalism and extraction and white supremacy.

**Peter McCoy (PM):** My name's Peter McCoy. I'm based in Portland, Oregon, and I'm a mycology educator, mushroom farmer and author, and artist of sorts. I spent nearly 20 years or more looking at, working with, and learning to see fungi and all the ways that they shaped the world and have shaped the evolution of, of all species, really, and the evolution of the earth and, and the development of human cultures historically to the degrees that we understand it, and certainly nowadays thinking about, and trying to look towards how they can better support and inform the development of human cultures going forward. So a lot of my work is a balance between, uh, the science of mycology and the application of that, that information -- not just in practical use, like mushroom growing, but actually trying to philosophize or think deeper about what these organisms can teach us as mirrors of effective and resilient systems, ancient systems that do so much when we can appreciate them on a practical ecological level and sort of incorporate those understandings and insights into the ways we might operate as humans, um, to better support ourselves individually, socially, and in interaction with the environment.

**DS:** You know, we always say movements are made up of relationships. They're as strong or as weak as the relationships of the people in them. And there's this dynamic, I think that people raised in capitalism and white supremacy and patriarchy, where people think that like you should start like movement projects, organizations, and the goal should be like, what you put out. Like, it's like, the externality, how it looks, how does it look on social media, what's your reputation, how many groceries did you deliver, how many, you know, whatever. And when we do that, when we focus externally, we neglect like the relationships. And so then, you know, organizations fall apart and people are unethical towards each other and people are, people are burnt out or we're not doing the work at the right pace, or we didn't actually make the decisions carefully that would make sure that we kept including more and more and more people in getting bigger. Or we were, um, neglectful to like something that was like a blinking red light in our dynamics.

And so to me, this thing that Peter was saying, that was very beautiful to me about like what the bulk of it is is the network, is these relationships, is these connections, feels very true in terms of social movement work and a lot of the things that I've been thinking about around mutual aid. I spent a lot of my time helping mutual aid groups turn their values and look at what's going on internally and how can we set up good decision making, and how can we set up ways to let new people in, and how can we think about, um, conflicts as like something that's inherent to doing work together that we care about, not something that means we're doing something wrong. And how can we like have generative conflict and move through it. And you know, all of these, how

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do we build a group culture that we think people would want to be in and stay in? Like all of these kinds of questions are actually, um, really hard questions for people who've been living in super hierarchical systems and working at jobs that are about exploiting them and making somebody rich. And so, this like care for our inherent relatedness, our inability to actually get away from each other on this planet feels like something that mycelium networks are showing us, to me.

**PM:** Seeing it through the mycelial lens is a phrase like to say, you know, thinking like fungi. Again, trying to embody them as teachers, just as we can learn from a mountain or from our, our pet dog and its happiness, plants we might relate to -- what can we learn from mirroring this aspect of the natural world that is so successful in practical terms, but also incredibly significant.

**DS:** It feels like this huge counter to this capitalist idea, that like is so popular, that we have to be individually successful. And that success is like climbing to the top of hierarchies and dominating people and failure as being at the bottom of the hierarchies and being dominated. And like, when you're talking about how mycelial networks show us how everyone is connected, I'm just thinking about like, and yet how the hypha have like an individuality we might say, but like the individualism isn't about dominating the system. It is about bringing the wisdom of the position that particular organism is in or that, you know, that particular part is in.

It just makes me think a lot about what decision making can be like when we can be in a group and be like, "Wow, different people have different experiences and perspectives, and we want to bring them all in." And when we do consensus decision making and social movement organization, we're saying, "Yeah. Instead of just having some people out vote other people because there's less of them, or because they're charismatic in some way -- and that often goes with weird privileged things - instead we're going to actually try to hear everybody in the group and see what would make this the best possible decision that the most people could live with and that would benefit the most people. Like it's a very different definition of success. It's not like, "I ran my way through with my vision and I owned it." It's like, "What could everybody live with?" And what could like the wisdom of all these different people in all these different positions in the world and in life and in the social hierarchies, like what if we brought that with them together so that difference stops being a barrier to decision making, and it becomes a resource for making like a better decision than we ever would have made if one person or one group or click won the vote.

As I understand it, humans as a successful species, like the only reason humans exist is because we collaborated like endlessly all along, and like to see other -- to think about other -- organisms that only managed to succeed through like collaboration, through sharing, through, like it's very recent, the level of extraction that humans are engaged in and it's not leading towards our success, our wellbeing. It's not generating that. But it's like so hard because there's

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such a big brainwashing saying that like, we're naturally going to turn against each other if we don't have like police on the streets and like, you know, all of these like rigid, um, structures of hierarchy forcing people to work. So anyway, I just really loved hearing the way that connections and success are related in the story you are telling.

**PM:** Yeah. I mean, it's really the way to phrase it, I guess, is that all hypha have an equal voice in the mycelial network, you know, and so you can imagine in a, in a forest setting, you have this network it's going through the soil and each individual is interacting with this piece of wood, trying to eat that or fighting off this bacteria, that's trying to hurt it and they're, they're doing different things, producing different defense compounds, digestive compounds -- this is how fungi grow and live -- but they're learning about the environment and they have to tell the rest of the network, you know, "This is what's going on. I need this over here. I need these resources to survive" or, "Hey, there's good resources over here. Let's, let's pool our information or pool our energy and maybe start to grow more in this direction because it's beneficial for all of us." And, you know, maybe only one tip was the one that first, um, one hypha was the first one to sort of send that signal. But, thankfully the whole network listened and it was the trust that, that they did have the right information or shared degree of insight that was honored, I guess, by the rest of the network, by the rest of the body collective.

The ways that accountability might show up in mycelial networks isn't, I don't think, as easy to see as in a human network. Again, ostensibly as observers, we're just watching how these things operate, ultimately. We can sort of speculate to the end of the days, but we'll never be able to talk to them -- or at least not yet we can't talk to them.

So again, it seems that, you know, you put a piece of food here and the network grows and it sort of finds it, then the rest of the network might start to grow toward that food. So there is this communication and, or there's a, you know, something prohibitive and it'll grow away from that, grow around it. And so there's communication, um, you know, rote, rote survival strategies. Now, if, if somehow the hypha encounters a bad thing and it seemingly is telling you it's a good thing and the network goes there, um, to be hurt or hindered, how is it accountable or held, held accountable? I mean, again, we wouldn't really know. I think there would be some die off, but then there's ultimately just maybe in the long run there's, there's evolution of conversation, internal conversation, you know, "This hypha made a bad mistake earlier on, um, a bunch of our other hyphae died, and let's never do that again."

*[musical interlude]*

**DS:** I'm involved in the movement to abolish prisons and we talk a lot about ways of imagining accountability and justice that are not based in punishment. And it's like our society pretends that we'll be able to make good people by having the threat that will permanently exclude people

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and punish them. And that has not historically been the way that humans have survived, right. Most, like, most human societies that existed on earth didn't have cages -- you know, didn't put a ton of people in cages, couldn't expend the resources to do so, wouldn't have chosen to do so -- and somehow created social connection that made it possible for people to have shared norms about how to treat each other, that also like most human societies haven't had serial killers or serial rapists, or, you know, all the many kinds of problems people go to when they imagine why we need police and prisons. And to think about like, how do animals and plants hold each other accountable is really cool to think about and be accountable. Like how do they, um, build shared norms about collaboration or, yeah, like how do they cooperate in ways that have room for individual experience and also for like a greater good that maybe they're all focused on. It's like, a fun way to think about it. And for me, I just like, just thinking about it like that mushrooms don't have a boss and that they don't have a cop. You know? It's like helpful -- you know, they don't have like a death penalty or prison or like whatever the things are, there's something else going on there. A different principal organizing those relationships -- really interesting.

**PM:** You know, multiple mycelial networks might weave together in the soil, and the waste product of one becomes the food for the next. But that also expands to the entire ecological web where, you know, so much of the work that fungi do paves the way for many of the great cycles of, of any ecosystem in most landscapes, whether it's an Alpine meadow or an old growth forest. And that's through, you know, all their work, all their roles we can talk about, but it just more speaks broadly that the acts of the individuals in the ecosystem, in these broader networks where it's separate culture, separate species and seemingly, you know, distinct cultures, again, it's all about they're still affecting each other. And this is what ecology shows us, that everything is so related in these, these really intact habitats. And so, when you pull out one, you know, keystone species, one keystone relationship, one piece of that puzzle that does something really critical, really unique and is really good at and that's what that culture -- that fungus -- evolved to do, there can be a cascade of deterioration that sometimes we can't even predict, and if it's lost, might not ever be able to recover from. And so it's, again, this is sort of like fundamental ecology, but it's also sort of in my mind sort of fundamental mycology that we need to appreciate them as a species, but it's also when, when I'm appreciating them as species, I'm appreciating the relationships, the connections, the networks, and everything that comes from that.

**DS:** I think it's really useful to think about capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, you know, these systems that were in ableism -- they, they produce like a hierarchy of value. Like who's valuable and who's not. And we, and that is like throughout our society, it's like, oh, changing diapers isn't valuable, driving the bus isn't valuable. But you know, making tech is, whatever. We have these extreme ways that people, some people's, like, labor and time and being are made

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-- their labor is not compensated or they themselves are considered disposable or warehouseable. Or their death doesn't matter, you know.

I mean we saw this so intensely, you've seen this intensely, like during COVID in the sense that like people with disabilities and old people like should just die and no one should ever worry about it, and this kind of thing. And the intensity of black death during COVID and, um, so many other ways in which, um, COVID's deeply uneven rollout shows us the hierarchy of value. And I think that like when you live inside a system that has an extreme hierarchy of value, everybody's afraid of being the ordinary person, you know, everybody's trying to climb to be extraordinary. And this is the capitalism story, you know, be the Oprah, be the Donald Trump, whatever these, you know, we have these figures who were told are, you know, be the Jeff Bezos. We are obsessed with billionaires and how wonderful they are when all they are are the people who are the most efficient extractors and wage stealers often, you know.

In my book about mutual aid, I talk a little bit about like, why we might want to really be cautious about fame, like about the idea that people are trying to get famous as organizers or the story that we have that social change was made by these charismatic figures -- that's the ones whose names you know, who are, you know, the people we should worship and they had the answers. As opposed to the reality that social change often gets narrated about charismatic figures, but in reality it's like tons and tons and tons of bold actions taken by very ordinary people whose names we'll never know - that usually have the most skin in the game -- that leads to the kind of disruption that actually changes and upends harmful systems.

And so this idea that I learned from Buddhism of practicing to be nobody's special, like what's that like internally to just let go of the idea of trying to be special and instead be part of everything and just be like, wow, what if everything, what if there isn't a hierarchy of value?

And there's also an idea that I've learned from similar teachers about no hierarchy of moments. Like what if all the time in my life is equally valuable and it's really valuable to be like driving this person to visit their loved one in prison, and that's not better or worse than going to Disneyland or whatever the, you know, capitalism has told me it should be my fantasy of what will give me pleasure and fun. And so like really changing our idea about what's pleasurable and really changing our idea about when like kind of stopping chasing the highest that capitalism tells us to chase. Like that I want to be the one with the perfect body or the perfect vacation or whatever the story is, a perfect wedding, you know, and instead, just really being in the reality of, of ordinary life and that our lives are deeply collective experiences in which we are products of conditions that we're living in. And we can only change those conditions in cooperation with a lot of other people who we will never meet, you know? And in coordination with others and being like, what's the set of skills I need to move with others deliberately instead of the skills I need to distinguish myself on social media or to just, you know, like, and then also like to see how fame

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is really, really, really harmful in social movements and I mean just in the world. Like how, you know, the me too movement -- it's all these spaces in which we can see that people who become, you know, kind of have unchecked power, inevitably use it for abusing others and, and often harming themselves. And so how could we become suspicious and disinterested in fame and really interested in like maximum inclusion of the most people into all the processes, you know? And so it's, it's really like a, it's a rejection of hierarchy, which obviously is something I talk about all the time, but I think there's a specific set of, um, seductions that people experience around like being known in social movements or having their group be known that really go south pretty fast, um, and, you know, break relationships, break connections, make the work lose its ethics, make it become exclusive, um, make it become like less honest than it can be.

Yeah, so I feel like that's like a -- I think it is very useful to look at the plant and animal realm. And certainly humans make we, we project that certain plants and animals are more charismatic, are more important, but what we see again and again -- like for me, talking to people who are much deeper in the world of ecology -- it's like, you know, when humans take out just one predator or you know, just one species is impacted by an insecticide or whatever, everything can become, you know, really distorted. And I think that we live in a human world that's like that where we have, um, you know, said that certain people are not worthwhile and that certain people are disposable and it, it produces and cultivates, like a distortion that actually harms everyone, even though, you know, it harms those people.

**PM:** Bringing fungi mycology, um, and all that it offers more central to our discussions, or day to day discussions or problem solving discussions in whatever realm, is certainly going to be increasingly occurring. Because of the rise of mycology and increasing popularity I think it's just inevitable. but it's something I've also promoted as a notion for a long time, because it's something we know so little about. And it's kind of one of the last areas for, for exploring our possibilities and our, and our options. You know, in some sense, especially as it comes to sciences and the natural sciences and thinking outside the box. It's one of the things I really like about mycology is that it's one of the least explored sciences and probably one of the least, if not the least, explored natural sciences. Relative to, you know, if we want to put numbers, we only have named and classify about 2% of the roughly 2 million fungal species. So we've only barely named any -- we hardly understand their ecology, their application for bettering human society, and our treatment of the environment. We know so little, so there's a lot there.

Mycology is one of the few sciences that actually invites and needs the amateur. We, we know so little, we have very few practicing professional mycologists, we need amateurs to just go out and try. And there's so much we don't know. So it's, it's very open and inviting in a way which is nice and kind of brings back more collaboration and the modern mycological movement, the microculture as I like to call it, it is very much, you know, in its own way -- through like Facebook or things like social media -- becoming an online, especially, you know, social network, um,

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distribute network, mycelial network of collaborations, sharing information, trying to move this science forward, expanding the ideas and the topics. And my work has tried to do that more through, um, you know, my book came as an outcome of holding large gatherings that were meant to do just this -- to not so much teach the skills, but to build a culture and a community around this topic that when I was a kid and learned, it was completely taboo, none of my friends or family cared about it, and I had to persevere because I thought it was interesting and eventually found other people that felt the same way after many years.

**DS:** I feel like so much of my life's work is, is that I want people to see what's supposed to not be seen. You know, it's like, capitalism, the nation state, these are spells we are under that tell you not to notice what's right in front of you and to believe that like your trip to Disneyland is going to make your life good. You know, like it's like, there's something -- or to believe that you're disconnected from others or to feel numb about people being unhoused in your neighborhood, or to, just to be turned off and not see, like, to not see the role of prison in your life, even if you're not in prison or whatever.

And so, the idea of seeing what we've been told is disgusting or slimy -- in the case of mushrooms -- or, you know, it's interesting to me how the people I know have these strong feelings about mushrooms, even to like eat them or whatever. I mean, I love this critique of expertise in this call for, like, ordinary people to study mycelium networks. I think so much of what mutual aid is -- and it relates to this question about like mutual aid disaster relief -- it's like, you know, the disaster comes and it's like, "Isn't the power company gonna come help us? Isn't FEMA going to show up?" And it's like, we see again and again, no, FEMA will show up late and only give like loans to homeowners and like nothing to unhoused people and tenants.

And, um, you know, the Red Cross -- all of these groups that we think are supposed to solve our problems, the utility company -- they're not prepared. The state is actually organized to like help PG and E be too big to fail and be able to set California on fire and have nobody, you know, be able to seek any redress, you know. The systems that be are actually causing the disasters we're living through, including ecological disaster, they're not solving them. And when the state shows up during a disaster, it usually brings militarized responses that quickly shoot and imprison the same people that are already targeted. So I am of course thinking of the recent anniversary of hurricane Katrina -- but you know, we see that again and again. And what it turns out is that in the face of acute disasters, the thing that's most effective is people knowing their neighbors, knowing who on this block lives in a really high story apartment and you know, doesn't have the ability to get down if the elevator goes out because there's no power, knowing who has a medical device that needs to be charged if there's no power and who else has a solar battery. Like that's the kind of stuff that saves people's lives is like existing relationships, existing connections that usually comes from having been doing the non-acute disaster emergency, um,



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a mutual aid. The work that people are always doing for the ongoing disasters of capitalism and white supremacy and lack of childcare and criminalization.

You brought up Occupy earlier. At least in my experiences, a lot of people who came and lived in Occupy encampments and it was their first political activity, then went on to keep doing amazing stuff in their cities for years. You know, they learned about, um, why we hate the police. They learned about, like, what was going on with unhoused people in their city, they became part of other things because of that first exposure. And I think that that is something I'm hoping about COVID mutual aid projects. Cause there's been a huge explosion of mutual aid and kind of the idea sort of mainstreamed during this period. And ideally all people who practice trying out a COVID mutual aid project will then be like, "Oh yeah, the crisis -- like I found out even more about how in my neighborhood there already are all these problems with poverty and criminalization and lack of childcare and lack of health care. And like, I can keep working on things about that no matter what's going on with COVID because that helped me actually understand the conditions I was living in better and what it's like to collaborate with others and to not wait for experts to save us.

**PM:** I think as we become increasingly dominated in our day-to-day lives through technology, if we're not already overwhelmed and inundated by way too much, is the perhaps often said but not as commonly enacted need to return to nature. There is a study, an aspect of psychology called eco psychology, which, um, has looked at the effect of removing humans, civilized humans, and industrially, civilized humans, or however you want to phrase it -- uh, city dwellers, perhaps -- from the city and the benefits of them returning to nature and all the effects on the psychology and the reduction of stress and things, plus many other benefits. Um, so that's, that's a field well studied. Um, my friend coined the term a long time ago, micro psychology. So it goes back to this notion of how do we, when we integrate with fungi, you know, what benefits can be found there? This is what I've explored quite a bit throughout my book. And we've intuited sort of these deeper senses, these feelings, these ways I've seen them, the things that have moved me about it. And, you know, in as much as I try to write about it and try to inspire, I also at the same time, try to leave space open for interpretation and re-interpretation of these concepts that I'm trying to put forward for the conversation to evolve.

**DS:** It's helpful to remember what's natural, you know, like since we live in a society in which we're told that, um, greed and hierarchy and competition is natural and that is so obviously not true. It's really helpful to remember that we can look to other organisms in our world and see how success and aliveness come through cooperation, and that's just always good to be reminded of.

*[musical interlude]*

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**DV:** *The Last Stand* runs from Thursdays to Sundays starting at 8am through 6pm from September 18 – October 10, 2021 in Brooklyn's Prospect Park. Creative Time projects are free and open to the public. No tickets or advance registration is required. Visit [creativetime.org](http://creativetime.org) for more information.

This podcast series is produced by Patrick Smith. The music in this podcast is an excerpt from *The Last Stand* by Kamala Sankaram.