



Seattle Urban Book Expo Author Showcase, Part 2

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[00:00:36] This podcast is being presented in two parts. You are listening to Part 2.

[00:00:38] [DRUMMING]

[00:08:11] Morning, when I wake up, I play a song by Chance the Rapper. It says, "Are you ready for a blessing? Are you ready for a miracle?" And then at the end, it says, "Are you ready?" And I go, "Yeah!" And then I open the door and I go out. So we have just had a blessing.

[00:08:27] I mean, that is incredible.

[00:08:31] Each of these master drummers hail from different places in the world. We have Senegal, we have Seattle, we have Ghana. And they came there together having this conversation with each other, going back and forth between the different rhythms, getting to understand that as we talk about writing and as we talk about storytelling, the first writing and the first storytelling we did was with the drum. And thank you for the miracle accompaniment to this moment because you have elevated it in ways that are quite magical.

[00:09:05] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much.

[00:09:11] And so the blessings continue and the panelists could please come and take these seats up here.

[00:09:17] In any order you like. And we're going to just have a little dialogue, a little question and answer. But before we do. How have you liked it so far? Yeah.

[00:09:30] Yeah, yeah. Uh-Huh.

[00:09:33] I mean, one of the things that it's been really incredible when you're looking at gifted people like that is you're getting a lesson in African bass or female bass, epistemology, ways of knowing. Well, you have seen that we know both through our intellect that we know from our heart and we know from our gut and we know from our soul. And that knowing is very relationship, that our lives in many ways as black women is based on our relationship with ourselves, our relationship with the other, our relationship with the world, our relationship with our history, our culture and our past. So you are engaging at this moment in a revolutionary act. And I want to thank Jeffrey, who is always running around taking care of each other, and we'll acknowledge him when he comes back from making this act occur.

[00:10:24] I also want to thank the Seattle Public Library for helping this revolutionary act occur. And I say it's revolutionary because the drums were taken from us. Tonight, we're back. Reading and writing was denied us. Tonight, we're taking it back. People working together in community. We're taking that back. A black man, Jeffrey. Jeffrey, I'm praising you and praising you, right? Right. A black man who gathers with his brothers to make sure that there is a platform for women's voices and find it so important that it's the first event in this three day event. I want to thank you. I wanted to thank you for exhibiting complementary duality.

[00:11:08] I want to thank you for talking about how we can work together.

[00:11:13] All right. I think that's what I wanted to say. But I was just so excited about everybody. So you each talked about kind of why you did the work you were doing and you talked about it in the context. Could you just talk about it just a little bit more on your side?

[00:11:29] Why is it important for women, for a black women, for, you know, to speak particularly at this place, time and moment in this universe with all of this craziness?

[00:11:44] So anybody we're not going to go in order. We're going to kind of do this dialogic. And as somebody says something that somebody wants to spin off of. Jump in there.

[00:11:53] But why do you what what's going on with with in your heads?

[00:11:58] You know, it's true that I was afraid to write. At first it was like, do I have permission to write? Nikkita talked about who will publish me? Right? Who will validate what I have to say? And with all those questions, it can it can stifle you.

[00:12:19] And it really wasn't until I told this story in the prison and I told the story enough times. I had to tell it maybe 20 times before I actually wrote it down. And once I told it and a young man wept and that's when I knew I had to write it down. So I thought, wow, this is something that really could impact people if I told them the story. And I thought it was my responsibility.

[00:12:48] That is great. And I have to tell you, I'm still holding back the tears because I am trying to be a big girl.. But that story every time I read it, my children have it, it does bring me to to a place. And similarly with my book, the topics of sexual abuse and sexual trauma I had not been able to talk about without breaking down, crying. And even I was just explaining, even up to three years ago, I couldn't do it. Even a few months ago.

[00:13:17] You know, depending on the people who I was with, I couldn't do it. And I thought, wow, if that's so difficult for me, like, who else is going through in having this same situation? And how do we take that back? How do we overcome that and be able to speak about things that aren't our fault that we didn't cause to happen. But we want to be freed from. And especially why women write, why black women write, is a topic that I've talked about a lot in, you know, in the work field, when you're going for a job is women are silenced, black women are silenced. We have this stereotype that has brought on about us. And all of these things that are said about us that aren't true. And so then when we do open our mouths, then we're, you know, labeled as angry. And.

[00:14:09] And you know, what's wrong with her? Like, what's her problem?

[00:14:12] And it's like, well, you know, let me count the ways of like, I got all this stuff on my chest that I haven't been able to get out because someone has wanted to finish my sentence or someone has wanted to quiet me down or this is not the time or you are not elevated in space to be able to speak.

[00:14:30] And so then when it comes time, we're fighting to like get a word out.

[00:14:34] People are like really surprised by that. And so so that's why I write. I think it's it's a voice that needs to be heard. I think that women have a voice that we need to stop being afraid of lifting up.

[00:14:47] And so that's why I write. I couldn't second, you know, what everyone said. More for me.

[00:14:58] You know, I echo what was said earlier. It was about identity and it was really about validation and proving that I existed, right, throughout my journey, my undocumented journey. I was trying to prove that I was a person that I belonged. And so writing my story was the only thing I had. It was my way to prove that I existed because my fear was I was going to end up in a detention facility indefinitely and I would be forgotten about. Many people that look like me are in detention facilities and they're forgotten about right now, today. Even the media forgets about them. So I didn't know if I was going to make it out, so I just wanted to shame this immigration monster and for people to know that people like me existed. If I didn't make it out, that was truly, you know, my fears. It was very cathartic. I first and through the journey of publishing and I appreciated what Nikkita said. I was looking for validation for a long time before I could actually publish my book. I wanted people to tell me that my story was worth hearing. That was good enough, that it was interesting enough and I got the exact opposite. I remember going to a big publisher, big publishing house, and they were like, no one cares about the immigration story.

[00:16:32] You know, essentially saying that no one would care about me as a part of this immigration story in this dialogue. And they're like, and you're too young to have to write a memoir. This deep and detailed, you know, give it a few more years. There wasn't I didn't have a few more years. Right. There is a lot going on in the area of immigration globally. Humanitarian issues are are are coming up in this area. And so I felt strongly that it was time for me to share my story and my voice. And if we don't tell our stories, other people will tell them and they will not do us justice. We give them the power, like if we don't tell our stories. Then we give other people permission to tell the stories however they want. And I was tired of hearing this narrative about the undocumented immigrant that I didn't identify with. And I know many people that look like me. That was that we're going through what I was going through. So that's why I wrote it, to empower myself, give myself a voice or revive my voice, but do that for other people and let other people that look like me know that I hear you.

[00:17:54] I see you. You exist.

[00:17:59] So when I first started writing, it was so I didn't feel so alone. And I actually did not commit a lot of things for people to read on paper. I'm a performance poet. So a lot of my work was more oral storytelling. And what I realized was a lot of people identified with what I was saying. And that really sparked a desire in me not just to continue to be a performance poet or to write, but to work with young people on giving them platform an opportunity to use their voice through performance poetry.

[00:18:38] At some point that transitioned for me to realize that the beauty of art of any type is that if it's truly deep and honest and genuine and gets the heart of a matter, you can literally move people to a new place. And so I found that in my work as an activist and an organizer, that performance poetry was an incredible way to motivate people to think about and do different things without having to spout a ton of statistics at them or to try to explain to them what abolition is or why we need to end prisons and mass incarceration. But by telling them something in a poem, that poem and that emotional experience would stick with them and people would be motivated to join movements. And so for me, performance poetry became an important aspect of building our movement work. And so I started to dig deeper into understanding the ways in which cultural workers have always been at the forefront of social movements because they changed the hearts and minds of people before the legislation comes. So over time, that also turned into doing more like op ed writing and publishing poems. And so really writing has been both about being seen and seeing others, but it's also been about how do you get hearts shift in people so we can start to get the larger systems and institutional shifts we need. Because if people's hearts don't shift, does it matter how many policies we put in place? Police officers will keep killing black or brown peoples. We need their hearts to change. So I really think, you know what cultural workers do writers like us do is bring to the forefront in a way that people can receive in their spirits. Important changes that we need to make.

[00:20:23] Let's ask another question, please. Our society feels very addicted to tragedy. I mean, people want to look at the black experience as tragic. It wants to look at the single mother, as tragic all alone and it wants to look at the immigrant coming from rat infested communities where flies fly around everybody's baby's eyes then or to look at someone who has gone through abuse as the victim, as the person who asked for it. There are many different ways. What did you do to maintain the attitude and the positionality of victor? Each of your stories could have had a different kind of ending. We could. Nia could have been in that slave ship and she could have been beaten, and we could have talked about the horrible people who took her away.

[00:21:11] We could talk about. You resisted talking about your mother. They wanted you to go to some level of voyeuristic tragedy. And you refuse. You. You were defiant. You said, I'm going to tell my story, even if it's hard for me to tell even, it's hard for you all to hear. This is a

story that needs to be not denied. And the same thing. How do we talk about a young dyslexic child? You know, you could have been special education all your life. How did you all find that spirit of victory that you speak about in your work?

[00:21:49] You know, it started for me and slam poetry where I realized the poems that got tens were the ones. And ten is like the highest you could get, were the poems that were about the worst thing that happened to you. And were rarely the poem about you discovering yourself or you valuing yourself or poems that made you laugh. Usually were not the 10s.

[00:22:12] And I got to a point where when I was doing working with young people like Youth Speaks, Seattle, doing slam poetry with teenagers and middle schoolers, that I did not want to encourage them to expose their most traumatic experiences to win a poetry slam. Now, that's what you needed to write in that moment. That's different. That's a need. Let's get it out. But to win a competition to allow that voyeuristic nature to take over felt wrong. And so I knew that I first needed to shift within myself the way I told my story and the kinds of stories I told before I could ask them to do that. I had to model that. I had to also model that that could be effective. So I started challenging myself to write poems like the one that I read that were more about being empowered or self-discovery, or maybe you were harmed or hurt. But at the end of it, how did you triumph? And I found that after doing those poems, I felt better regardless of what the score was. Whereas when I did a trauma based poem and the score wasn't great. Not only did I feel shitty about the poem like the context of the poem, but then I felt shitty about the score. So it really became a challenge to myself to elevate the kind of writing I was doing for the purpose of inspiration as opposed to just winning in a competition.

[00:23:38] And that began to be transformative even in the classroom setting and the kinds of things I was able to bring into the schools that I was teaching artist in, young people thinking about telling their story from the victorious perspective as opposed to just the abused perspective.

[00:23:54] I love that you ask this question because for me, it was about survival when it comes down to it. Having to go into a courtroom for seven years and having to be violated in a courtroom full of people that don't look like you, who are saying prove that you're a person, give me a story so you can prove that you're a person and it will either break you, literally, mentally. And I talk about the mental health component. I mean, I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. And I share this because we have to think about all of the children that are showing up in these immigration courts by themselves. I was an adult and I couldn't handle it. So I had the choice of either breaking down completely, right, and being annihilated by this whole system and being downtrodden or raising myself up. And what I talk about, what I like to share with other individuals who are going through this or anyone. Is the difference

between investing versus helping. So helping is this idea of charity of. Let me help you. It's short term because I have power. You don't. And that's how people approach me originally. And I refuse to have anybody help me. I wanted people to invest in me. It was like, I'm worth your time. And it wasn't just financial investment. It was about you - there's something about me that is so powerful that I'm not going to let you turn away and just hand me a hand out. Right. And so that's really what my mission became to prove to myself and to everyone else that I'm worth it, I'm valuable and I'm worth your investment, not just monetary. Right. Time, all of the above. And so that's what allowed me to maintain my dignity and not appear downtrodden and not to be annihilated by this system. And I wanted to share that with others.

[00:26:10] Yeah, I resonate with what both of you said and as well, I think it was back when I was in college. There was this show Missy Elliott would take these people and she was teaching them how to be rappers. There is one episode where she took them to the grave and she was like, write this poem. Write like the worst thing that's ever happened to you. And you're going to read it and then you're gonna bury it, whatever. And so I was like, oh, let me try that. And because I had been silenced, like not that anyone told me, like shh - don't say anything. But I just have always been that person that let me make you feel comfortable. And I don't want to say that because you might feel uncomfortable. And, you know, and so I, you know, spent a lot of my life around my abusers because I wanted everyone else to be comfortable. And I didn't want to raise any kind of like drama, or issues, or like having people pick sides. And so I just didn't say anything. And then I was internally just like crumbling. And so I did this exercise and it was so freeing. And I was like, that feels great to just say it, even though I was in my room by myself, like no one there, sat talking to the TV screen. But it felt great to be just like dang, this happened. And I said it and it's real and it's true and it happened. And I took it to my Bible study group. There's about 40 people in the group. And I asked the reverend, I was like at the end of Bible study, can I read this poem? He didn't know anything. Then he goes, Oh, sure, go ahead. And so I talked about a very violent rape, tag-team. And so I read it and it was short and there was nothing sweet about it. And everyone paused when I was done and just left the room. And we usually would like stay and talk and hang out.

[00:28:07] Everyone was just like, okay. And they all left. And so I was like, well, like, that happened. And so I walked out to my car.

[00:28:17] And this woman who I had never seen in the class before, didn't know her name, didn't get her name after. I still don't even know who this woman was. But she stopped me and she was like, I just have to tell you that I appreciate you for sharing your story because similar things happened to my niece and she is on drugs and she's an alcoholic and she's a prostitute. And she's attempted suicide so many times and she doesn't know how to shake it. She doesn't know that there's any other way to be with these things having happened to her. And so a lot of

times when people see me and they hear my story, they're like, well, how you know, how do you get there? How come you never did you know all these things that other women have experience of just not knowing how to shake it. And so they're going down all these avenues that are self-abusive. And so I just listened to her and. And that never left me that people need to see that there are other alternative options that just because something very traumatic came upon your life, that there is there are different ways and that you can triumph over that. And so I love being able to tell the story where people's see the title The Monster in My Room as automatically thinking that it's the abuser or the oppressor. And for me, I want to bring mental health awareness.

[00:29:31] And I wanted people to know they're not alone. And I want people to to feel that this monster is not necessarily this abuser, but the monster is what I'm holding on to because of it. And so the shirts that I'm kicking myself for forgetting at home today that I have say I survived the monster in my room and on the back of the shirt, it says, the monster in my room is. And then it lists depression and loneliness and anxiety and discrimination and all of these things that we hold onto that our monster, because this thing that happened, it happened. It's done like no matter what. Whether they got punished or, you know, whether they were right or wrong or what they did. That's gone. And here we are as individuals and we still have to get through each day. And so my monster is not this person or these people that abuse me, my monster is me, like trapping myself in that feeling. And so the book really brings forth that main character's triumph and how she was like, no. Like, I'm going to, you know, stand up and stand out. My family's not going to suffer. My children are not going to suffer. My husband is not going to suffer. My family and friends are not going to suffer because of something that is, is not allowed to take over.

[00:30:55] I think that as a teacher, so I'm a teacher. So one of the things that I think is the most important thing I can do as a teacher is be very careful with the words that come out of my mouth. And I like to think that a lot of the training I got came from these words of metu neter, an ancient Kemetic thinking - metu neter is good speech and that we have power with our words, how we shape we can shape things we can say things that can affirm people. We can say things that can tear people down. So with that kind of power, I really wanted to make sure I was telling a story that we've heard. We've been told in many different ways. But I wanted to tell it in a way that liberated us from the thumb that was on our neck around.

[00:32:01] Get over it. It happened. Get over it. And what are you supposed to do with that? Right. So when I heard that we were missed - getting over it was easier.

[00:32:14] And then I thought I started to think about the relationship between African-Americans, people in this country and African continentals from the homeland and how we

come together. And there's a big miss. And that miss is based on, I think, the foundational omission that – oh, you're people sold.

[00:32:37] You get over it. And, you know, my mother used to tell me if we were sold for all this money, where's the money? Cause it's not in Africa.

[00:32:46] So we you know, this logic really to me was very healing and how to put it in a way that would affirm people and not tear down people or make them feel some kind of permanent pain, but to feel instead some release. And what I think as a teacher might be a paradigm shift, because when you get off that - this is how it is, how it's been, how it's always going to be, and then you can say, oh, there's a new possibility with this story.

[00:33:23] That's the effect that I wanted to have.

[00:33:27] And I hope that it will have even after I'm gone. Great responses, weren't these nice responses? We have a chance for maybe one question or maybe two. But one, because we're in the library. We have to leave at 8:30. And I just want to say, first of all, how I want to again, really thank you. Library.

[00:33:53] Because the library has been a home and a nurturing. I know for me as a young kid. I spent my, the library with my daycare and I would go through and I would sneak into the adolescent section when I should do the junior section. And then I would go into the adult thing and read about the world.

[00:34:11] So we want to thank you for nurturing us in many ways and for being supportive of the work of people being able to speak their words and have them available for other people to read. No, thank you. Thank you so much. Yes.

[00:34:28] Ok. Anyone have a question? Hi everybody

[00:34:32] My name's Andrew. Basically, my question was, I know you guys put out these books and you actually ask the question or answer the question I was going to ask, which is did you feel like a storyteller beforehand? And all of your answers were amazing. But now that you've done it, do you feel different? Do you feel like you now have that right you were looking

for? And do you feel like you're a better storyteller? Because every time you guys speak. It's amazing how you can tell that story, even just snippets of your life that aren't in relation to the book. But do you feel like this whole process has made you a better storyteller?

[00:35:14] That's a great question. I would say that yeah. You know, initially when I put out my book, published it, was really about my story. That's really what I was thinking about. Let me share my story. But I didn't realize that people would come up to me and say, you're sharing my story. That is my story, you know, and I'm I'm too scared to share it or I'm not in a place where I can share it. And so I feel like now I have a greater responsibility. So it's beyond being a storyteller now I get to be. I would say maybe like a conduit for other people to share their stories. Right. An engineer for other people to share their stories in whatever fashion that they want to. So that's really what this journey has been for me. And I thought that I was going to end with I'll write the story and then I'm done.

[00:36:13] But it's actually been an opening for more work. And it's bigger than me now. It's no longer my story.

[00:36:23] So, yeah, that's my that's my answer.

[00:36:26] That is so true for me, too. So one thing I'll say about it is that I think everybody has a message, a story. We all have a story we need to share. And I am a better storyteller.

[00:36:41] But I think there's something about having a product, you know, that's a book. It might. It could be any kind of product. But the product of that, you know, having a book, having multiple income streams. I can't lie. That's important. It really gave me a power.

[00:37:01] I had no idea that my product could sell. I think everybody has to have a product.

[00:37:08] And so I recommend that and everybody has to have a story. We have stories, so everybody has to have a story.

[00:37:15] And the way you tell it, the way you convey it is up to you. But if you put it in a book, I think it will outlast you. And I think that's the beauty of the book. Even I don't care about e-books. That's OK.

[00:37:31] I'm thinking about doing an audio one day. I just got into audiobooks.

[00:37:37] But at the end of the day, that thing you can hold put on the shelf. Share with somebody else. It's priceless.

[00:37:47] Exactly what they said. And also for me, like I've always loved being a storyteller, always. People have to tell me to stop. You're done. And I have a theater background. And so similarly, I, too, like my last reading. Someone was like, I want to buy your book, but only if you going to read me the whole. And because I bring the characters and there's so many different voices and characters and I bring them to life, which sometimes you don't have that you know, you're not always in the author's head when you grab a book off the shelf and you don't know what they envision for that character. And so you may be reading it differently than they intended you to receive it. But also at my theater background, wanting to get on the stage and tell the story, because I do believe in the power of verbal storytelling. So, yes, with the book, because you have the time and the depth. But to just get it, the main idea shrunken down and a time to really be able to have the conversation and have a Q&A to me is important because each time I hear someone, then that adds to me and then I'm able to go and add that to someone else. And so I think that the open Q&A, the dialogue, the personal interaction for me is just going to keep exponentially growing the storytelling capability. So, yes.

[00:39:09] Yes, all of this. Yes and no. I feel like my work as a cultural worker and artist is my attempt to keep my real dream alive.

[00:39:22] If I was living in the world like a just world where I didn't have to spend 70 percent of my time trying to organize for justice or doing pro bono cases or fighting the system, I would spend as much time as possible writing stories, being in performances, making shows, and then hanging out with young people, helping them develop the same passion if they wanted to.

[00:39:48] That's like my dream job. And so I feel like *Pebbles in My Shoes*, the artist work that I do is an attempt to keep hold of a passion that when we do achieve justice, that's what I can do. So sometimes I feel like my world gets so, so caught up and clouded in this political fight. That being an artist and telling stories is an opportunity to try to remember that there there is an impossible world beyond this. But if you look at the word impossible, it actually says I am possible. And so is my way of keeping hold of like that future vision. So this is a yes and a no is such a complicated relationship, especially under capitalism - trying to be an artist. Because capitalism will tell you to commodify your passion. And then at some point you stop making art

because it's passion and you start making art for an audience. And at that point, it is just a product. And so is that constant balance of trying to stay in the position of passion while simultaneously keeping up the fight. So I think I waiver around whether or not I feel like a storyteller.

[00:41:04] Thank you for that. Thank you all. Thank you. Can we applaud them one more time?

[00:41:09] Can we really, really, really. No, no we have to applaud.

[00:41:14] We have to applaud every single day, every single day. Black women need to be applauded just for waking up and, you know, and walking out the door. Yay! We made it! But anyway, this is just the beginning of an incredible weekend. Tomorrow at 1:00 to Wa Na Wari, there will be a series of two kind of sessions with authors, one at 2:30 to 3:30, 2:00 p.m. to 3:30.


[00:41:44] All right. And the second panel is 4 p.m. to 5:30. And then after that, at 6:00 p.m., we're going to have a networking mixer, at Wa Na Wari where there'll be food, drinks, music and authors performing chapter reads, and it's free.

[00:42:01] And there's no football games going on.

[00:42:05] Please tell them about Saturday and Saturday is the big event itself. The fourth Seattle Urban Book Expo, where not only will you have these incredible women involved, you going to have 30 plus authors of color and vendors showcasing their work is going to be at the Northwest African American Museum. And it's free to go. Let's go there, have a good time. Tell people.

[00:42:31] Help us build this. That's the only thing I ask. Help us build it.

[00:42:37] Yes. And make it inter-generational.



[00:42:42] Bring your children with you so that they can see people making books that look like them. And one of our authors is eight years old. A young woman, Ivy Naukaye,

who wrote a book about her experiences taking ballet classes. And it's it's really quite delightful. Well, we're going from 8 all the way to. Well, I'm not going to say how old the oldest person is. But they're probably pretty old, so. But anyway, thank you, Jeffrey, for giving me the opportunity to moderate.

[00:43:20] We're turning it over to you.

[00:43:22] Yes. So that's it. And once again, I'd like to thank all of you for coming tonight. Thank you so much.

[00:43:30] 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.

