



Library podcast

Someday We'll All Be Free: Patrisse Cullors and Luis Rodriguez - Part 2

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[00:00:35] This podcast is being presented in two parts. You are listening to part 2.

[00:00:41] So real quick before we interview these young folk— we about to have a little conversation with them. Just want to introduce ya'll to some folk that I've been rockin' with. If my bro Wesley can come up here. I just want to introduce— first I'll introduce the sister to the right of me.

[00:00:55] Nikita Oliver. Can ya'll make some noise for Nikita Oliver [applause]. Prior to April, I mean she— she got a new intro now because you've got to say, you know, she ran for mayor with the People's Party. Should've won.

[00:01:12] Obviously a teaching artist. She is an educator, a poet, a singer, a rapper, a friend.

[00:01:20] An auntie, OK? This is a dope human being. She helped raise me since I was a young person. She's been doing this work continuously since she first got here by way of Gary, Indiana. I mean Indianapolis, Indiana. I think she really from Gary though.

[00:01:37] Aaron Counts, who's a poet and fiction writer. Aaron are you in the room today? [applause] There you are. He's also a member. He is a author of the poetry collection *Strange Tongued Names* and the lead engagement artist with Creative Justice which uses art as one of the vehicles to keep youth out of jail, and it's a different concept of justice. His empowerment curriculum is taught in jails and prisons around the Northwest. [applause]

[00:02:06] I want to make some noise for a bruh, Delton Mosby.

[00:02:12] Hey so Delton Mosby. Seattle based painter and poet, a writer and musician. In 2009 he published and released an album titled *Middle Child*. He also appeared as a guest writer providing the forward for Keith B. Wheeler's book which is titled *Hope*; H-O-P-E helping others pursue excellence.

His fascination with the Harlem Renaissance era has driven his approach to visual art. He self-describes as a healing artist. [applause]

[00:02:46] As you can see we like to give people applause in here so you are going to be cool with clapping for people, OK? Got to make some noise for bruh Jo-Jo who is the photographer. Whose documentary work showcases the street and its lifestyle and a dedicated youth mentor and community builder for many years. Brad, a.k.a. Jo-Jo, is responsible for launching two young artists movements.

[00:03:12] You're gonna have to help me pronounce this one: [unintelligible].

[00:03:16] [unintelligible]. Say it one more time real loud. Can ya'll three say it one more time?

[00:03:22] Word up. In Seattle Youth Speaks he regularly conducts workshops and presentations in partnership with area youth art based organizations and teaches social photography at Seattle Central College. Y'all make some noise for the teaching artist. [applause]

[00:03:43] So we gonna have a quick little conversation real quick. It's gonna be us though, alright? We gonna have a conversation with the Creative Justice youth but they ain't here. [unintelligible] They ain't even here, you feel me? OK?

[00:03:57] So tell me this yo.

[00:04:00] How was the experience either creating the video with this art? How was that expression? How was it to be able to get your experience and illustrate it either on a beat or with art?

[00:04:12] How was that process for y'all?

[00:04:17] I felt free. You know? I felt as if I had the stance. I was the star. You know, I felt as if I was not only being like listened to but like I actually had like a crowd who like wanted to hear me, you know? Not just like "I'm tuning in" but like "I'm actually standing here paying attention to you. You're like the highlight of, you know, you're like exactly what I want to see" you know, I liked that. I like that I have the floor and people are looking to see what's next from me, you know? Because they want to see what I got, you know? [applause]

[00:05:06] Jasmine kind of hit on what I was gonna say. Basically like, I just felt like— I mean I wasn't on none of the music or nothing but like I felt heard. Like I don't really like— I don't really feel like I like do things publicly like I don't really like— It's like if it was my choice I'm not really gonna be in the spotlight. So like, it just kind of did feel like good and different to be like the highlight of something, you know?

[00:05:40] Word up. You hear they said that. They are walking— [applause]—They are walking voluntarily into a potentially uncomfortable situation. One, with the vulnerability of their art. And then two, with being here today. Ya'll recognize that? [applause]

[00:05:58] Alright I got one more question, OK?

[00:06:01] And you know my bro [unintelligible] is going to answer one of these. Yeah. Anything you need them to know. So whatever's on your mind, your heart. Free flow. What do you need these folks to know?

[00:06:13] So when I do my art it's just interesting and it makes me feel better to be able to put something down and not have to have a conversation, you know? Like being able to just put something out there without having to say anything, you know, just letting people's minds grasp what they're looking at and, you know, put it into their own perspective and then starting a conversation from that. That's what I like about when I do my art. [applause]

[00:06:45] I feel like— because like I just want all you guys to know that like just because certain people don't like being like— like everybody has a voice no matter what their age is, no matter what their gender is, their color, like everybody has a voice. And no matter how high in power you are no matter how low in power you are everybody can say something valuable and everybody opinion should be valued. [applause]

[00:07:18] So just because like they don't have the upper hand in the situation. They still should be looked at as if they do when they speak. [applause]

[00:07:33] While the Creative Justice young folk are on their way to their seat and my man Wesley's coming back up so we can introduce Luis, can you tell somebody to your left or right how amazing they are? So clap it up as they're going back to their seats and tell somebody how amazing they are. [applause]

[00:08:02] Thank you very much Creative Justice, one more round of applause. One more. Just one more please. [applause] Free the youth. And mass incarceration please. Before I bring our keynote up to the stage I want to give a big shout out to Elliott Bay Book Company. That's you over there. How are you doing? We see you.

[00:08:24] They have selections from our keynote, Luis J. Rodriguez.

[00:08:26] Luis is the award winning author of the memoir *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.* He has 14 other books in poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and children's literature. His latest books are a memoir, *It Calls You Back: An Odyssey Through Love, Addiction, Revolutions and Healing*, and a book of poems, *Borrowed Bones*. For over 40 years, Luis has dedicated himself to urban peace, gang truces and healing work among the most traumatized and troubled communities. He has 37 years of working in prisons, juvenile lockups, and jails. He's also traveled around the US to speak, do

poetry, and facilitate workshops on Hearts and Hands, creating community in violent times. His work has also taken him to Canada, Mexico, Central America, South America, the Caribbean, Europe and Japan. He's the founding editor of Tia Chucha Press and co-founder of Tia Chucha's Centro Cultural bookstore in Los Angeles. He is presently a script consultant for the FX TV show *Snowfall* co-created by John Singleton and teaches creative writing in two maximum security yards every Monday at California State Prison Lancaster. Tia Chucha Press is now releasing an anthology of poetry from abandoned girls of our little Rose's home in San Pedro Sula, Honduras where Luis spent a month last November counting time like people count stars. Without further ado please welcome Luis J. Rodriguez. [applause]

[00:10:02] So... I'm so honored to be here. And yes we did come from some fires— I want to first of all introduce my wife Trini who's the real person that makes the Tia Chucha's Cultural Center happen. And— [applause]

[00:10:20] But we came from these fires as you may have heard. We were two miles from one of the three fires in L.A. which have been somewhat contained. The Ventura County fire's still going on. But in that fire right where we were at, a hundred and twenty thousand people had to evacuate their homes, 40 homes were burned and thirty eight thousand acres I think were burned or were burned.

[00:10:43] That's just one of the fires. But I'm going to talk about a even greater fire. Because we were talking about these wildfires but we have a fire in our community. And it's manmade. And we call it mass incarceration. But to me it's not just the people behind bars, it's the imprisonment before we even get there.

[00:11:10] Our communities are already in prison before they even go behind bars.

[00:11:15] It's the prison seen and unseen that we need to address. Because there's a lot of gateways to prisons and I've seen all of them. Poverty is one of the biggest gateways to prison. Addictions, social injustice, you can go down the line.

[00:11:32] The poorest people in this land live behind prisons; reservations, ghettos, barrios, migrant camps, you can name them all. Trailer parks. We live in prisons before we end up in the prisons and that's why it's so hard to go after just mass incarceration unless you also try to include the poverty and the diminishment and the lack of jobs and the lack of social resources that allow us not to go there.

[00:12:03] You have to bring it all in. And to me this is why this is an important topic because if we're going to abolish mass incarceration and policing we're going to have to abolish poverty. [applause] We're going to have to abolish the things that are shackling us from living full complete— [inaudible]

[00:12:27] One of the key things I was hoping— This is why it's important for the art and the young people to speak and do their art because art to me is one of the keys to all prisons. You know what I'm saying? It's one of the liberating tools to get rid of all prisons. And yet who supports arts in our

schools? Very little. Who has arts in our communities? We happen to have a cultural center that does all the arts.

[00:12:52] We have music, dance, theater, writing. We have all kinds of beautiful open mics. Every Friday we have poetry, people playing guitar. We have a literacy and arts festival. Guess what. We're the only place like that and the only bookstore for half a million people in this section of L.A. that we're in. Half a million people. There's no bookstore, no movie houses, nothing. Not even movie houses in the so-called entertainment capital of the world: L.A.

[00:13:20] Because we live in the poor neighborhoods. Poor, working class, mostly black and brown. So the poverty is already ingrained in us and also the poverty of spirit is the worst part of it.

[00:13:33] Material poverty is one thing. But the worst part is when your own spirit is completely impoverished.

[00:13:40] And this is why we have to do the song and we have to do the music and we have to do the dance and we have to do the poetry.

[00:13:47] This is why. Because we're not going to lose our spirit to poverty and we're not going to lose our spirit to mass incarceration and we're not going to lose our spirit to all these corporations who have decided that we're not even human enough to be given the dignity of a human mind and a human heart. So to me it's getting back to some basics and I will start with a little bit about my story, but not too much because I want to get back to this story about mass incarceration, where we're at. How many people know what Mexicans are? Who Mexicans are? Are we immigrants? Exactly. I don't know how many times I've argued this with people, and this is not making this up, this is not hyperbole, this is fact. My mother's [unintelligible] native from the state of Chihuahua, Mexico. She was born in the Chihuahua desert that also goes into parts of the U.S. Parts of El Paso, parts of Texas, New Mexico. So when I was born we lived in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico.

[00:14:53] We only went from our land to our land. And people don't see it that way. If I have brown skin, I'm native to this land. [applause] The border has only been there for 150 years.

[00:15:13] That border that people call now the border. And I will have to tell you that borders to me are a big illusion that we've been hanging on to. It's all made up.

[00:15:23] There is no borders. When you go up to space and look down on Earth, do you see those patterns and the state lines and those border lines? Do you see all those different colors for all the way we— our maps are in schools? You don't see any of that. You see a green, white, blue Earth that we're all in.

[00:15:41] And I want to speak as a native person because my mother [unintelligible] and I really appreciate Wesley and the song. I'm going to speak as a native person. One time my mother had died. I was really sad.

[00:15:55] But I went to an indigenous elders meeting in Hawaii. Hilo, Hawaii. Tribes from all over the world were there. We were sitting there and I was talking to an elder— Samoan elder and I mentioned my mother dying and he said something that I will never forget. He said “Was it sad? It happens. But guess what. Your mother's not dead. Our Mother Earth is always here. We always have our mother. There's no orphans in this world. Everybody has a mother. That mother's still there.”

[00:16:27] And guess what Mother Earth does. It acknowledges you when nobody else acknowledges you. It doesn't care if you're LGBT, doesn't care if you've been to prison, doesn't care if you've been a heroin addict, doesn't care if you suffered or poor. It accepts you, welcomes you every time you step on that Earth it welcomes you.

[00:16:45] It doesn't care what color, doesn't care what religion, it accepts everybody and that's the kind of world we need to align to now. That's the kind of world we got to say we're going to build because if we don't have a vision it's not about just stopping something. It's not just about abolishing something. It's about a vision for something else.

[00:17:05] And that's what we've got to have a vision for: a world in which everybody is acknowledged and everybody's welcome. And there is no borders that divide us and there is no division based on race or belief system or anything else that people come up with because it's all made up. I'll tell you something about the system: it makes everything up.

[00:17:24] White supremacy. There's no such thing. And I'll tell you something else. All you white people. There is no such thing as white people. You might be Irish, you might be German, you might be Jewish, you might be all kinds of things.

[00:17:37] There's no such thing as white people. It was all made up. And people walk around making things up as they go. Now we got a whole government that's all made up. Run by a guy that made up everything. So fighting for truth has become a cause. It's become a subversive act to be about truth now. We don't even know what's truth anymore because there's fake news here, fake news there. And guess what. I believe all of it is fake news.

[00:18:06] And yet at the same time I do know there's truth. And we carry that truth and our truth has to be our cause and we have to be about acts of truth everywhere now. And this is an act of truth. This event is an act of truth and not just truth but acts of beauty.

[00:18:22] That's what art is. That we do three things in this world and that's to create more truth, more beauty, and more decency in this world. That's what we need to do. This is a moral imperative that we end the mass incarceration system, that we end the policing system, and that we end the poverty and the gateway to get us into that system. That's a moral imperative.

[00:18:43] This is what Jesus Christ was about. If you believe in Jesus Christ or not. This is what Muhammad was about, this is what Native peoples have been about.

[00:18:50] This is what it's always been about. And if nobody understands that they don't get the spiritual end of the religion. Because most religions don't get spiritual ends anyway.

[00:19:01] But spirituality is in everything. You don't have to go to a church— or power to you if you do— but you don't have to go to church.

[00:19:11] You carry the church in you. You're the temple of energy that makes change in this world. And we don't teach that to our kids. We don't teach them that they have the energy to change everything now.

[00:19:22] They are the geniuses themselves. Einstein's not the only genius in the world.

[00:19:29] He's a smart guy and guess what. He's a certain kind of genius but everybody is a genius in their own way. How many times do we teach that to our kids?

[00:19:37] I wasn't taught that. And I tell you this because I've been at this a long time. I'm an old guy. But guess what. When people say the future belongs to young people the future belongs to young people with older people like me standing next to them.

[00:19:52] We're not just gonna push the youth up there and say "you do it." Let's work with them. And we don't need to lead them, let the youth lead. But I'm gonna stand right next to them. They got to know that people like me have been there and can help and we can guide. But guess what. The youth can lead.

[00:20:10] Many years ago when I was young, I lived in a neighborhood and I want to introduce this really quick book called *From Trouble to Triumph*. People who read it always want to know about my neighborhood called Las Lomas.

[00:20:21] The Hills. It was the poorest neighborhood in L.A. County when I lived there. People don't understand what it's like so I decided to do a book with pictures from that neighborhood with the way it used to be. Now it's all gentrified.

[00:20:35] People died for this neighborhood.

[00:20:38] Cops killed people. I lost four friends by the time I was 18 years old by cops, unarmed killed by police. I lost 25 friends by heroin addictions, to gang murders, to all kinds of things and I wanted to tell the story of these guys. Five guys from my neighborhood who survived. 20 year heroin addicts, 30 years in prison, all kinds of issues and now they're free and now they're no longer addicted and now they're helping others. And guess what. There's a so-called enemy in here. A guy from Sonora. You know those people are still at worry, even though the neighborhood's gentrified.

[00:21:07] They still come back and do drive-bys. And I met with my friend. Because his son got killed. And he wasn't my friend, he shot at me when we were growing up.

[00:21:20] But I called him up. My son was in prison. His son had just got killed. I said "we've got to talk" and we had dinner together. Me and him. Enemies.

[00:21:27] You know I'm saying? Enemies. And we had dinner and we had a talk and we had to say this is wrong.

[00:21:33] We've got to stop this nonsense. We've got to stop this madness. We've got to stop our kids dying for nothing and give them something to die for. Because if you know what you're going to die for, then you're going to live for that. You're going to live a big life because you're going to die a big death. You understand what I'm saying? Kids are dying for nothing now. For nothing! Suicides, drugs, heroin overdoses, all these problems that we're dealing with. They're dying for nothing.

[00:22:00] We're all gonna die. Die for something big because you know why? You live a big life trying to get there. And that's what's important to me because when I was a kid I wanted to die so badly and I did everything I could to die.

[00:22:14] I took all the drugs. I started doing heroin at 12 years old. I went to the gang at eleven years old. I went and got a gun. Somebody gave me a gun, I went and shot people. I've been—stabbed people.

[00:22:26] I did everything I could to destroy this body because it had no value in my mind. I decided it wasn't worth anything because teachers were telling me "you're never going to amount to anything" and I believed them. And their schools didn't even have books. We didn't have pencils, we didn't have paper. This wasn't that long ago. And we were punished for speaking Spanish and Spanish is a colonial language and I'm fighting for my Spanish and they still punish me for it, you know? [laughter]

[00:22:56] I joined a gang because it was the only thing I knew to do. And because they were gonna die for a blaze of glory, for that piece of land. I said, "I want to die for that. I want to die for this barrio. That's the only thing worth anything."

[00:23:11] And I remember I used to go to all these funerals and I used to think "man, that must be the happiest day of that person's life." What happens in funerals? Everybody's crying, everybody loves you.

[00:23:26] Your moms are crying, your girlfriends, girls you didn't even know liked you are crying and your pop shows up and you have never see him in your life.

[00:23:33] Your pa shows up for your funeral. Like man, that must be the best day. I want a funeral just like that. I did everything I could to die and it wasn't in the cards as they say. I used to stand in the street corners. Come get me like a pandejo as we say in the neighborhood, you know? I didn't care, I

wasn't scared. People would shoot. I've been shot at half a dozen times. As a teenager, forget as an adult— I've been shot as an adult too but as a teenager. I O.D.'ed on heroin three times and got pissed off when they would get me and try to watch me and wake me up and keep me up. I was so pissed off that I wasn't dying.

[00:24:09] Everybody was dying but I wasn't dying. I'll tell you a story. I was homeless in the streets of L.A. at 15, on heroin. I had a 22 handgun and I would use it to mug people but also to protect me. And I didn't trust anybody. I would never sleep with anybody else and I would never sleep in the same place twice.

[00:24:29] I found an abandoned car, I found an abandoned building. The L.A. River, the concrete river— I was up and down that river. I knew all the cubby holes, I knew all the places to sleep and I knew not to—

[00:24:40] I don't mind hanging with the homeless or poor people or heroin addicts during the day but at night I don't trust anybody. And then I was walking downtown and I noticed this beautiful big building and I walked in there. You know what it was? It was that central downtown library. There was this amazing library. This place like this.

[00:25:01] I walked in there and there was all these amazing books and nobody gave me a book and I barely understood how to read because I was barely getting English and I ate those books up. I read every book I could read, you understand?

[00:25:14] My favorite book was Charlotte's Web, if you can imagine, you know? Because I never could read a book and also see the pictures. And then a librarian put these special kind of books up. This is in the 60s. The black on black experience books. Malcolm X. James Baldwin. Claude Brown. Piri Thomas. All these writers were writing books and I was eating them up.

[00:25:42] They were changing my life and I knew that Malcolm X was in Harlem on the other side of town but he was living my life. And he said books shaped his life.

[00:25:51] Somebody said books saved their life. And I wanted to believe that so bad. Because part of the problem is a lot of our friends and a lot of our people, nothing stops them.

[00:26:05] I was fortunate. Been going to prisons, like was mentioned, for 37 years. I don't work for the prisons, I don't work for the Department of Corrections, I go there on my own or I get invited. Because my book is always really very popular in prisons. People know who I am. I have great audiences all over the country, not just California.

[00:26:25] I'm all over the place. I've been to institutions here in Washington state. And one of the things that happens is, you know, prisons— people read books and they do art and they do poetry.

[00:26:40] And I wanna be in there so I can help bring this out to show people the humanity of people and where they're at. And it's very important to know that prison can stop your spirit but doesn't have to kill it. And right now I'm [unintelligible], maybe 20-30 guys, two different max security prisons. And the first group, just so you know, is made up of guys that are willing to program. Christians and Muslims and other good people but they are lifers and not going anywhere. Many of them live without possibility of parole. Some of them have already been there 40 years. But they wanted to do writing and poetry and I'm teaching them, we're having a great time with them. But the next yard, it's the general population yard. They— that population yard never had any program 'til a year ago when I first started that class. Now they have a lot of programming. But before there was nothing. Nothing was there for them. And they told me nobody's gonna sign up, nobody's gonna want to do anything there. They got so much programming because everybody's signing up. They're signing up for my work class but also others. And I'm just not teaching creative writing.

[00:27:44] I'm teaching creative thinking and creative living. Things that they need to know so they can grasp it in the prison or when they get out. And so I'm sitting there with all these guys, I've been already going over a year, I've been going there over 10 years and I'll just tell you a funny story: I was going there for 10 years and the prison threw me out. They didn't like what I was doing. The warden changed and they brought me back in. I'm still doing the same thing. So I'm working with these guys. And this group, you know, half black and half brown. Half Chicano, half black. All the Chicanos are tattooed everywhere, face, everything. You know, the black guys too but they're all— They're all tough guys— and I tell my wife, you walk in there you would be probably scared to death. I'm sitting there in the very end and all these guys are sitting around, with their writing. They're kicking ass with their poetry.

[00:28:36] And they just needed an opportunity to be given that says “you can be expressive, you can evoke your life, and you can find a way to examine your life” because they need that too.

[00:28:47] They need those tools. And so I'm working with these guys. And now we're going to do something amazing at Tia Chuchas. We got a grant from the Art for Justice grant. Have you guys ever heard of this? It's a new grant. This lady with money, I don't know anything about her, but she had a Lichtenstein painting. I don't know anything about this because that's not my side of the world. But she sold that painting for 160 million dollars and then she put one hundred million of that into this Art for Justice campaign. And the whole Art for Justice thing is to change the narrative and reality of mass incarceration. That's the only reason it exists. And we got this funding because of the work that I'm doing and the work that Tia Chuchas is doing in the community. We serve 15,000 people there and we work from kids all the way to elderly, and we also work with formerly incarcerated and incarcerated and young people, and we're going to combine it all to help change that reality. But again the key to me is to remember to tell people it's not just the prisons behind bars. We have to change the reality of all the gateways that lead us into prisons. And that's going to have to be where art— and I'm gonna end with this. And what I wanted to tell the story—

[00:30:11] One of the stories of what saved me. What stopped me from wanting to be in a funeral all the time, what stopped me from wanting to die. I was 16 years old and somebody opened up a little

culture center, community center in my barrio. Who had this crazy idea, I have no idea. There was nothing there ever. And they were going to open it, a grand opening, and the night before they had the grand opening, I broke into the building and graffitied all the walls. I was a big graffiti artist but it was all gang related, you know. But it was quite elaborate. It wasn't tagging, it was a lot of elaborate lettering and images. I was doing a lot of work. I even put my [unintelligible] in. You know what a [unintelligible] is? My gang— I was known as Chin, because when I was 9 years old somebody jumped me and broke my— and fractured my jaw. Didn't break it all but the fracture and the growth and it pushed my jaw over.

[00:31:04] To this day I only have three places— [inaudible]. Ten years old I got jumped. And when— [inaudible]

[00:31:12] The kids— girls called me monkey. Everybody made fun of me but guess who embraced it. The gang. And they called me Chin. That became my gang. And so my parents, who had some money, were trying to fix this. I said, "I don't want to be fixed. I'm Chin." I should have said get a fix. But that's how it was. So anyway I'm sitting there and I'm doing this graffiti.

[00:31:32] The next day they're having a grand opening, they open the doors and they see it, and they fall out. They can't believe that somebody's graffitied all the walls.

[00:31:39] And then I show up because I want to see my handiwork, you know. And then they go, "You know what? He's here. Arrest him."

[00:31:47] And they just hired a youth worker and they told the guy, "hold him. Call the cops." That guy did hold me but I'll tell you what he did. And I'll have to make a long story short.

[00:31:59] He didn't call the cops. He became my mentor and teacher.

[00:32:06] He got a stupid, young kid wanting to die and told him that he was an artist. "You have art in you dude." I had no idea what he's talking about.

[00:32:16] And he showed me this book of Mexican murals. I never knew anything about it. The big muralists; Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco, all those murals but also at the very end of the book was all these Mayan temples and how the Mayan temples had murals in and outside the building. Beautiful art. They were artists, every one of them.

[00:32:36] Because at least indigenous people knew; to be a complete human being meant to be a complete artist. They understood that. [applause]

[00:32:45] He gave me a dream. He gave me a seed of a dream that I could be an artist and I'd say changed my life.

[00:32:53] The next year I painted eight murals. I stopped heroin for a little while. And I even went back to school. I had dropped out. My arrangement was that I would go back to school, he would teach me murals, I did that, that was my word. We have in the neighborhood what we call *palabra*. Gotta be your word. And you know what?

[00:33:14] I got my high school diploma. [applause] And I also learned to be a writer and an artist and to fight for it everywhere I go. It's like one of the guys in prison says "from the day you start to the day you depart, you have to be about art." And I believe in that. And I want to end with one last thing. You heard of scared straight? I wasn't scared, they couldn't straighten me out by scaring me. I was cared straight. And that's what we need and that's what's gonna change everything.

[00:33:49] Thank you all very much. Thank you. [applause]

[00:34:07] No you can't. Now you can though. Y'all make some noise one more time for bruh Luis. [applause]

[00:34:16] So bruh Luis, I've got just a couple of questions for you. We have a very diverse, beautiful audience tonight. Peace bruh Dom. Ya'll make some noise for Dominique Davis by the way. [applause] Community passageways.

[00:34:29] And that's actually one of the questions that I have interest in, so coach Dom, if you've got a minute. For people that are in here that are organizers, where the self identified and maybe community identified organizers in the room? We're the organizers that do organize towards ending incarceration with, either in the prisons, outside the prisons, abolition, where are the organizers that work in that? Maybe call y'all out. [applause]

[00:34:57] So for the people in here that are organizers, do you have any insight in regards to whether the connection between art and this work of abolition and anti-incarceration as well as maybe just some insight in regards to unifying our movement.

[00:35:14] Let me just add that maybe don't use art as an appendage to the movement, make it integral to the movement.

[00:35:22] You understand what I'm saying? Some people, they do all this organizing and then they have a little concert or some event at the end like that's going to help. But guess what. Every [unintelligible] should be creative. The way out of chaos is not order. It's creativity. Creativity is the next stage. The constant state. [applause] And then we just have one other thing. For Native peoples creativity is related to the feminine energy. And we need to have feminine energy in our lives and conscious feminine energy because what leads is not the masculine, it is the feminine. the feminine energy is the constant, the male masculine energy is the variable. And what we do is we serve the feminine. That's what kind masculine energy does. That's what we do. We have to serve the creative imaginative part of you. And then you know that you can plan the rest of it. There's nothing wrong with organizing because that's the organizing principle, masculine energy.

[00:36:13] We need the generative energy before that starts. And that's what the feminine and the creativity is all about. [applause]

[00:36:24] Beautiful beautiful. Thank you. And where are our youth at? Where the young folk at? And if I say youth, ya'll know what I'm talking about. You know when you're a youth. Where the youth at? So can you give a message to the youth as well?

[00:36:38] Well we have a youth group called Young Warriors. They're made up mostly of young ladies right now, young women.

[00:36:46] We want them warriors because warriors are different than soldiers and warriors are creative, expressive, powerful, authoritative human beings. You carry your own authority. You don't have to get it from anybody else. You have to own your life. You can't turn it over to anybody else or anything else. Get knowledge, get awareness, get connected. But remember you are authentic and that means you have authority, you're the author of your own life. That's where all the authoring and that authority and authenticity come in. And I just want to say one last thing because I probably will need to end this, but you should know that besides me getting away from— I was in juvenile hall, I was in jails, I was in adult facilities, I was on heroin for seven years. I got out of all that because of the help I got but the terrible thing is I have an older son and many people know this.

[00:37:39] His name is Ramiro Rodriguez. This book is a sequel to *Always Running. It Calls You Back*. Because the madness called me back and it took the form of my son. My son joined a gang in Chicago. My child got into shootings and drugs. At 17, he started his first prison term. He ended up doing 15 years from the age of 17 to 35. My son fell right into the very traps that I was trying to avoid.

[00:38:05] And you need to know it will happen to you unless we change those conditions and those situations that our kids fall into. They are not criminals. They are not bad people. They are people who have been funneled through a system that says, "you've got nothing to contribute. You're poor. You can't go to war. You've got nothing to do here. Guess what. We'll find something for you to do. We've got a place for you in prison."

[00:38:29] And that's what happened to my son. But I will say one thing. He's been out of prison for seven years and now he's changed completely.

[00:38:35] He's crime free, drug free, and gang free. And now he's mentoring the youth group and he's back living with us. And he's doing really good. So you know one important thing: Change is possible. Change is everything. Don't accept the idea that people can't change. I have seen it over— I've seen in my life, my son's life, and all the people in prisons that I work with. Change is what we do and don't ever let anybody tell you otherwise. [applause] Luis Rodriguez, ya'll make some noise. [applause]

[00:39:18] Bruh Luis mentioned the feminine energy and that's actually something I want to just bring into this space right now and focus us on. A lot of times we talk about incarceration, we talk about prisons, we think about black males, we think about Latino males. But y'all know that there is a huge amount of young ladies being over disciplined in the school system and being led into the school to prison pipeline as well. Do ya'll know that? So if you did not acknowledge that and understand that it's our sisters as well, our mothers, our aunties, our little cousins that are also being prosecuted and hurt by this criminal injustice system, y'all understand that. And with the interests of that...

[00:39:57] I want to bring up one of my mentors, someone that I look up to, that has shown me the example of vulnerability and shown me what it really means to speak from the heart. I want to bring up my big sister K.T., who was a proud anti-racist organizer with the Village of Hope and a powerful spoken word artist and storyteller. She uses her words to share insights into the deep wounds that prisons cause and honors the love of her family and community. Her story was a part of the 2016 installation of Patrice Cullors' Power: From the Mouths of the Occupied. I bring to you Miss Karen Taylor, a.k.a. K.T. Ya'll make some noise. [applause]

[00:40:53] Thanks. Hi everybody. It's an honor to be here. This is my niece, Chloe. I'm bringing her up here with me so she can— she got Plato all over thanks to Davida. But I have a piece, a spoken word piece that I want to share with you.

[00:41:13] So here we go.

[00:41:15] How are you gonna suppress— How are you going to suppress me? You can't suppress me. You can't tell me how to be me. You can't tell me how to feel. After all this stuff going on in society today. You can't tell me how to be. You don't know me. You don't feel what I feel inside of me. The rage, the agony, the fury building and mounting in me that I try to keep hidden because you don't understand me.

[00:41:40] You have never accepted me. You have never allowed me to be me. When is it OK for me to be a black woman? A black queen. When is it OK for me to scream, and to cry, and to shout, and to wail, and to moan about everything that is going on around me? Everything that you're doing to me. How you mistreat me, how you separate me and put me to the side like I'm nothing. You want to elevate yourself so high above me, but can you look down and realize and see that you need me? I am a black queen and those are my black kings that you beat down, lock up, and destroy and steal hopes and dreams from. My children, my nieces, my nephews, my cousins. You're a dream thief. You don't want me to be who I was destined to be. Who God breathed life into me so that I could be. How dare you suppress me. How dare you ostracize and oppress me. You got me messed up. Everything that my grandmother and my grandfather desired for me. You have stolen from me.

[00:42:43] You have made things hard for me. You have driven me all over the Earth. You have pushed me, pulled me, prodded me, tricked me, dogged me, raped me. You have done so many things. You have stretched me from one side of the Earth to the other and walked on me and made me feel less than human.

[00:43:01] You have hurt me. You have tried to break me. But I'm still me. You can't take me from me. All your lies, all your false information, all of your belittling history about me. You can't change me from being who I was meant to be.

[00:43:16] Still I rise, still I rise, still I rise. The blood you've spilt and my people, the murders you've committed against me. The rapes, the sodomies that you have committed against me. Where's your apology? I just want to take the mirror and turn it so you can see the ugliness that you are, that you try to project onto me. I'm not ugly, I'm a black queen. The very essence of what I was meant to be.

[00:43:43] I am just as great as you. I am just as successful. I am just as intelligent.

[00:43:50] My eyes see what you try to be. You can't be me. Always trying to imitate me.

[00:43:55] You don't have the story that I be. You can't live a day in my shoes. You can't walk through tragedy, you can't live through sodomy. You can't rise out of the Earth and still be me. You can't even see me. I rage inside each day. I open my eyes hoping to be what I know I was destined to be. Still I rise.

[00:44:14] I get up and I try again each day to be a better me. I see your eyes as you look at me. As you try to make me feel your shame. I don't feel your shame. I look at you and I pity thee. Because I wonder why you can't just let things be. Why you can't embrace me. Why you can't admit that you need me, and that you envy me, and that you're jealous of me. I love me. I embrace me. I embrace every part of me, in every piece of me. You can't suppress me. Don't try to suppress me. Don't try to possess me. Just let me be me. [applause]

[00:45:06] That's power, and that's beauty, and that's truth. Give K.T. another hand please. [applause]

[00:45:25] So we want to take a moment to meditate on this issue of abolition tonight with our panelists and we're emphasizing the voices of artists, community leaders, and cultural workers who have experienced incarceration and then also one of our panelists, [unintelligible], will be closing us out with a song tonight. But for now I want to bring the panelists to the stage.

[00:45:50] Oh this brilliant Luis Rodriguez, who we heard from earlier. Will you please come to the table? [applause] And also this black queen K.T., please come up and be with us. [applause] And [unintelligible] come up too, we're gonna see how brilliant you are very shortly so come on and join the table. [applause]

[00:46:20] And Jasmine [unintelligible], back from [unintelligible]. Free the youth! Free the youth! [applause]

[00:46:30] All right. So I'm just going to have a couple little conversation questions with these people and, you know, we're here talking about the tragedy and devastation of mass incarceration. And we're talking about abolition. But I want to take a moment to just back up and ask our panelists to speak with us about what abolition means to you and what are the concrete steps we need to be taking to get us in that place. So Luis, would you be willing to start?

[00:47:00] To me, it's about building a new house before we tear down the old house. The old house is falling down around us. But if we don't have a new foundation and a new structure and a new house, we're going to be in ruins. So that new house has to be based on four pillars. Because a house has to have good strong solid foundations right? And the pillars are to end poverty.

[00:47:28] We don't need no more poverty. Not in the richest world— not in the richest country in the world with so much enrichment and abundance everywhere and yet we act like scarcity is the way things are. Scarcity is a made up thing. Two, we end all the social injustice which includes the racial based policing, it includes the mass incarceration, it includes all the discrimination regardless of what's going on. Three, that we take care of our environment. That we take care of our Mother Earth. That we take care of everything. No more fossil fuels. That just takes away and doesn't give back. That we learn how to live with Mother Nature and the nature inside of us. And the fourth thing is to have peace at home and peace in the world. War is an industry. It feeds into the mass incarceration industry. All of it does. So to me let's build a new house. That to me is abolition. Make sure that we have something else in its place.

[00:48:19] Thank you so much Luis, that's beautiful. [applause]

[00:48:27] Hello. How you guys doing tonight? So are we alive tonight? Yeah. Hoo.

[00:48:34] So my name is [unintelligible]. Earlier we were tasked with kind of touching basis with each other. Specifically people we've never talked to about this topic of abolition. And I said it was a difficult one because it seems like here in America specifically that they have successfully compartmentalized systematic oppression. So it seems like attacking one, there's always these others that are in play to keep the system up. So in this case, I think that we kind of have to reflect on past social movements that have successfully driven their point home, have created some change both on a local community level as well as a policy level.

[00:49:25] And again I think it always starts with the youth. Some of these movements fail because, like my guy Luis over here said, that they are the future but unfortunately the future doesn't have the past, which are the elders who had laid the foundation, right next to them and showing them the ropes until they're at a point to where we can let it go. And I think that we need to be fearless in our art. No restrictions, no holds barred. We own it. We have our own opinions. We have our own expressions. It's not up for me to interpret it. You see it as you see it.

[00:50:00] And hopefully we get our point across through our creative mediums. [applause]

[00:50:16] To me, to abolish is to rethink, to reconstruct. Rather than just like completely trashing and throwing away something, you're actually like getting to know it and trying to understand before just completely like, you know, ridding of the deal, you know? It means a new start. It means new ideas, you know? To be imaginative, you know? To allow new ideas from voices we don't get to hear. That's what abolish means to me. [applause]

[00:51:13] For me it's— you know, just getting back to what helped me was just humanistic relationships with people. Just people loving on me.

[00:51:29] And just having relationships with me and, you know, I think that's what the youth were speaking about earlier, is being important when, you know, there's so many other levels of importance, but you're still important. What the young man, I think he was trying to say or— he said what he needed to say, that's how I heard it. And you know, I just think it's— I agree with everything ya'll said. It's rethinking it, redoing it, you know, and revamping it. I don't think the system that's in place right now has ever worked. It didn't work for me, you know, and I'm saying, like I just said, what worked for me was having a positive support group around me, having people to care on me, having people to hold me accountable. Having people to love me and to trust me and to give me chances and chances to grow and to watch me heal. You know, I think that that's the only way that we can be effective as a community, as a society. That's just how I feel. [applause]

[00:52:49] So my dear panelists, you have a room full of people who are here on a Friday night and they must be feeling what you're saying because they seem to be enthusiastic. Are you feeling what they're saying? [applause] So I want you to take a moment to speak directly to their hearts and have people understand and give them something to help them to feel deep down inside about what these impacts are. What the hurt and the harm of this cultural state and this mass incarceration really means, if you could speak to that I'd be so glad.

[00:53:27] I do a lot of prisons and juvenile facilities. Five minutes from my house is a nice dark juvenile hall. It's the largest juvenile lockup in North America. I go there to speak to the youth. There's a whole section that looks just like prison because they're preparing all those kids to go to prison. They did a poetry festival there. They invited me— and I'm sorry I didn't have a chance to do poetry, I had it planned but it's OK. You heard what I had to say. But I did some poems and then they had a 14 year old kid get up. Several kids got up and read but there was this 14 year old kid that really impressed me. He got up and read this beautiful poem. 14 years old, and he had an angelic face but he was sitting there in juvenile hall and his mother and grandmother were there and I was so moved by this kid's words it was so— [inaudible] —and then I never ask the kids what they're in there for, I never ask how much time they're gonna do. But one of the staff wanted me to know that kid was facing one hundred and thirty five years in prison. In the United States of America. Shouldn't exist anywhere. But here in this country, that kid will be thrown away.

[00:54:38] I think that it tears up the whole family. I think that irregardless of whether it be a male or a female that's incarcerated, I think it tears up the whole family because, you know, I know it tore up my family. I remember my mother coming to visit me when I was in prison at age 16.

[00:54:57] I was the youngest one at Washington Correctional Center for Women. I think it was 1981. Anyway, my mom came to see me and she forgot she had a quarter in her sweater pocket and they told her that she couldn't see me and it just— I just, I started kicking my cell door, just going off.

[00:55:21] Because I needed to see my mom, I needed to still have relationships with the people that I knew. Because I was around a whole bunch of strangers and a whole bunch of people, you know, at age 16 that I didn't know, and it's like, you know. Not to mention the fact that my growth was stunted, you know. I was young, you know, when I got out of there. I was still— I got out when I was 21 but I was still only really 16 in the mind. I just feel that, you know, financially it tears up the family because they have to pay to let you call them. You know, they send you— my mom sent me packages and stuff like that that she probably really couldn't afford to keep doing. But, you know, she did it. It just, it affects the whole family. Especially like if you go in there and you got kids. I just seen a lot of this family breakdown and family destruction.

[00:56:26] So it's just me and you right? Is that how Jerrell put it? So the question was— we just talking from the heart?

[00:56:35] Yeah so, speak to the hearts and have them understand why this— why it's so important to revise our system of mass incarceration, why it's so harmful.

[00:56:47] Hoo. I think that this is— That's a heavy question for me only because I kind of see where the criminal justice system kind of intersects with the educational system which kind of intersects with community, and when I say community I just mean growing up, for example, I had a ton of outlets that kept me out of trouble. We had C.A.Y.A. football.

[00:57:18] We had the community center. We had late night. We even had police in our community that came from the community who knew people of the community. So there wasn't really the option of taking you to jail. It was "I know your grandmama, I know your grandfather. He go to Mt. Zion Church." That was enough to keep us out of trouble. I think with the removing of outlets for the youth, this is kind of where the problem starts at.

[00:57:43] One thing I did note: the gentleman here said that he came for the food and found that he was interested in what was really going on. And that is where the change happened. For me being an educator, this summer I had a group of 14 youth from the [unintelligible] community center. Came in, no respect. It was me and an older white lady. She was always bringing food. They were totally taking advantage of that. They came just for the food and had no interest in staying for the program. I told her, "you've got to clip that. you haven't even laid a foundation of respect here."

[00:58:26] I was that youth at one time. I know what it's like to not have a fully stocked fridge and your only motivation to go to school is for the food.

[00:58:36] So in some cases it's that Hansel and Gretel, "go ahead fill your belly with the candy" and in that story the kids got eaten up. They were plumped up and they were eaten up.

[00:58:52] In this case, the kids came for the food. They were there long enough to enjoy their meal.

[00:58:58] And for you to draw them in long enough to capture their attention, to where they have now been eaten up by their own interests and curiosities. Right now, I feel like we don't have enough of that in our communities and as a result these kids— One, the issue is that there is no mentorship. So kids are looking up to their peers. They're looking up to that other 16 year old who has no life experience whatsoever. I think that's a huge problem. So I think just speaking from the heart, if we want to be solution oriented we have to look at the outlets that are provided for the kids. Right now we have an issue with the Seattle Public Schools being defunded to where all the art programs are damn near none. So now you have individuals like me and Jerrell who are offering up our time and services to go into these institutions and provide an outlet and pull the creativity out of these kids. The hidden talents, the hidden geniuses out of these kids that they don't know that they have in them.

[00:59:57] That's my thoughts.

[01:00:03] Hey I'm back again. This is Davida. We ran out of time for our conversation, Some Day We'll All Be Free. This conversation took place on December 15th at the Central Library. The conversation is continuing. We are excited to have the Creative Justice exhibit. This is an art exhibit called Someday We'll All Be Free on display at City Hall from March 2nd to May 1st. Please drop by and check it out. You can also join the conversation online. Check us out at the library's Twitter handle @SPLBuzz and use the hashtag #criminaljustice to follow our conversation about the impact of criminal justice on communities. We also want to thank our community partners Creative Justice, the Creative Justice youth leadership board, F.I.G.H.T. (Formerly Incarcerated Group Healing Together), Black Prisoners Caucus, Village of Hope, Social Justice Fund Northwest, Best Start for Kids, Seattle Office of Civil Rights, 4Culture, Seattle Office of Art and Culture, Seattle Public Library Foundation, Intiman Theater, Seattle Public Library community engagement. In 2018, we have a new year round topic. That topic is environmental equity and our series will focus on native sovereignty and building equity strategies via conservation and green design with low income communities and communities of color. Thank you.

[01:01:42] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.