

“Everything that is done in the world is done by hope.”

— Martin Luther King, Jr. (January 15, 1929 - April 4, 1968)

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The Black Experience

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your last name from him?

A: Oh, that's my adopted brother Kakamia, and he got it from me. I was given my name when I was in high school, and he ended up taking my last name; we adopted each other. But, he's incarcerated in California now, and has been for 24 years. He was convicted at 16 and tried as an adult. He's 40 this year. But the amazing thing is he was just deemed eligible for parole, so as long as the Governor doesn't [veto] it, he actually is gonna get to come home which is pretty exciting.

For me, that poem about my brother is about looking at his tattoos. He's a tattoo artist, a visual artist, an incredible artist who has covered himself in these images that, you know, have political meanings that literally live on his body. We can read his body as a roadmap to what has been done to him, what he has done in response, and the person he's decided to be coming out of that. To me, he's living poetry.

So, I feel like that's what I try to carry into my work, taking those things that we hide, you know, and that we're told that we should be ashamed of, and try to bring it to the light and say that this is political.

Q: What is a political prisoner to you? Because it's a buzzword sometimes.

I think the term political prisoner is, you know a complex term because I think sometimes folks mean specifically prisoners who were arrested and unfairly convicted because of their work organizing on the outside. And sometimes folks say, well every prisoner is political because the condition of being imprisoned is a political condition in and of itself. The things people did to get there are because of their political conditions, right? The majority of the folks in prison are there for crimes that relate to drugs, which are survival crimes. Either economic survival crimes, where you're just trying to make money, or self medication survival crimes where you're just trying to make it through the day. So, I think it's really important to acknowledge that.

The piece I wrote about Sundiata Kote — he's an incredible organizer, a brilliant mind — who's been locked down for 40 years, is important to me because I think one of the functions of prison is repressing a generation of knowledge. We've lost some of our greatest minds to prison, and they're still sitting there. And it's so hard to reach out through those bars, but I think we have. The knowledge I've gained from being personally connected to Sundiata is invaluable, it's shaped who I am.

Q: You said in the book “Sometimes poetry doesn't even under-

stand itself,” so today, at this moment, what does poetry feel like to you?

A: I think the thing about poetry, is no one writes poetry to get rich. There are not rich poets [laughs]. So I think poetry at its core is emotion, and it is an attempt to connect with other people. I teach writing, and I always say there's a difference between writing and sharing that writing because I think a lot of times writers say, you know, “I don't have a specific audience in mind, I don't wanna have a specific impact, I just wanna put it out” and I actually think that that's bullsh**. You can write whatever you write, I've written things that were for me, because I did need to get it out, that I would never publish. But the minute you try to put that writing into the world, you have a reason, you have an intention, you have a goal in mind, even if it's just to have the world acknowledge that you exist for a moment.

Writers have to be conscious and responsible. For me I think poetry is one of the most powerful ways to connect with folks. So I think it is something that carries even more weight and responsibility.

Q: Is there a political prisoner you think should be brought more to light, that you haven't really seen out there?

A: I think all of them. I think of the fact that we have over 100 political prisoners from the Third World Liberation era, sitting in prison. There's Oregon Jericho, a member of the Jericho movement. There's a list of all those prisoners online (<http://oregonjericho.wordpress.com/>). I would just encourage everyone to send a card, send a postcard if you can't commit to an ongoing conversation. And I think for Portland especially, there's the case of Patrice Ford who is the son of Kent Ford, the founder of the Black Panther Party here. The state presented no evidence against him, instead what it did was utilize repressive laws to basically beat people down and take a plea bargain. I think that Patrice was targeted because he is the son of the founder of the Black Panther Party. He was targeted because he is a black person in Oregon. He was targeted because he is Muslim in an Islamophobic world, and he was targeted because he spoke out and tried to do what's right. He shows the intersections of all of our different oppressions, which we think of as isolated but are absolutely connected.

Imarisha's book of poetry is available for purchase at Powell's, both online and at the location on West Burnside; Amazon; St. John's Booksellers; and Reading Frenzy. On March 20 at 7 p.m., Imarisha will be doing a reading from the book at St. John's Booksellers.

Pacific University Celebrates Black History Month & Black Student Union

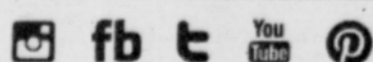


- ▶ *Who I Am: Celebrating Me*, a black history play
(free event, tickets required)
Thursday, Feb. 20, 7:30 p.m. | Taylor-Meade Performing Arts Center | Forest Grove Campus
- ▶ Poetry Slam with T. Miller
Friday, Feb. 28, 7:30 p.m. | La Hacienda Ballroom, 2020 Main St. Forest Grove
- ▶ An Evening with Angela Davis
(reschedule from February due to inclement weather)
Friday, April 18, 7:30 p.m. | Stoller Center | Forest Grove Campus

More information
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