TRANSCRIPT

"REIMAGINING DRUG POLICY THROUGH ARTISTIC EXPRESSION: MUSEUMS, MARCHES, AND MORE"

A conversation with Reginald Dwayne Betts, Jesse Krimes, and Kasia Malinowska

Moderator: Daveen Trentman

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ANNOUNCER:

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DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

Good evening everyone. Thank you all so much for being here. And a special thank you to Open Society for hosting (THROAT CLEARING) this program tonight. My name is Daveen Trentman. I am a cofounder of The Soze Agency. We are a creative agency based out of Brooklyn, New York. I am also the executive producer of the Museum of Drug Policy-- which is a pop-up art exhibition that is now-- traveling the world. We've been in four cities across the globe. And it's all made possible because of the support of Open Society.

So, tonight we are going to rap about art and the role of artists, and policy, and drug policy. And why the hell any of those things belong in a room together. And so what I think we're gonna come out with tonight is a really clear understanding of the intersection between-- bringing together artists and creative thinkers, and also policy minds and policy makers. And the real kind of magic that comes out of that collaboration and that commitment to that partnership.

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So, with that being said, I'm really thrilled to introduce my panelists. Tonight is gonna be a lot of fun. These are some of my favorite people on the planet. So Dwayne Betts is a poet and lawyer here tonight out of Connecticut. Kasia Malinowska is Open Society's-- global director of drug policy. And Jesse Krimes is a conceptual artist based out of Philadelphia.

So, to kick it off, Kasia, I'm gonna throw it to you. We're here on a Monday night and there's some significance to that. Tomorrow is a major day in the global drug policy reform movement. Tell me the importance of tomorrow.

KASIA MALINOWSKA:

So tomorrow is something that-- the U.N. marked as an "anti-drug day." And-- you know, those of you who follow the U.N., and actually follow the HIV crisis-- you all know that World AIDS Day, December 1-- (COUGH) sort of came into existent-- in ex-- into existence in support of people who are HIV po-- positive who are not getting enough services, sort of against discrimination.

That's not how the anti-drug day came about. The intention is actually not necessarily to be supportive of people who are drug users, those that need additional services, those that are struggling because of the war on drugs. It actually is sort of to celebrate drug control, as such. And-- and if one looks at-- if one looks at how countries are celebrating drug control as such, it actually is incredibly uneven, and, if anything, it's incredibly punitive.

I actually came to learn about that day-- maybe 15 years ago, actually, in Polish press, where I saw a picture of a stadium full of people, in China, with a couple of people kneeling in the middle, and being publicly executed. And that was the way China chose to commemo-- commemorate-- June 26th.

Those actions were actually criticized internationally. Not surprisingly. And so such overt sort of show-of-force is no longer acceptable. But what we do see is something a lot more subtle, which is, if you travel to-- I mean, multiple places on the planet, you will find out that, around June, people are not coming for methadone-- as diligently as they did-- in May, or April.

You'll find out that needle exchange programs are emptying out. Why? Because the police really wants to make the point that, on June 26th, they're gonna show increased surveillance, increased-- increased numbers of arrests-- seizures, and so on, and so on. So that sort of theme of punitive-- celebration of drug control is very much in place across the globe, with some exceptions only. And so, the sort of-- there's an anti-movement-- which-- which now has been-- has been in place for close to a decade, where, basically, it's about people who are articulating their support to people who are struggling-- with drug dependence. Who are speaking out on behalf of-- those who are incarcerated-- for-- drug possession, and so on, and so on.

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And it's an interesting movement, because it now runs acl-- across the globe. And we very much hope that, tomorrow, you get on social media, you do your thing. You-- submit-- you write your blogs, and actually speak-- in favor of reform, in whatever way you-- you-- you think you can do it best.

DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

Great. And for those of you, also, on Twitter, Instagram, (THROAT CLEARING) Facebook, we're using the hashtag #supportdontpunish-- in recognition of this day tomorrow. So please feel free to use that tonight and tomorrow. And I think it's also really important that-- us being here today in preparation of tomorrow-- we really are bringing artists to the forefront of this conversation-- because what we know to be true is that-- art and culture are so critical in-- they're so critical as weapons in the debate-- for drug policy reform.

And Jesse, you've shown work at the Museum of Drug Policy. And that work you created while you were incarcerated. So I wanna hear more about what that experience was like. As you-- were incarcerated, what inspired you? How did you create the work?

JESSE KRIMES:

Yeah. So-- I mean, just to, like, give some kind of context-- so I was indicted on a drug charge. And, you know, I'm from, like, a rur-- rural area outside of Philadelphia. And so, you know, I was indicted on a drug charge by-- the government. Ended up going into-- the local jail. And, you know, when I refused to cooperate, they shipped me from the local jail to a federal facility. Put me in solitary confinement for the first year.

I got caught with 140 grams of coke. But when I refused to cooperate, they found-- cooperating witnesses and unindicted co-conspirators. Ended up charging me with 50 kilos of drugs that were never found. No physical evidence. This was all through hear-say evidence, wis (SIC) i-- which is admissible in the federal system, but not in, like, state systems.

So that's also part of the reason why they wanted to charge me federally-- instead of through the state. Yeah. So I-- ended up arguing my drug weights. But what that effectively did-- so, instead of-- instead of being-- charged with the original 140 grams, my guideline range would've only been, like, 30 months to a 49 months-- sentencing range.

But, when they upped it to 50 kilos, my mandatory minimum was now 10 years to life. And, if they filed my prior, it was 20 years to life. And so, again, this is, like, a-- game that the prosecutors play to kind of leverage over you to get you to plead guilty. Or, you know, if you go to trial, like, you know, they'll-- they'll give you that kind of time. And so, you know, going into the system, this was all kind of new to me. Even though I had done, like, a state bid before, the federal system is, like, a whole different animal. But yeah. So I went in.

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Argued the drug weights at sentencing. And ended up getting found guilty of-- what was it? Five hundred grams of cocaine.

And so, for that, I was supposed to get a 100-month sentence. The drug gave me a 30-month of variance, which is 30-- the-- the largest variance that courts ever handed out. And so, instead of 100 months, I ended up getting 70 months. And there were, like, a lot of other things that went into that-- that particularly, like, relate to racial bias-- which, you know, I can talk about further if that's something we wanna discuss. But anyway, I don't wanna be too longwinded. So I ended up going into the system. And, you know, I was just really-- really angry, honestly, at, like, you know, facing that much time. Seeing, like, all these kind of-- tools and mechanisms that were being used against me.

And, even though I ended up getting a much lighter sentence-- there were a lot of friends in there of mine who ended up getting those 20, 30, 40-year sentences. And so I was just-- I mean, I was, like, angry. I was full of kind of, like, anger and rage-- at that system. And I was guilty, right? But, like-- that kind of time of-- for drug offenses, is ridiculous.

And so, like, I started putting a lot of that into the artwork that I was making. I started, like, disciplining myself and creating artwork as a way to, like, I don't know. Just, like, find some kind of self-worth in this environment. And find some kind of reason-- to, like, maintain my sanity under these conditions.

And so I ended up making, like, a large piece-- where I was transferring images out of the *New York Times* onto prison bedsheets, and then blending them together. And so it was a way to, like, introduce color into this environment, and also kind of escape from a lot of the things that were going on around me. But, I mean, it was really integral to my own survival-- being in that space.

DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

What does "large" mean? How big is that piece?

JESSE KRIMES:

So I would do it in sections. Each one was three by five. And, over three years, it ended up being 39 pieces and 15 feet tall, and 40 feet long. So that's, like, three years working 14 hours a day. Like, I didn't miss a day. It was that important to me to, like, be disciplined and-- and-- and take the power away from-- from the staff, and the institution, and, like, discipline myself. But use that in a way of, like, creating something positive-- where, like, I managed myself and I didn't-- I didn't create that space for other people to kind of s-- you know, have that power over me.

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DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

Yeah. And Dwayne, what you and Jesse share is that you're both formerly-incarcerated artists. But what's different is that you were incarcerated at a very young age. You were a teenager. So during such transformative years being a teenager-- were you an artist then? What role did art and creativity play when you were in prison?

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

Yo, I saw that piece. Was that the first time you showed that, when we met in-- in Jersey?

JESSE KRIMES:

Yeah. Yeah, that--

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

That piece was huge.

JESSE KRIMES:

--was the first time.

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

So I-- I was at a conference when he was--

JESSE KRIMES:

That was only part of it, too.

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

Yeah. And that's-- (LAUGHTER) I saw it, and I thought, "Man, dude stole a lot of fuckin' sheets to (INAUDIBLE)" (LAUGHTER) But-- but-- no, I mean, it's interesting, right? It's interesting me bein' on this panel, 'cause I-- I didn't have a drug case. I had a-- robbery case. I robbed somebody. I carjacked somebody. And I was 16. And I get sentenced to-- 23 years in prison. And then they-- but they suspended some time, and ran some time concurrent, so ultimately, I had to do-- nine-- I guess, ultimately, I had to do nine years. And subtracting good time, I did it about eight-- eight and a half years.

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And-- and it's interesting, though. 'Cause I-- I went in. I planned on being an engineer. And-- you know, just bein' 16, and needin' to-- needin' to have something to hold onto while I was incarcerated, I told myself, at 16, after I got sentenced, I said, I-- I would just be a writer, 'cause, you know, I always had something to write with. And I always had paper.

So I just (MAKES NOISE) figured, you know, I would be a writer. Which actually sounds really absurd to me, to-- to think back of, like, me being a 16-year-old kid facing nine years in prison, having ne-- having never been away from home for more than-- five days when I went to a basketball camp, and bein'-- bein' confronted with more than 3,000 days of incarceration-- makin' a decision to-- to be an artist, because I-- I believed that that would be somethin' that could anchor myself to-- to a reality that made sense.

But then I was askin' myself-- and this is the last thing I'll say, and-- and we can move on a bit. But I was askin' myself, like, to be a artist, and how does my work as a artist relate to-- to sort of the war on drugs, a-- and drug policy, more broadly? And-- and I think in the sort of recent past, I wrote a book called *Bastards of the Reagan Era*, where the whole book was k-- kind of, like, explorin' what it means for a community to be overrun with drugs. And what it means for people who are engaged in-- in the practice of sellin' drugs, and what it means for young people who grow up in that to-- to grapple with their own identity.

But, even beyond that, I realized-- that, while I was incarcerated, you know, I was writin' a lot of poems that touched on drugs, because it was just present. You know? It was a lot of people I knew in prison who were heroin addicts. It was a lot of people I knew in prison who sold drugs. And everybody didn't get locked up for those things. But, sometimes, that was on a peripheral of who they were.

And-- and I was always grappling with that as a writer. And so, what did the art mean for me? I think the art meant that-- that I was able to think with-- I was able to think with more nuance about what the system was doin'. And-- and creatin' poetry. And writin' essays forced me to grapple with, in a-- in a-- in a more-- a more contoured way-- the system I was existin' in. Because like Jesse said-- and I hadn't thought about this before. But I was guilty. And-- and I didn't-- I didn't challenge my-- my case, though, because-- I was, like, obviously guilty.

And I was facin' two life sentences. And it's-- (MAKES NOISE) and-- and the trial tax is real. But, as I was listin' to Jesse, I realized that a lot of people-- that one of the important parts of-- the-- the fight against the war on drugs, that-- that I think we don't conceptualize as much, talk about as much, is that, if you're facin' a 30 to 40-year sentence, and then they change the weight of the narcotics you have, and now you're facin' 100-month, or ten year to-- to life sentence, sometimes you go to trial, not because you're combatin'-- not 'cause you're challenging your guilt or innocence, but you go to trial because you're challengin' the fairness of the-- of the underlyin' sentence.

And-- and-- and you can't-- you can't-- you know, for me, i-- it's, like, inescapable. The creation of art-- and bein' a poet, and bein' from the kind of community that I came from,

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and l-- and-- and existin' in the United States at this time, if you talk about these issues, you cannot-- live, and not be confronted with this.

So even though I-- I committed a carjackin', I'm constantly talkin' to people who had drug cases, I'm constantly talkin' to people who dealt with addiction. I'm constantly talkin' to people who family dealt with the sort of adjacent concerns that come when you have a per-- a person in your family that's addicted to drugs.

And so that-- that bleeds into my work, and it bleeds into my work in ways that s-- that, sometimes, I'm not even conscious of. You know, the poem that I read in D.C. was-- was full about somebody who-- who was talkin' about the history of drug addiction in his family, and who ended up in prison for a long time, partly because of that. So it's-- it's-- it's-- it's basically, like, inescapable, and it's interwoven into all of my conversations. Not all of them. I mean, sometimes I talk about sports, but... (LAUGHTER)

DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

Only on the weekends. So Kasia, we have all of this amazing art, but what does it mean-- how does it apply to the drug policy reform movement? What can art-- maybe translate to masses of people that a traditional debate can't?

KASIA MALINOWSKA:

So-- the best I can do is just to share my own experience, because-- generally, art is not my-- area of expertise. But, you know, I think back to the AIDS crisis-- in end of '80s, and the beginning of '90s. And I think to times when I was working, actually, in Philadelphia at Children's Hospital, with moms who are HIV positive, and were coming to the clinic with-- children who are positive.

And, you know, this was early '90. It was intense. Medicines were-- I mean, there were no antiretroviral drugs at the time. There was a lot of death and-- (INHALE) and it was upsetting. And, you know, I had to function in that world, in a very professional manner. Right? So crying over a child with HIV wasn't an option.

And then, I went to see the AI DS quilt in Washington. And it was, just, (COUGH) an amazing-- it was an amazing portrayal of love and grief, but also a permission to cry. (MAKES NOISE) Because that's what people did. When-- when you think about the-- the AIDS-- the AIDS quilt-- on the Mall, you know, peo-- it was enormous. And you would just go there and-- panel by panel, and, by panel, sort of feel the grief and the loss. And it was okay to cry. And that, for me, was incredibly important. Because it was not okay to cry in the hospital, because it wasn't about me. It was about people that were coming for assistance, and they needed that assistance.

And my job was to be together, and to be professional. (INHALE) And so those spaces where it's okay, actually, to grieve and cry, I think, are incredibly precious and important.

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And, for me, that's what AIDS art actually gave me. An opportunity to do that. I then-- went back to my own country, to Poland. And there was a film that I brought with-- with me.

Actually, two films. One of them was-- one of them was *Suzi's Story*, and another one was *Troy's Story*. It was a guy who-- it was a m-- man-- a husband and a father who documented deaths of both of their loved ones-- to AIDS. And, again, having an opportunity to have a conversation about those movies with government officials in Poland that were extremely conservative-- HIV was entirely new. It was sort of a thing that was somewhere in the West, but not in Poland yet-- was just an-- an incredible gift-- because it actually-- you know, it showed what it is that we're talking about.

So-- so, for me, I-- I'm just incredibly grateful to people who are coming to the table around the museum, because that gives us space for all of those expressions. I've been to the museum in New Yo-- I've seen the museum in New York and London. And to-- and-- Montreal. But not Mexico. And, wherever I went, people with tears rolling down their face. Is-- you know, it is what we-- how we respond to the injustice. To the grief. To the anger. And everything else that needs to be expressed as we do the reform work.

DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

Yeah, and I think what we're seeing right now in the United States (HITS MIC) is really a contraction of the heart. People across our nation, and, really, across the globe, are feeling this darkness kind of overwhelm them in these times that we're in.

And what I see art being able to do is really open the heart, and ultimately, when we open people's hearts and we start changing minds, then we see policies start to shift. The great Paul Robeson said that, "Artists are the gatekeepers of truth. They are civilization's radical voice." So, Jesse, I wanna hear from you. What is the role of the artist right now, and-- what has been your experience as an artist trying to impact policy?

JESSE KRIMES:

I mean-- first, I mean, it's not really for me to say what the role of the artist is for e-- for everyone. I mean, it's, like, so different across, like, every context. And so-- like, the role of the artist for me-- is to make work that is, like, genuine and true to yourself.

So for me, in order for artwork to even be impactful, it has to be honest. Today, I think there are, like, a lot of artists who, like, f-- try to get into an issue, and try to, like, work through an issue, because it's, like, what they want to talk about. But, sometimes, it's not always, like, a genuine thing that they're working through.

And so, first and foremost, I feel like you need to-- it needs to be real to you. 'Cause it needs to come from that place. 'Cause it-- if it can't impact you, and it doesn't help you work through something in any way, you're not gonna be able to help anybody else see something in a new way. And so, yeah. I mean, I think just as varied as all of the issues, and all of the

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artists are, the-- the role is to be genuine and true to yourself-- in what you create. But then, also, think about how what you c-- create can have a broader impact, right? Like, how-- how what you make-- can be attached to other things that can be insightful, or allow people to come at something in a-- in a way that they may not have thought about it.

So it's, like, humanizing, in some sense. But it doesn't always have to be humanizing. Sometimes it can be illuminating in-- in other ways. Right? And just make people feel something differently. Yeah. And so-- personally, for me, like, as I make my work-- and what's been really important to me lately is that I've been ma-- like, the work I made in prison-- I've come home. I've shown it in museums. I've shown it in galleries. I've done talks.

And, you know, what I've recognized more is that the people who connect with the work are already allies. Right? And so, like, thinking of myself as an artist-- as a white guy from, like, rural Lancaster County outside of-- outside of-- Philadelphia, it's, like, "What's my role?" Like, "What is my role in my artwork, particularly, given where our country is today?"

And it's, like-- I feel like part of my responsibility as an artist is to go back to the community where I'm from, and talk to people who think opposite-- on a lot of these issues. Or who just don't actually have an understanding of what some of these issues are-- to be real.

And so, like, when people get an accurate, or more accurate des-- depiction of what some of these things are-- like, people are willing to come to the ca-- the table. And so, for me, lately, I've been trying to make artwork and, like, not try to get people to come to it, but take it to them. And, like, figure out strategic ways to make that happen, to kind of broaden these conversations outside of, like, our bubbles. And so, like, that's what I've been thinking through. But, again, I think it's different for e-- for every artist.

DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

Yeah. Dwayne, I wanna hear from you on this. Do you feel a duty, as an artist? And just to-- to second that, is you, I feel like, approach this from a really unique lens, because you're also a lawyer. And so does being a poet-- transform the way that you view the law?

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

He's, like, "Yo, did she say he's a lawyer? 'Cause I know he said he did eight and a half years in prison. (LAUGHTER) There's no way (INAUDIBLE)." I don't-- let me see. Well, I guess, I-- I agree with some of that. I mean, again, I can't say what it means to be a artist with everybody. But I think one of the reasons why artists-- haven't typically-- like, the connection between art and advocacy, I think, has gotten stronger over the past few years.

And-- and I think one of the reasons why artists haven't been more closely aligned to organizations has been because organizations frequently want-- like, they want talking points. (LAUGH) And-- and a talking point for a artist is propaganda. You know? So, for

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instance, if I write a poem-- if I write a poem, and-- and-- and it's about somebody who's abused their wife, but the guy was a alcoholic, or the guy was strung out on crack-- like, both of those things are true. Right?

But, from a policy perspective, they aren't actually worried about the domestic violence, because that complicates the-- the issue of how we punish somebody when they have, like, multiple things going on in their lives, and when they've committed different kinds of crimes. Right? So, as a artist, I'm'a write somethin' that complicates the narrative and frustrates the way we think about something, and frequently, organizations, they don't want that shit.

And they don't wanna engage with that. And the other thing is-- is, like, for re-- for me, is really interesting, is, I was-- as a poet, I wasn't intelligent an-- and-- for a long time. Right? Like, we don't go to poets. I think the only poet—and he got an amazing new book out-- Terrance Hayes-- is, like, the only poet that I've seen on CNN talkin' about things other than a recently released book. Like, somebody that's offering commentary on the world at large.

'Cause, usually, they don't go to artists for that. Although we got a huge, and a long history, of artists bein' active voices around issues. Wendell Berry, for example, in Kentucky, always talkin' about environmental issues. And those aren't voices that we go to.

But I wrote a memoir. And because I wrote in complete sentences, motherfuckers was, like, "Yo, (LAUGHTER) he been to prison. Let's put him on a panel." And-- and the idea was that-- right? Like, I wasn't on panels to talk about my memoir at all. You see what I'm sayin? Like, I was on the panel to talk about the issue, because the memoir suggested that I could talk about the issue, absent whatever was said in the memoir.

Whereas, the poet-- well, li-- they-- they don't think of poets in that way. And so, you think if you're gonna invite a poet, you want 'em to read poetry. And, if the poetry doesn't support the issue in a exact way that we need to sell, I don't wanna use it. As a lawyer, what I've tried to do is-- (LAUGH) I mean, I-- you know, I-- I became a lawyer to-- (LAUGH) to assert that I had intelligence. No, that's-- (LAUGHTER) no. But, like-- (LAUGH) so that-- but-- but I became a lawyer because I recognized that, like, art and advocacy exist in one way, but havin' been-- a victim of my own actions, and a victim of the law-- and I wanna be clear, right?

I was a victim of the crime that I committed. Right? I committed a crime. I was a victim of that decision. But I was always a victim of the law that decided that the best place for me at 16 years old was a prison. And-- and we're-- you know, I-- I spent my first ten days in solitary confinement. I did close to two years over the period of my sentence in solitary confinement. I went to super maximum security prisons.

And that was the law that mandated actors to make those kinds of decisions. And I felt like-- you know, I'd been grappling with this as a artist, but, if I went to law school, I could more efficiently, maybe, grapple with the ideas that animate what the law means.

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And, in turn, that has animated some of the poetry I write. Because now, my poetry becomes more nuanced. I've worked in a public defender's office for a year. And I recognize that, "Look. I don't think this kid should go to prison, but I heard the-- the mother's voice-- or the-- the victim of the mother talkin', and I wanna acknowledge that, and how to grapple with that." Or, like, "I don't think this kid should go to prison for a small amount o-- amount of cocaine, right?"

And I know that he didn't go to prison for that. But he went to prison for his fourth drug charge. And why did he get a fourth drug charge, right? And what does that say about the systemic failures-- and now-- you know, one of the reasons is that, like, if somebody-- I don't wanna point to anybody in the audience, 'cause this is being recorded, and I don't wanna (LAUGH) suggest that any of you sell drugs.

(LAUGH) But, like, say somebody in the audience gave me a package, and it was worth $200. And I got picked up off of the street with that package, and they took that $200. And my-- my public defender was great. And he got me a completely suspended sentence because it was a first-time drug offense. I still owe somebody $200. And nobody is havin' a conversation with me about, "How do I pay back this drug dealer, who though that's a quote, unquote, 'non-violent crime,' my l-- not givin' him his money leads him to want to do violence on me?" So then the kid comes back in again, because he's not really a good drug dealer at all. Right?

(LAUGHTER) And so, now, his $200-debt has been compounded to, like, $400. And you add the money that he paid to get bonded out. And the point is, like, as a-- as a lawyer, it has-- it has allowed me to complicate the ways that I think about how we get, basically, trapped in to this-- this vicious cycle. And it's, like, multiple vicious cycles goin' on.

And I hope, as a artist, like, I could animate those things without lettin' my work be reduced to propaganda. Now I-- I don't know what other people do. 'Cause I-- you know, most of us are gonna be forgettin' anyway-- be forgotten anyway, so I'm not really that concerned with the way other people approach art, but I think I-- I try to do it like Jesse to say, you know-- try to find my audience and-- and I try to do a thing that's true to myself. And I try to do a thing that's true to myself based on the information that I've gleaned from all of these other worlds that I've lived in.

DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

Uh-huh (AFFIRM). What I think we're seeing is artists really tapping into these things that have been true for so many decades. And now the artwork is really starting to create that. And Kasia, I'm wondering, from your perspective, are we starting to see a shift in public sentiment around drug (HITS MIC) policy?

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KASIA MALINOWSKA:

If you ask me that question a year ago, I think my answer would've been slightly more positive. But generally, yes. Yes. I think-- I think-- we are experiencing a shift. How much of a shift, I think, is debatable. And it's very much-- I think what the-- the last election in the U.S., but also recent election in Colombia, what's coming up in Mexico-- elections in the Philippines a number of years ago, where Duterte was elected-- I think all of that shows us how our wins and losses are very much attached to the sort of political life of a country.

Because, you know, i-- in Europe, for most part, yes. Canada, obviously. The progress is obvi-- is clear. In the U.S.-- states that manage to legalize, continue to have it legal. You know, is-- is that under threat? Obviously, it's up for discussion. But I think, generally, the narrative has shifted. I think-- I think it's clear that what happens in Philippines is awful and unacceptable.

And there isn't anyone in their-- right mind that would-- publicly back such policy. So, of course. We-- China no longer executes in the stadiums with people chanting, "Kill! Kill!" So, of course. We're moving in the right direction. I think that-- yeah. The elections in-- in Latin America this year-- are going to-- show us h-- how much of a bys-- backsliding are we able to accept. And where do we need to go next?

DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

Yeah. (SIGH) So Jesse, I kind of wanna shift this a little bit, because I think it's-- important to pull out that you and Dwayne-- both do have the experience approaching this as formerly-incarcerated artists. But I think-- generally, there's major misconceptions about the type of work, and the quality of work that formerly-incarcerated artists-- create.

And-- and it is an honor to share the stage with you, to share partnership with you in our work that we do. So what is-- do you think is the biggest misconception about artists who are incarcerated now? Who are formerly incarcerated? And what do you want the audience to walk away with knowing?

JESSE KRIMES:

Yeah. So, I mean, I think goin' back to what Dwayne touched on even, like, when he was talkin' about his memoir, or-- or his book, right? Like, when people-- one of the big issues is, like, when-- when people want you to do something as an artist who's-- who's been to prison-- like, a lot of the work gets pigeonholed into that kind of, like-- that that tight narrative, and, like, the complexity of the work gets overlooked.

Or, in many cases, like, a lot of these artists just never even get seen. Right? So there are, like, tons of artists who are making, like, critically-- criti-- critically, like-- established work, right? Th-- th-- like, works that you could see in MoMA. In the Whitney. But because, like,

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a lot of the-- the social failings-- like, there-- there's no support networks. There's no real pathways for people to use their creativity to connect into organizations like this, or to connect into-- other funding organizations.

And it's, like-- so there's this-- there's this whole kind of pool of wasted brilliance-- across the country that never gets the-- the-- the adequate amount of support. And so, I mean, I think, like, particularly when we're talking about issues of incarceration-- in whatever form that is-- whether that's, like, drug policy, or violence, or whatever it is-- there needs to be a centering of voices from people who have lived the experience.

And so, like, what happens o-- often is, like, a big blue chip artist will get invited in, who makes work about an issue. And while that's, like, cool, and that's important, like, you're ignoring a lot of the other artists who can make that kind of work, or are making that kind of work, and they're not ha-- they're not being centered. Their voices aren't being included. And so, like, that's what I would like to-- the audience to know, is that, you know, when you're thinking of-- or if you're in a position-- where y-- where you're trying to organize something around any issue that's pertaining to incarceration-- always make it a point to search out people who are directly impacted.

So, like, if you're thinking of, like, a big name person to come out and talk about this issue, like, that's okay, but you should also partner with someone who's actually lived that experience, as well. And-- and think about ways to, like, support that artist.

And so, like, though, like, what we created last year, the Right of Return Fellowship, you know, it's very intentional. It's a fellowship designed specifically to-- support-- formerly incarcerated artists across all disciplines. And so, to date, that's, like, the only fellowship in the country that is geared, specifically, towards that. There are others that do that, but it's, like, you know, we encourage formerly incarcerated artists to apply. And so I-- I think there needs to be a much more kind of intentional push-- to include artists.

The misconceptions is that, you know-- I-- I-- I mean, I don't know what it is. That they're not technically gifted, or, like, conceptually as gifted. But there's-- there's definitely, like, some kind of stigma around including-- formerly-incarcerated artists at-- at, like, the-- the upper echelons of, like, a lot of these organizations that are going on.

DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

Yeah. And I think if we look historically just at movements, in general, if the LGBT movement was led by straight people, it would not have had the same impact. If other movements wouldn't have been led by the people that are directly impacted, there's just no way that they would've had the same impact. And what I always come back to with criminal justice reform, and-- is that we're not-- I don't think we've reached the point yet that we can say, like, people who are directly impacted are leading that movement.

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And we've had so many critical heroes in this movement who are-- who are yelling the message as loud as they can from the mountaintops that those who are closes to the programs, are closest to the solutions. And we know this to be true. We can see it historically. So, Dwayne, I wanna know. How do we center artists who are directly impacted?

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

(UNINTEL) so one, I think, it's-- it's complicated. And it's complicated even in Jesse's answer, because, you know, you can read Jesse's answer in-- in two ways. One is that-- it's another fellowship that he's part of is great, because they invitin' people who have been incarcerated to do work that has nothin' to do with bein' incarcerated.

So-- so frequently, it's sort of, like-- "Do you have any wounds? Are the wounds that you have on display for the world in the work that you create?" (SNAPS FINGERS) And-- and so, when we say, like, "What is the-- what i-- what are the challenges?" Well, one challenge is that-- like, bein'-- one challenge is that you can't have an artist and expect them to-- to-- to just reproduce their incarceration. I mean, they might not do that.

Now this is my obsession, but it-- my-- it's my obsession in the same way that, like, Milton's obsession was the church. You know? Ain't nobody criticizin' Milton for writin' about the church all the time, so, you know, I write about prison all the time. I might choose not to. But I think the-- the other part about it, though-- and this is the part that-- like, I don't know if those closest to the problem are closest to the solution.

My kids are always to the problem, and they are not close to any solution. (LAUGHTER) Right? It's, like, you know-- and I think-- and I think the-- I think that that sounds great. But what it should say-- what it should say is there are some people who are closest to the problem that are closest to the solution. And those people are bein' ignored. And those people aren't bein' cultivated.

And those people aren't bein' d-- developed. 'Cause, shit, if the problem is in the courthouse, it ain't-- like, no motherfucker I would ever hire to be my attorney that didn't have a law degree. But they are actually closest to the problem. Like, if you've been sentenced to life, you are closes to the problem of life sentence. But, if you don't have the technical expertise that comes with gettin' the law degree, and comes with gettin' a l-- gettin' a law degree that allows you to work at the kind of elite institutions that gave you trainin' and exposure to how to handle really complex problems, you, in fact, are not close to the solution, right?

And so I-- I think-- when we say stuff like that, I think my challenge with that is that, i-- i-- is, I think it-- it belittles the kind of work that those who are close to the problem, and close to the solution, have done to be both. Right? And there's a lot of people who have done the kind of work to be both, but don't get supported by institutions, because those institutions (COUGH) have been led to believe that people who have been incarcerated haven't done the work.

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You know, one of the things that-- that Jesse first said-- right? He didn't say, "Yeah, you know, I was locked up, and I did these sheets. And I was tearin' up sheets and-- and creatin' these images." He was, like, "Well, I decided to do three by five inches, and, ultimately, over a period of 14 hours per day, for three years, this is was I created."

And, even in his tellin' the story, he was informin' you about the technical precision that he was able to build by workin' 14 hours each day. He didn't say, "I was incarcerated, and--" no, it's, like, "No, I did the kind of singular work that everybody does to be a master artist. That is what I'm tellin' you a story of. I'm not simply tellin' you a story of this thing that I created."

And so my thing is the misconception is that people don't understand, it, is many of us who have done those kind of things. And some of us who have done those kind of things aren't prepared, today, to lead a movement. But are prepared today to be mentored. The first time I hear of Soros was, like, 2010. And-- and-- and I wasn't at law school. And I wasn't a lawyer. But I had a justice fellowship. And I was able to meet a lot of lawyers. And I was able to be engaged with a lot of advocacy work. And I was a-- expert, at least, on what it meant to be a juvenile who was incarcerated. And I was a expert on the h-- on the sort of history, and the mechanisms, and the state laws that led to that.

And it was never a single person in the field that said, "Dwayne, you know, it's a ceilin' about how far you can go in this work right now, because you don't have a degree that trains you in a certain way to do a certain kind of work. Most of us have law degrees. Have you ever thought about law school?"

Like, nobody ever said that to me. And then I ended up at Yale Law School. And so my thing is how many people are like me, who, like, didn't get an opportunity to even imagine what the ceilin' should be? I think that's the misconception. The misconception is that you meet somebody that's formerly incarcerated, and their ceilin' is bein' on your panel. Right? And-- and-- and we aren't on this panel 'cause we were formerly incarcerated, though, right? That was, like, some added shit. Daveen was, like, "Y'all are great. And you were formerly (LAUGHTER) incarcerated. So, fuck it. Let's do it."

But, like, a lot of times, people who are formerly incarcerated get invited to 'em panels just because they were formerly incarcerated. Like, that shit is a skill. (LAUGHTER) It's, like, you know, "We have this person, you know, who's a doctor, who works and runs this institution. We have this person who has been an attorney, litigatin' death penalty cases for the past 20 years. And we have Joe, who served 15 years in prison for, you know, heroin-- for-- for heroin traffickin'."

It's, like, "What is his expertise in?" And-- (LAUGHTER) and I think that we-- we do that far too often. And it's sort of misconception is that our expertise should be limited to our incarceration, or is limited to our own incarceration, when, in fact, those of us who are able to do a good job is because we've developed expertise in the same way that everybody else in the world develops expertise. By, like, hours and hours of work, and study, and commitment, and dedication.

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DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

I wanna just push you on that, too. Because I'm curious. So it's, like, that's true. And so how do we-- how do we translate that to funders, to organizations? To-- where's the pushback come from?

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

Because I'm a (UNINTEL), I'm just gonna shout out OSF, right? I know that, like-- like, OSF, and for the Soros Justice Fellowships, they do a great job of bein' very intentional about the kind of candidates that they choose to support. And it is frequently those who were formerly incarcerated. And it was frequently those who were workin' in the system in different spaces when, like, every year they give out, you know, 20, 30, however many fellowships they give out. They could fill that up just by law students from elite-- graduatin' from elite law schools who apply.

And I know (UNINTEL) those folks apply, 'cause a lot of 'em are my friends, and they, like, "Damn, Dwayne, you know, I ain't even-- shit. I ain't even get an interview." And I look at the people who get interviews and I'm, like, "Thank you." I'm, like, "This organization is bein' quite intentional. And they're not givin' you extra credit because you came from an institution that groomed you for this kind of interview." They're, like, flattenin' out the playin' field and sayin, "Let me think about ideas. And let me think about strategies." And you got-- you got-- you got Jesse, and-- and-- (SNAPS FINGERS) what's my man name--

DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

Russel (UNINTEL)--

JESSE KRIMES:

Russel--

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

And Russel. You got Jesse and Russel-- like, "Okay, let's-- let's-- let's work with Soze, and let's do this fellowship that is for the formerly incarcerated." And because-- (CLAPS HANDS) because-- Soze has credibility in the field, it's clear that the people who get that fellowship aren't gettin' it just because they were formerly incarcerated.

An-- and you got some other organizations who are tryin' to be more-- intentional about the people they hire. You got-- you got-- you know, you got-- man. I can't even remember these people (LAUGHTER) names. What's-- (LAUGH) you got Glen S-- you got Glenn Martin's organization. O--

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DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

JustLeadership--

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

Just--

JESSE KRIMES:

JustLeadership.

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

--oh, you got Glenn Martin's-- f-- (LAUGHTER) okay.

DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

So we're seeing--

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

I--

DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

--I mean, we're seeing a push forward on this. And-- before we go to the Q&A, I just wanna-- I think it's important, because Kasia, you're here representing a global voice in your work.

And, tonight, we had two people who are directly impacted by U.S.-based policies. But what's important for our audience to know about the global community, and those voices who aren't elevated, that are directly impacted from drug policies across the globe?

KASIA MALINOWSKA:

Well, what's important to know-- what's important-- it's a bit of an obsession of mine, but I think what's really important to know is the Philippines. And it's important to know about the Philippines because I think we've reached-- a level of brutality and-- yeah. The level of brutality, in the name of the war on drugs, that has not been acceptable ever before.

And so it's important to know about it. And to note it. And to speak about it in any way you can, because that level of brutality, unfortunately, is on the table as one of the options. And

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so if you look at what's happening in Bangladesh, if you look-- if you look at what's happening in Indonesia, and some of the discussions that it's okay to just point and shoot-- I mean, all of this is-- yeah. We've pushed the boundaries of what's acceptable in an acceptable space.

So-- so I think it's important to watch it. And it's important to speak out against it. And, again, who told us about all of this? It was the photographers. It was the photographers that were willing to go out on the street at 11:00 o'clock at night at the risk to themselves and actually photograph, photograph, photograph, and send those pictures into the world.

And so I-- again, I-- I just have tremendous amount of respect and-- admiration for people who do this work. So-- so that's important to know, that the boun-- the boundaries got pushed. The same way they got pushed in the U.S. when we look at the children, right? Of-- of immigrants stopped at the border. So-- so I think speaking up on that, speaking up on how unacceptable it is that we're going into that place, is important.

I think it's also important to celebrate the good stuff that's happening. Let's celebrate Canada. Right? I think there's been a lot of-- a lot of discussion around Uruguay. Many of you will know that this is the first country that-- regulated cannabis on a national level.

Canada coming to that table, a large G7 country, is going to be important. So I think both. The-- dramatic-- failures and the great-- and the great wins-- need to be talked about. And they need to be talked about in reports, in academia. And all those-- all those ways we know how to talk. But they certainly need to be represented by-- by people who are artists in a way that is heart-opening, soul-opening, and inspiring, as well.

DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

That's exactly right. Thank you all so much. We're gonna take some questions. (APPLAUSE) We're going to take some questions from the audience. My colleague Oliver here in the white is going to be-- walk around with microphones. So, if you have a question-- just please raise your hand. Oliver, we got a question here in the front row, middle section--

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Actually, it's not a question. More or less a comment-- a few comments perhaps. I would like you to talk about a-- art therapy. The healing process of it. Especially-- in the world of HIV and AIDS. It would be a good idea to have people-- living with HIV and AIDS to basically write their stories, because many times, the public does not have much of an idea of what living with HIV. They hear, but they don't really know what exactly a person who's living with HIV is going through.

I just would like to make one little correction to the lawyer. I believe-- once you-- once you are a lawyer, and you have a license, that is (UNINTEL) probably easier to have elite

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training, or training for whatever organizations. But, once you have your license and you are (UNINTEL) enough, you can go out and do what you have to do. You can become a great lawyer without the elite-- elite backup. Thank you.

DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

(WHISPERS) Let's take mabey a couple, and then respond.

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

Yeah. That make sense.

DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

Great. So we're gonna take a couple more questions-- before we respond here in the front. Oliver?

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

So there's been a piece of drug policy art in the news the last couple of days. Some sculptor took 20 tons of metal, bent it into a shape of a bent spoon, and erected it in front of the Purdue Pharma headquarters. And has now been charged with a felony. I'm not sure exactly what felony, for doing that. And has taken a lot of heat on the grounds the bent spoon is stigmatizing. So I'm just curious about what people think about that. (THROAT CLEARING)

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

I'll just take the first-- the-- I-- I don't think I was making that point about, like-- I wasn't making a point that you have to go to an elite school, or be an elite lawyer, to work at elite institutions. I was just makin' a point that a lot of elite institutions only train-- hire lawyers, or summer interns, that go to, like, the top-ten schools in the country. And then it just becomes much more difficult. And I was makin' that point as a challenge to the system, not as, like, support for the system as it exists.

In some organizations, like PDS, it's-- it's, like, frankly oppose to that. And they get-- you know, they hire law students from all over the country. And they don't just hire law students from the top three or four schools. But I worked at the ACLU. And I saw all of the people they hired. And I was in conversations with people at the ACLU, where they just frankly said, "We can't find people who were formerly incarcerated that—to have these jobs." And so I kind of-- i-- in that case, I'm just sort of speakin' of experience for those institutions. As-- as far as the art therapy, I-- I don't know. I have no-- I-- I have no clue. And, as far as that goes, I hope dude has a great lawyer that's-- (LAUGHTER) that's free. I hope somebody

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takes that case for free. And I actually think that that's amazing. And I hadn't heard of it. And I'm gonna look it up soon as-- soon as I leave here. I think that's-- that's pretty amazing. I wonder how he did that, though. I mean, he had to be, (LAUGHTER) like-- he had to (NOISE) be a ninja and a genius (LAUGHTER) to do that under the cover of night.

DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

I've seen that piece. And I-- I thought about retweeting it, but the hesitation I had around it is-- while I think it's incredible, because, in my very humble opinion, is the role of the artist is to really be disruptive, and to tell these radical truths-- but what I think is so dominant is the U.S.-focused narrative that we have in opioid crisis-- which is true. We do. I personally lost my brother to a heroin overdose, so I'm very familiar with this crisis.

But, you know, 5.5 billion people across the globe don't have access to pain medication. And that is something that the mainstream media is not talking about. So I think that impor-- that piece is super critical here in the U.S. But I think there's also a more global context that Kasia just referred to-- that we need to start weaving into our other-- U.S.-focused conversations. Oliver, do we wanna-- this gentleman here in the middle?

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER #2:

Well, I think one of the things that really jumps out at you, if you look at the data, is that the damages to the-- the catastrophic nature of mass incarceration, here in the United States, just as an example, and in-- and in, I guess, if you wanna go to the Philippines and look at mass murder, and (UNINTEL) outstrip the-- the-- the mortality associated with drugs, per se.

Not as man-- not nearly as many years of life are lost to drug overdose deaths as there are to years of life lost to incarceration, which is ten, 20, 50 times as great. So to have art turned on that is just the right-- it's just the right-- focus, I think, because that's the one-- the drugs, actually, turns out, can be very useful. Witness the effect of having access to marijuana in certain states, and that drop in the overdose rate. And how little the federal-- federal government is not funding any research to find out how that works in this country.

You know, there's a-- there's a total denial of the beneficial effects of drugs-- except making a lot of money for some companies. But, you know, any of us who have been sick with something, psych-- needs psycholo-- anti-depressants, let's say, it turns out ketamine's the best anti-depressant that ever came along.

And it was a-- demonized drug. Cannabis was a demonized drug. The most put in prison. And now-- I'm-- I'm on the medical marijuana program in New York for a-- an injury to my leg. And it's a wonderful pain reliever. And my doctor wrote a letter saying, "Opiates are not the right-- medicine for this guy's problem." So I think to-- to-- to focus on suppressing the punishment, and recognizing, at the same time, the many benefits that are available in a lot of drugs.

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The-- this business of micro doses of LSD on a regular basis that people are using now. And they talk about how it helps them center their lives. And they can think clearly about what they want to be, and who they are. You know, 'cause the dose is the right dose.

When the dose was, you know, gallons of LSD, you were crazy from it. Those-- most of us had that experience one time or another. (LAUGHTER) You know, like-- the only way we drink is a gallon of rum at a time, for example. Alcohol wouldn't work in that context. And the concept that something useful for dealing with a complex, and-- and conflicted society full of-- contradictions and hypocrisies-- the drugs come in real handy around that, in terms of your emotional balance. And I think it's very hard--

DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

So we're gonna want to be able to take one other question. Do you--

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER #2:

Yeah, sure.

DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

--have a question? Okay. Do you have a question with it? That's okay if you do--

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER #2:

Well, how can we-- how can we focus the artistic energy on this phenomenon of mass incarceration, the punishment, when we have to recognize the benefits of these drugs in many ways-- aside from Purdue's ability to make billions of dollars (LAUGH) on the most dangerous versions of the-- of-- of-- of the distribution of drugs?

We used to talk with Ethan at Princeton about, "What would the system look like for legalization?" "Oh, it'd be, like, the pharmaceutical system. You go to a drug store and you get your drugs." Look at the example of that with opiate pain--

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

Jesse—

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER #2:

--medications.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

--got that one. (LAUGHTER) Jesse (INAUDIBLE)--

JESSE KRIMES:

I got that.

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

Jesse got that question.

JESSE KRIMES:

I mean-- f-- for real, I've-- I mean, (COUGH)-- it's-- it's (COUGH) pretty common sense. (COUGH) I mean, we're talking about punishing (COUGH) people for drug use-- drug sales when-- this is a-- more of a social issue, right? It shouldn't be a legal, punitive issue in the first place. And, like, going back to, like, a lot of other, like, social-- social things that get ignored, right? So, like, we're-- we talk about mass incarceration and all of these things, but that's kind of, like, the backend approach.

Like, what's the frontend appo-- approach? Like, what leads to mass incarceration? Obviously, it's, like, very shitty policies. And, like, moral decisions by people in power. That's one part of it. But, like, also, like, economics, right? Like, what's happening in communities that drives people to wanna use drugs to self-medicate? To, like, detach from society? To not communicate with people?

Like, what's wrong with-- world our country's, like, c-- with communities, like, s-- individual's self-worth, right? Like, why do we search for all these other things in all these other places when you can that in here? And so, like, when-- even when you go into prison-- like, that's not being addressed-- before you go into the prison system. And it's not being address in the prison system.

And so, like, you go in and, like, all of the r-- I've been through every rehabilitation program in the federal system. RDAP. It's, like, the shittiest program possible. All they do is try to get you to identify the-- the negative decisions you're making-- like, how do you identify that? What are your triggers? And then there's nothing else to replace that.

Like-- we need to be d-- s-- talking to people, like, "What makes you feel good? What-- what are you good at? How can we build you in-- in whatever you're interested in?" And that's the thing-- like, once you build-- for me, it was art. And, like, now art work i-- is equally-- just-- gives me the same kind of self-worth that I was getting from doing drugs-- you know, it's artificial self-worth, but it provides something in that moment from doing drugs, and from selling drugs.

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Like, feeling like I was the man because I had all this money, and I could do all these things, when I was-- like, came from a poor background. Very poor background. And so it's, like, what-- what are we providing before prison, in prison, after prison? Like, what are we providing to build people, so that-- that self-worth and, like, having to rely on drugs, is some kind of medicated system, or having to sell drugs to get economic benefits? Like, those are the failings. And, like, we're-- we're not really doing much to address those underlying things. 'Cause these are all, like, systems of something, like, deeper that w-- we don't really touch on.

DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

Uh-huh (AFFIRM). We're gonna take one last question. So we'll go over here. Oliver. Or-- thank you.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER #2:

Hi. I was wondering how-- if-- if-- race comes up in the discussion of your art, and if you can use-- (COUGH) artistic expression to kind of excavate racial empathy, especially in this intersection where we find-- what-- what I find is that-- you have-- you have formally incarcerated people-- who-- disproportionately, in the nation's mind, may look black and brown, and so the-- the act of redemption is, kind of, still a national hurdle-- in a way that maybe oth-- I mean, in formerly incarcerated people who may be victims of previous wars on drugs-- that, in the nation's mind, are disproportionately black and brown.

Again, kind of the r-- the redemptive nature of what they're given, versus maybe what we see with the opioid crisis now, which has much more of a white, suburban face. The empathy. The national discussion. Even kind of what you were saying, Jesse, about, like, the credit people get for the-- the art that they create, the-- the level of intelligence that they have, the-- potential that they have after incarceration. I wonder if there's-- a discussion to be had at the intersection of race, art, former incarceration, and drug policy. Just wanted to bring that into the discussion.

JESSE KRIMES:

Absolutely. Yeah. I mean, sort of, like, a-- part of what-- a part of what I use my artwork to talk about are how I was treated very differently in a lot of these contexts. And so, like, s-- the artwork-- I-- I mean, it-- it dealt with the entire experience in, like, all of its complexity. And so none of it was, like, straightforward answers.

But, like, when I show it, and, like, get to talk about some of it, I get to also relate s-- that to some of the experience. And so, like, when I was sentenced-- the judge-- y-- i-- this, like, stands out. And this is something I always talk about. But, like, the judge said to me-- he's, like, "You know"-- when he gave me that 30-month variance, he's, like, "You know, I see value in you." (LAUGH) He's, like, "But if I loo-- but, if I look at you--" yeah. "If I look at

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you on paper, you're an absolute train wreck." He's, like, "But-- but, l-- after hearing you talk today, and having everyone come out and support you, I see value in you. And I'm gonna give you a chance." And so he gave me the 30-month variance. Right? Still didn't cooperate.

This wasn't for cooperating. And then he said, "Just earlier today--" he's, like, "Just so you know--" he's, like, "Earlier today, someone came before me who had the exact same drug weights, the exact same criminal history, and I gave him 22 years."

DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

Jesus.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER #3:

Oh, what?

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

But the-- but the question, though, is did he tell you that this person was black?

JESSE KRIMES:

I was with him in the holding cell.

AUDIENCE MEMBERS' VOICES:

(LAUGHTER) No. (UNINTEL)

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

I mean, I knew he was black.

JESSE KRIMES:

Yeah. Of course--

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

I just wanted to know if the judge told you.

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JESSE KRIMES:

No. No, no. Of course.

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

That's funny.

JESSE KRIMES:

And, so, like--

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

I mean, it's not funny. I'm sorry. This is being recorded. That is funny in a way that, like, train wrecks--

JESSE KRIMES:

Right.

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

--you know?

JESSE KRIMES:

Yeah.

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

Yeah.

JESSE KRIMES:

Right. And so-- (UNINTEL) then, like, that's part of, like-- yeah, that's part of, like, w-- what I talk about. It's part of the anger. It's part of, like, all of the-- the bullshit, which-- which goes into it. But I do feel like, you know, there are-- much broader ways to talk about that. I'm sure--

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

My-- my judge told me, "I'm under no illusion that sending you to prison would help, but sometimes, you gotta go." (LAUGH) Like-- like, so m-- so my judge responded (SIGH) in a completely different way to me. I think-- you know, I think, in my art, (COUGH) like, it's-- my-- my poetry-- actually, I struggle against this now. 'Cause if you look at my first three books, they are, like-- not the memoir. 'Cause i-- you know, I wou-- I had some-- some-- some folks I knew in prison who were white, that I wrote about.

But, like, if you look at-- the memoir's largely black. The two collection of poem-- poems are largely black. And the thing that I struggle with now is the how-- i-- is to-- like, even if I don't race the people that I write about in the poem, they still ended up being read as black.

Which means, if I want to make the poems directly engage in the kind of conversation you're talkin' about, I have to race them in different ways. I have to find ways to race them. There-- to-- to change the story in, like, subtle ways, to force the reader, or the listener, or to ask different kinds of questions.

And, even as we've had this conversation-- I mean, it's-- it's, like, so much to talk about. He said that at the very beginnin', though. 'Cause you mentioned the fact that you got this 30-month variance that nobody ever gets. And you was, like-- and-- and we know why it was that. But it's so much stuff to engage in.

I think that sometimes, we had a conversation, and don't explicitly talk about the ways in which race motivates a lot of the decisions that are made in court. Particularly decisions around, like, who gets mercy. 'Cause if we say that we're talkin' about a world in which everybody has engaged, and i-- i-- if we say that we're talkin' about a world in which the people in this world that we're talkin' about have engaged in criminal conduct, then the real thing is about the ways in which-- judges and prosecutors are willin' to cut people a break when they're white, and not willin' to do the same thing when they're black.

Or we're talkin' about the ways in which society at large is willin'-- you don't need a redemption story if you're white. If you're white, you just need to be white. And you come home, and you get to be white again. Right? And so you actually don't even need a redemption story.

It's-- it's work done by Devah Pager and other sociologists that talk about the fact that somebody-- who was white, with a criminal record, is more likely to get a call back on a job than somebody who is black without a criminal record. Right?

So-- I think it's-- an-- (UNINTEL) at least I know it's more in my work that I can do to engage in that conversation. And I think if you feel like we missed that-- if you feel like I missed it, right? I apologize, because I-- I do think, sometimes-- you-- you come somewhere like this, and you kind of got the singular focus, and you don't mention the way that, like, racial bias was present at every stage of-- like, my criminal proceedings. It was present

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everywhere. And how my work is always tryin' to animate that, but animate that alongside a bunch of other things.

It just, like-- it gets complicated, though. And that's why bein' a artist is different from, like, writin' a white paper. Because if you just writin' a policy paper, you could-- you could ignore the complexities and just hone in on your talking points. But, like, sadly, I think as artists, we-- we, you know-- I mean, I wish that I could-- I wasn't, like, denigratin' the-- (LAUGHTER) that came off wrong. I write-- I write those things, too, I guess.

DAVEEN TRENTMAN:

With that, (LAUGHTER) thank you all so much. (APPLAUSE) A real round of applause. I think it is the sign of brilliant panelists, when the conversation continue f-- could continue for hours. So thank you all so much. Again, the hashtag is #supportdontpunish. And is where you will also find where we've engaged these artists and their social handles. You can continue to follow their work, and conversation, moving forward. So thank you, everyone. (APPLAUSE)

* * *END OF TRANSCRIPT* * *

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