

The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world.

Since 2010, we've been broadcasting from occupied Cherokee land in Southern Appalachia (Asheville, NC). We also frequently feature commentary (serious and humorous) by anarchist prisoner, Sean Swain.

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Walidah Imarisha: on *Angels With Dirty Faces*, accountability processes and more

This interview aired on The Final Straw Radio on New Years Eve, 2017.

This week, William and sometimes contributor & commentator Disembodied Voice had the chance to interview Walidah Imarisha, who is an Oregon-based writer, educator, public scholar and spoken word artist, about her book Angels With Dirty Faces, which came out in 2016 'out From AI and AK Press, [and] which highlights three distinct experiences that are, in different degrees, tangential to the realities inherent to the prison-industrial complex. This book just won the creative nonfiction award in the state of Oregon earlier in 2017. In this interview, we got to touch on a wide array of topics, mostly centered on Angels With Dirty Faces but also on accountability processes, and on what might have to change in order for them to feel more effective her relationship to anarchism, and some up-coming projects and appearances. We also get to touch on the book Octavia's Brood, a compilation of speculative fiction that Imarisha co-edited with Adriene Marie Brown, who also wrote Emergent Strategy. More about Imarisha, her work, and up coming event can be found www.walidah.com. .

B: And here's an update for those with loved ones behind the bars in New York that promises to further isolate and erode the health of inmates while squeezing more profits from friends and families and into the pockets of prison profiteers. Quote, "The thugs who run the NY State DOCCS have issued a new directive, 4911A, that describes new draconian package rules that they are testing in three facilities as a pilot program. Currently, at most facilities, families and friends can drop off packages at the front desk when visiting, packages that include fresh fruit and vegetables that supplement [the] high carb-and-sugar, meager diet provided by DOCCS. The new rules are problematic in a lot of new ways, including:

1. Packages could be ordered only from approved vendors.
2. Fresh fruit and vegetables are not allowed.
3. Family & friends cannot drop off packages while visiting. All packages must be shipped through the vendor.
4. Each person is limited to ordering 3 packages a month for him or herself and receiving three packages a month from others.

As an update:

Kakamia was paroled from prison 3/27/19!



Thanks to Grier for transcribing this episode. If you'd like to see other episodes transcribed for easier ingestion by folks with hearing difficulties or for translation, check out our patreon at <https://patreon.com/tfsr>

[laughter] -- there my people are. [inaudible due to laughter] So I'm working on that, and I've been working on some science fiction short stories and projects as well, so I have some sci-fi stories that have been put out in various places, but I'm still sort of working on putting out more work on that. But right now, my main project is actually a nonfiction historical book on Oregon Black history, because I live in Oregon. So yet again, you're jumping to something new and I'm like, I don't really see it a being different, but I feel you.

Q1: Yeah, for sure. That all sounds super super exciting. I remember seeing just a YouTube talk that you did, or a talk on YouTube that you did about the racist history of Oregon and I definitely learned a lot. I think you did it anywhere between 3 and 5 years ago, or something like that, and I got a lot out of it.

Those are all of the questions that we had. Is there anything else you wanted to add a part of this interview?

A: I don't think so.

Q1: Well, Walidah Imarisha, thank you so much for coming on to this show for an extremely thought-provoking and incisive interview. Yeah, thank you so much for your time, and your energy, and for this book you've written. It's been great to have you on.

A: Well, thanks so much for having me, and for creating spaces to have these conversations. There aren't enough, so I'm thankful for the space that y'all are holding.

Q1: Yeah, absolutely.

Q2: It's been wonderful.

A: Thank you.

Q1: Thanks for listening to our interview with Walidah Imarisha. Again, more can be found from her at www.walidah.com

5. Each package cannot be more than 30 pounds. Of the 30 pounds per package, only 8 pounds can be food.

Allowable items will be the same in all facilities. No more local permits.

6. There are fewer items allowed than before, and of the items that are allowed, far less variety. This includes additional restrictions on clothing.

7. Pilot rules are not clear about how books, media, religious items and literature, or other items subject to First Amendment protection will be treated. This could mean that groups like NYC Books Through bars will not be able to send free books to the 52,000 people in the prison system.

The pilot program implements a, quote, 'Approved vendors only' end quote package system. This means that only packages from approved vendors will be accepted. The vendors appear to be companies that specialize in shipping into prisons and jails. There are currently only five approved vendors, identified on the DOCCS website. This amounts to a cash grab for these companies. The pilot program is starting at 3 facilities: Teconic, Greene, and Greenhaven. These facilities will stop accepting packages from nonapproved vendors on January 2nd, 2018. We have to make this package directive unworkable. These new rules are cruel, eliminating fresh fruits and vegetables, and creating massive profits for the vampire companies that will fill the niche.

We can organize the roll back of these rules. Here's some ideas how.

1. You can sign a petition. You could share it with your address book, share it on Twitter, share it on FB. It takes two seconds. You can find it in our show notes.

2. Get in touch with your people in the NY state prisons and let them know about this. Inform them, send them the info. Massive noncooperation on the part of NY state prisoners will play a huge role in this.

3. You can flood the electives with post cards. One could be sent to Cuomo and one to Anthony Annucci, the acting commissioner of DOCCS. It costs 34 cents. Andrew Cuomo can be reached at:

Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
NY State Capital Building
Albany, NY 12224

Acting Commissioner Anthony Annucci can be found at
New York State DOCCS Building 2
State Campus
Albany, NY 12226.

Some sample text can be found in the show notes at
thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org

But first, here are some words from Anarchist prisoner, Sean Swain.

Q1: So, we are here with Walidah Imarisha, author of *Angels with Dirty Faces*, and co-editor of *Octavia's Brood*. Thank you so much for coming on to this show. Would you introduce yourself a little bit more and talk a little about what you do?

A: Sure! Thanks for having me. My name's Walidah Imarisha and I'm an educator, and a writer, and I work in a number of different areas. I see my work all tying together as trying to claim a right to the future and trying to be able to move folks toward imagining and then creating better and more just futures.

Q1: Will you talk more about your experience as an educator who is also involved in movement work, and also maybe more broadly about the role of the academy in movement?

A: Sure. I think I've been very lucky to teach in places and positions that have allowed me to shape and to have as much autonomy as possible around the content of my classes and the subject material. I think that intellectualism is incredibly important in movements for change. I think it's important to have spaces where we are thinking about theory, and we're thinking about larger frame works and questions. To me all intellectualism should be public intellectualism, which is, in my definition, intellectualism not in service of the powers that be, but in service of the people, and in service of creating new just worlds. And, to me, the distinction that is very important is about,

without sexual violence -- that is science fiction, because we haven't seen that world. But also recognize we need imaginative spaces like science fiction, where we can explore beyond the boundaries of what we're told is possible, because we can't build what we can't imagine. Imagination is the first step to new worlds. So we have to have spaces where we can throw out what we've been told is realistic and possible, and instead start with the question, "What do we want? What is a world we want to live in?" "And I've -- yeah. This project has been incredible. It's something -- we spent five years putting the book out, and it is something that has helped me be more visionary in my life and in my work, and I very much see *Angels With Dirty Faces* as connected with that. It was funny because I worked on *Angels With Dirty Faces* for ten years. So I started it well before we even had the idea of *Octavia's Brood*, but it came out after *Octavia's Brood*. And so, when I would tell people, "I have a book coming out," and they would be like, "Oh, is it science fiction?" and I would be like, "No, it's a creative nonfiction book about prisons and harm," and they're like, "Whoa, that's really different." I'm like, "Is it?" [laughter]. Because in my mind, again, they're intimately connected because the reason I think it's important to put *Angels With Dirty Faces* is to create the space so that we can imagine different futures. And to me, you know, *Angels With Dirty Faces* is about helping to cultivate the values that will allow us to build a different world. And so for me, all of my work is connected. And I understand why other folks are like "You just jump around a lot," but I feel strongly that, I've hoped that my work is able to embody sort of a visionary ethos and aesthetic that allows to create space for more possibilities, as my co-editor Adrienne says.

Q1: That's so excellent. You mentioned you write poetry. do you write speculative fiction as well?

A: I do, yes. And I write science fiction poetry as well.

Q1: Excellent. How can people get their hands on that?

A: I'm still working on it. So I'm working on a book of science fiction poetry that is called *Tubman's Uncertainty Principle* and looks at Black women's liberation movements through the lens of quantum physics. [laughter] So nerdy. I do love the project because when I tell people, I find my folks real quick. Cause most people's reaction is "Um, what now?" But the folks like you who are like [audible gasp]

A: Yeah, I mean, I don't know that I have a checklist, but I think for me I have been incredibly lucky and honored to learn and be mentored by many different folks who have been and are incarcerated, and to work in solidarity and as *compañeros* with those folks. I would not be the person I am as a human, as someone involved in change or as an artist without the mentorship and guidance and leadership of folks who are incarcerated. So for me, I think it's important to see folks who are incarcerated who you are engaging with as, A. Part of the community, because they absolutely are; and B. As folks you are working with rather than helping or working for. I think that a lot of folks who get involved come in and are often white folks. They come in with a savior mentality, and folks who are incarcerated and more, broadly, POC don't need saviors, they need allies. Because some of the most courageous, innovative, incredible organizing work is happening in prisons, behind these walls, in some of the worst conditions possible. And we on the outside have so much to learn, and we need the wisdom – we need that leadership, we need that ingenuity and creativity, and bravery. And so, I think it's important to come from that perspective, rather than coming from the perspective of, "I'm doing this to help this person," rather than coming from the perspective of saying, "I'm doing this because we are both in shared struggle, and this person has a lot to share with me about that, and I want to be in communion and in conversation with this person to be able to make our communities and make our world better."

Q2: Absolutely, thank you for that.

Q1: Yeah, definitely. Perhaps to veer off topic just for a moment, you've mentioned *Octavia's Brood* throughout this interview, and this is an anthology of speculative fiction that you co-edited. Will you talk little bit about how this project compared to *Angels With Dirty Faces*? Like similarities, differences...?

A: So *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* is an anthology of fantastical writing by activists, organizers, and change-makers. So it's science fiction created by people doing work on the ground to envision different futures. My co-editor, Adrienne, and I created the anthology with the premise that all organizing is science fiction, and therefore all organizers are creators and visionaries of science fiction, because these worlds -- they are trying to imagine a world without borders, without prisons, a world

"Who are you accountable to, and who is your work accountable to?" And I'm very proud to call myself a public scholar, because, to me, that means I am accountable to those communities who are marginalized, who are oppressed. I'm accountable to making sure my work reflects them, making sure my work is centered in their leadership and their resistance, and that my work inherently attempts to support changing the structures that created that oppression in the first place.

Q1: That's really cool. Sometimes I find in far left, at least the strains of the far left that I find myself in, that there's this kind of anti-intellectualism that happens. Do you find that that has been the case for you, or do you have a different experience with that?

A: I think I've seen, you know, both sides of the extremes, and I think that's part of the problem -- is that it's extreme. So I've definitely seen folks who are anti-intellectualism and focused only on practice. I've also seen folks who have only immersed themselves in theory and are not engaged with or thinking about how that moves on the ground. And I think that both of those extremes ultimately keep us from being able to create the kind of change that we want, so there has to be a balance. And I also think it's important, again, that intellectualism and the engagement with thinking about the future is really not only rooted in oppressed communities, but includes the imaginings of oppressed communities. So I think it's important that we're not just looking to public scholars to just articulate these ideas, but we're looking to public scholars to help and hold space for communities to articulate these ideas and these imaginings for themselves.

Q1: Yeah, definitely. I couldn't agree more. Yeah, the acknowledgment that intellectual theory comes from so many different places and not just out of academies or whatever -- though there is a lot of super useful stuff coming out of academies too. So, you've done a lot of lectures, and you say you're an educator and a writer, and you wrote this book *Angels with Dirty Faces* a couple of years ago. Would you describe this book for anyone who hasn't read it yet?

A: Sure. It's *Angels With Dirty Faces: Three Stories of Crime, Prison, and Redemption*. It's a creative nonfiction book that looks at the criminal legal system, at prisons, and at the idea of harm and accountability through the narrative and the stories of three people. My

goal in putting the book out was to create spaces here we can have conversations about the idea of what happens when harm is done. So when there's been harm done in communities, when folks have hurt each other, then what happens? And the book doesn't answer that question, but what I realized in doing my work as an a prison abolitionist is that we needed to humanize those folks who are incarcerated, and also folks who have done harm, and they actually aren't necessarily the same people, because those folks have been dehumanized. And we can't begin to have conversations about how to heal communities when we're imagining folks in the communities not as human beings who have, in some cases, made incredibly atrocious mistakes, but as monsters.

Q1: Yeah, that resonates a lot with me, and one of the questions that we were really interested about, is kind of this disposability mindset that the world at large seems to have for so many people, and that that's certainly conditioned on forces of classism and racism and anti-Blackness.

A: Absolutely. I think that when you live in a capitalist society, everything becomes a commodity, including human beings, and I think that, you know, it's very clear that, you know -- and I think there's been a lot of amazing scholarship work done about this, the connections between system of racial oppression, like slavery, and the prison system. And recognizing that the prison system is not about safety, it's not about reducing crime -- it's about exploitation and control of potentially rebellious communities. You know, folks like Angela Davis, Ruthie Gilmore, and Michelle Alexander have moved these conversations in the public. And so I think it's important to have a historical and larger frame work around it, so that we can see its not just that people are being thrown away -- it's that certain folks especially are being thrown away, because they were never wanted in the first place.

Q2: Absolutely, yes. What you just said about that there are particular folks who tend to become dehumanized and disposed of in our society is very much true, but what I appreciated about your book and the stories that you tell in it, is that you're really approaching it from a space where you're talking about people...who we actually care deeply for who create harm and hurt us, and that is something that has often been an conversation in the community that I'm in, and that we're in,

think even more importantly than that is the understanding and importance, and the value of collectively, and recognize that no one person is going to have the answers, and anyone who says they have all the answers is lying to themselves or to you. And I think that the recognition that is part of that collective process that will ultimately help us build different futures, and come up with new questions. Because this movement for change, there's no end point. It's a continual revolution in the fundamental sense of that word, in continual movement. And you know, I think some folks could feel depressed about that. I choose to feel incredibly hopeful, because it means that we continually have the opportunity to ask ourselves is this the world we want to live in? And we continually have the opportunity to re-envision the part, as we grow, that we also want to grow. And so, to me, those are a lot of my principles and values, and I do believe that the idea of anarchism can be useful and helpful. I identify politically closest as an anarchist. I also think that to me, if a label is useful in encapsulating ideas in a way that helps move work forward, then use them, and if it doesn't, then keep the values and principles and move on. And also, as a Black woman, I want to recognize that a lot of what we call anarchism, which we think of as being created by these old european white dudes, are actually principles and values and ways of being and ways of knowing that communities of color have practiced for eternity. And so, I also think it important to acknowledge and recognize that this information is not something that is separate from oppressed peoples, it is something that actually comes from oppressed peoples and that, in may, ways it's about time traveling and having those values and principles help us to inform and envision different futures.

Q2: I love what you said about the label being useful only if it moves the work forward, and that actually reminds me a lot of things that I've heard people, particularly who do prisoner support, say, because it is a space where you're offering solidarity and you're offering support, and sometimes you're offering it to people who aren't ideologically on the exact same page as you, and it becomes an evolution of your relationship to that person and the reasons that you're in relationship to them. So I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about, beyond just about yr brother, and how you write about, your experience with supporting incarcerated people, and maybe, like, your best practices around that.

A: I mean, I'm of the mind -- my co-editor for *Octavia's Brood*, Adrienne Maree Brown, talks a lot about growing possibilities, and so I think that there is no one right way to do things. I think that there are actually, -- we live in a quantum universe so there infinite possibilities, and to me, infinite ways to create justice. And so for me, as long as folks are holding on to their values and principles, I think that the work can and should move in many different ways. So when we do *Octavia's Brood*, we do workshops, and we ask folks to say practicing "yes, and" rather than "no, but." I think that we live in a 'no, but...' society. There is one right answer, so all the rest must be wrong, right? This dichotomy which creates hierarchy. Rather than saying yes and all these things can be true and therefore there is no hierarchy, it's all decentralized, it's all here and accessible. So, you know, I am thankful for the campaign, I am thankful to the Black woman visionary who created and held that campaign for 10 years before it's -- this kind of mainstream resurrection. I've seen many positive things come out of the campaign and I think there are great conversations that are happening, and I think that to me, it is about capturing moments. And so I think that this is a moment that we can be using to ask these bigger questions so that it becomes about, "How do we fundamentally change a rape culture. how do we fundamentally shift the ways that institutionalized oppression have been ingrained in us, and how do we envision and begin to build something different?"

Q2: Absolutely, and I'm not surprised that in speaking with you, that I hear you asking all these questions, and really posing kind of how you think about the world in question form, because that really came across in book, in a way, that it really feels like the whole book is about posing questions. And certainly for folks who are familiar with your other work, that also questions is very much a through-line in the way that you do your work. And to us, we felt that questioning and kind of like seeking out more conversation and not seeking closure is very much like an intrinsically anarchist thing, and we wondering if you would talk a little bit about your relationship to anarchism.

A: Sure. Yeah, I definitely think that asking questions is incredibly important for many reasons. And you know -- a number of folks have been disappointed by the book, because they are like, "You just asked questions, you didn't give us the answers." [Laughs] Like, boo, if I had the answers, I would have done something along time ago. But I also

with things like accountability processes and different ways of trying to address harm at the community level, that -- where we don't want to throw people away, right? And we'll talk more about that question a little later on in the interview, but I'm curious because you mentioned prison abolitionism. What do you feel, when we talk about the end of prisons, what would need to be true of our society, in order for us to stop throwing people away?

A: Yeah. I think, you know, it's important to talk about what abolition is, and I think that Angela Davis has a great short book that she wrote called *Abolition Democracy* that's based on the ideas of W.E.B. Du Bois, and him talking about the fact that, you know, calling ourselves "prison abolitionists" is specifically and directly linking back to abolitionists who are fighting against slavery. and Du Bois was writing about slavery and said that, you know, abolition is not just the end of slavery -- it is the presence of justice for those who were enslaved. It is the ability to participate fully in society, so it's not just the tearing down; it's actually a replacement and a building up of those folks who had for so long been exploited and brutalized and terrorized. And I think that that's a very important and useful framing when we're talking about prison, because when we talk about prison abolition, often folks think only of tearing down the walls. They think of an absence. And the question becomes, well then, you know, if you wanna tear down the prisons, then what? And I think that for many prison abolitionists, we believe that abolition as a mind set is about ending this carceral mentality, this idea that punishment and retribution that prisons are founded on, but it's also about creating systems that actually focus on keeping communities whole and safe, and when harm is done, to healing those communities. And so I think it's important to recognize that abolition is not just about destruction. It's also about creation. And Alexis Pauline Gumbs, who is an amazing Black Feminist visionary thinker, wrote "What if abolition is a growing thing?" and I think that that idea, as abolition as growing, as a garden, as a plant, rather than as a wrecking ball, is a really powerful one.

Q1: Yeah, definitely. It seems like yeah, I -- it's hard for me to grapple with this question, super, like -- what might need to be true of our society in order for us to stop throwing people away is a really huge question that I sometimes don't really have great foot holds in -- the

carceral state, and capitalism, and all of these things like patriarchy, anti-blackness, misogynoir – all these things build walls between people, and you know, take the element of caring out of the human equation, which is a super huge shame. So I think approaching it like that makes a lot of sense to me.

Just to get back to the book, I was really taken with the style that the book was written in, the narrative or creative nonfiction, and I'm really interested in about the evolution of this book. Would you talk a little bit about how it changed stylistically throughout the writing process?

A: Sure. So, *Angels With Dirty Faces* focuses on three people stories: myself, my adopted brother Kakamia, who is currently incarcerated in CA, and James McElroy, also known as Jimmy Mac, who was a member of the Westies, which was the Irish Mob that ran Hell's Kitchen in New York from the 1960s to the 1980s, and also served as hit men for the Gambino family, for John Gotti, for the (???). And the book actually began because Jimmy Mac and my brother were incarcerated in the same place and got to know each other, and Jimmy Mac had never done an interview with any journalist, but, because of my brother, he agreed to do an interview with me. And through doing that process, he, you know, was like, do you want to write my biography? And I was like yes, this would be fascinating. But as I began to write the biography, I realized that it was something that was growing. I had been doing work around prisons and justice within prisons for, you know, 20 years or more then. I couldn't help but want to bring that into talking about Jimmy Mac to give it a framework and to be able to give a full picture of these ideas of crime, of violence, of prisons, of justice, that are so racialized, that are so much about class and gender and sexual identity, and are so much used as a method of social control. And so the book just grew from there to include my brother, to include myself, and then to include the work that I've done that has been a lot around Black Liberation political prisoners. And so, I really began to realize that I think the best way to change folks' minds is through stories. And I think that what really causes a deep shift within a person is being able to emotionally connect with someone else's experiences, and I think that is part of the reason that this system works so hard to dehumanize those who it is scared of, because if we are not people, if we are things, then there is less of a possibility of other folks in society empathizing, connecting, and then seeing the ways that the system functions. And so I felt like sharing those stories

think a lot of the problem is what we consider to be failure and success, and how we are judging community accountability process, especially when it has been serious harm that's been done around, especially intimate violence and sexual violence. And I think that we have the idea that has been, is very much a product of this capitalist society that we can find a quick fix for these things. And that we can create something that, at the end of the day, everyone will feel healed and will feel whole and will move on from. And I think that those are fairly unrealistic expectations. I think that there is no quick fix to healing, and there is no quick fix in the process of transformation. And so, for me, what I have really come to think about is, are the individuals and is the community, at the "end" of the accountability process, healed enough that they are able to continue their healing and growth and accountability in a less formal structure afterwards? And I think that if that was one of the criteria we may see accountability processes very different. But I think that we have to begin shifting the ways we talk about harm that is done, the ways we talk about who is doing this harm, because I think that, you know, and I think that things like the #MeToo campaign, and this response to individual men who have committed sexual assault and sexual harassment, is you know, we have to see that it is pervasive, that it is something that happens. We often talk about how many women and gender nonconforming folks have experienced sexual assault, but we don't talk about how many folks are assaulting, right? And I think that we have to talk about that, because that is where it is most awful and uncomfortable, to think about people in our lives, people we care about, people we respect, who are committing this harm. And yet, that is the case. And if we don't talk about that, we can't begin to actually transform our communities. And then we just rely on these individual instances and our response to them, which will continue to feel inadequate, unless we really begin to shift how we're thinking about it, and have these larger conversations about the culture, and the pervasiveness of intimate violence and sexual violence.

Q1: You touched on #MeToo and other initiatives which highlight survivors of sexual assault. I was wondering if you had any more reflections on how much they break from normative narratives, or alternatively do they uphold narratives, or is that not really a helpful framework for thinking about that?

live with every day, was something that was in the book. And that to me was the highest honor that I could receive in relationship to the book. But the response has been powerful from all sectors and I won the creative nonfiction award for the Oregon Book Awards in 2017, and that has kind of given a new round of interest in the book, so it's been really powerful to use the book as a way to have conversations in communities, and as a way for communities to begin having that dialogue of saying, "Well then, what do we do? And what can we create now that can be ready when harm happens in our community?"

Q1: Definitely. And congratulations for the award, and speaking for my own self, one of the most powerful aspects of the book, which seemingly I'm not alone in this, the fact that you name all these really difficult complexities that are just inherent to human interactions, and you know, the question of snitching and the question of the accountability process -- those were really, really powerful, powerful moments, and like very, very real. And I'd love to hear, has -- so the reception has been good, but I'd love to hear, has Kakamia or Mac's or even your situation, has there been any material changes to any of y'all's lives or situations because of *Angels With Dirty Faces*?

A: Well, unfortunately, Jimmy Mac passed away before the book came out so, it is one of my biggest regrets that he didn't get to see the book out in the world. And I worked hard with Kakamia -- because he is still trying to make parole and get out of prison -- to, you know, protect his identity as much as possible around that. But he has shared the book with folks who are also incarcerated with him and that has meant a lot to me because the book is very personal about him as well, and he has felt comfortable enough to share that with folks who have all given positive feedback to him about it.

Q1: That's awesome. You touched on accountability processes several times and I -- they are kind of the thorn in, you know, kind of a thorn in the side of the far left in a way, and they probably don't work as well as we like to believe that they work. I was wondering if you could reflect on accountability processes a little bit and kind of talk a little bit about -- can we boil down the failure of these processes to individual flaws or is there some sort of structural component, structural aspect to their consistently lukewarm results?

A: I think one of the biggest things, and I talk about this in *Angels*, I

would be an important way to create a shift. So, the creative nonfiction genre is kind of a giant snatch bag with a lot of things in it. But, you know, my book definitely -- it includes statistics, it includes history, it includes analysis. It also includes personal narrative. I'm a poet, so some of the writing incorporates the aesthetic of poetics. So, it definitely is a hybrid creature. But I think that actually how we live our lives is seeing everything as connected rather than in these neat boxes.

Q2: Yea, and that is one of the most remarkable aspects of the book. I can imagine that this is something that people comment on to you frequently about it -- the way you just charted that evolution of kind of talking about Jimmy Mac and then realizing that more stories needed to be included sounds very natural and organic, and yet the stories that you chose to include about yourself and your brother were highly personal, and I was wondering because, I suppose, you could have chosen to talk about some other folks who are incarcerated who you had learned about or corresponded with, but you chose to speak about yourself and your relationship with your brother and your family. I wonder if you could reflect a little bit on the choice not just to widen the scope of the book from one story to multiple stories, but specifically to those stories.

A: Sure. Well, as I was working on what I thought would be the biography for Jimmy Mac, I came to feel that I was really connected with Jimmy and with this process. I mean, the reason Jimmy spoke to me was because of my brother and, you know, Jimmy was calling me his niece, and said I was an "Westie," which I was like, "I don't know that I want to do that, but thank you," um, [laughter] and I felt like I was very much a part of the story. I think that any idea of objectivity is a fallacy in human beings. I don't think that you can be objective. And I think that folks who say they're being objective in their writing, in their creation, in their education, teaching -- they are either lying to you or to themselves. I think that the most principled thing is to be clear about your subjectivity, and to be clear about how your subjectivity affects the information you're presenting, and then to allow the reader to engage with it on that level. And so that's what I began doing. And as I was doing that, I was realizing that these conversations around harm, around crime, around violence, were things that I was also grappling with personally. And so, you know, my brother was arrested and tried -- at the age of 16 tried as an adult and

has served almost 30 years in prison at this point. And then, you know, I had actually gone through a failed accountability – a community accountability process with my partner at the time who had sexually assaulted me. And really recognizing that these stories are not stories that are easy to discuss, these are not stories that there is a neat simple ending that can be created, but these complicated, messy, difficult, painful stories are the ones we have to talk about, because if we don't talk about them, then any conception of justice we're creating will eventually derail when we get to places like that. And so I think that, for me, we have to go into those places that make us uncomfortable, that make us scared, that are painful, to be able to sit with the complexities and contradictions of humanity. And I think that's the only way that we can build new systems of justice, new processes to address harm, new ways to keep communities safe, that will actually both be effective and will embody the values and principles that we have and that we want for this new world.

Q1: Yeah. I couldn't agree more, and I think that that point just can not be overstated. There's no amount of times when, you know, having that information will ever be too much.

Q2: I wanted to say that one of the things that really challenged me in the book, when you talk about sitting with that complexity, you speak about how -- I'm sorry, can you pronounce your brother's name for me again?

A: Kay-kuh-mee-ah.

Q: Kakamia. That you talk about how Kakamia really resisted becoming an informant, and really didn't want to play that role, but eventually did, and that was really painful for him, it was difficult for you, and it really made me sit with the complexity of that because I think in the circles that I run in there's like this anti-snitch kind of thing, and it's this very knee jerk, kind of all of nothing kind of approach that can just be so harsh toward people who do that. And on the one hand, yes, it's a decision that we can condemn, but on the other hand, it's also -- you capture the horrible choice of that so well in the book. So I just wanted to say that, just for me, that was a moment where the story really forced me to sit with that complexity, so... thank you [laughs].

A: Yeah...thanks. I think that I just wanna be, I mean, Kakamia is anti-

snitch, and, you know, hates himself for debriefing. And also probably wouldn't be alive if he hadn't debriefed. And that both of those things that are in seeming contradiction with each other is absolutely true. I think it is important to take in to account context. I think that one of the things, one of the many things that is so flawed with the criminal legal system is the idea that people fit neatly in to categories, and human interactions fit neatly into categories, and so we can predict what needs to happen when a situation occurs. And I think one of the things that's really powerful about the idea of transformative justice, which is you know, prison abolition is a part of that, is the idea of saying, as we are living the values we have for this new world, how are we respecting that every human interaction is different, is unique, and how are we responding to that and creating situations that address that moment? I think that's one of the things that is so both challenging and powerful about transformative justice -- is that it accepts that each situation is unique.

Q1: I'm wondering about what the reception of the book has been, either critically or, if you've done book events, how have people received the book?

A: Well, the reception has been really good for the book. I think I definitely was very nervous about putting out the book for many reasons. Because the book is so deeply personally for myself, and for Kakamia and for Jimmy Mac, as well as other folks who's stories are partially told in the book, I wanted it to be as honest as possible, and I tried to be honest and accountable to those folks-- Jimmy & Kakamia read different versions of the book, they got to see the book and give feed back on it. I felt that was very important, especially writing about folks who are incarcerated, where so much has been taken from them. I did not want to take their stories and their experiences from them as well, and use it to my own end. So, even though I worked to try and make the book as honest and as real as possible, that also meant that all of us are kind of laid open for the world, which was you know a very scary idea, I think. And the response to the book has been really incredible and powerful. It's -- I think what has honored me the most is when folks who's family members are incarcerated, people who have been incarcerated, and folks who are survivors of sexual assault all say they felt like they saw themselves and their experiences reflected accurately in the book, and that the complexities of that which they