

MUSIC:

(singing) Disability Inclusion: Required.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Greetings, everyone. I know it's been a minute, but never fear, Disability Inclusion: Required is here. We are back with fresh takes and fruitful conversations this year. I am your host, Justice Shorter. And today we're talking about gender liberation and trans movement organizing with Aldita Amaru Gallardo and Rainier Miles. Aldita is an organizer, facilitator and resource mobilizer based in Oakland, California on unceded Ohlone land. She currently serves as program officer at the Fund for Trans Generations, a donor collaborative at Borealis Philanthropy that resources emerging trans-led organizations across the country.

Rainier Miles is a disabled Black trans liberation steward with over a decade of experience in community collaborations, organization, and outreach. Rainier advocates for reparations, representation and the reclamation of power within marginalized communities. As a proud Black parent and a cherished then dad, he is passionate about uplifting the joy, magic, and excellence embedded in Black culture. Oh, and you didn't think we forgot, did you? Happy Black History Month.

Aldita, Rainier, hello, hello. Thank you both so much for joining us today.

ALDITA AMARU GALLARDO:

Hello, hello. Thanks for having us.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

It's so good to hear your voice.

RAINIER MILES:

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for having me.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Thank you so much for being here. So, I want to start off with this, and they are words that are inspired by Kelly Anne Hayes and Mariame Kaba, and the fact many people have used this question to trace the inception of the activism. So, can you both get us started and introduce yourself by sharing what has radicalized you to do what you do and the ways that you do it? Aldita, can you go ahead and go first?

ALDITA AMARU GALLARDO:

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Sure, happy to. Well, I think for me, my name is Aldita Amaru Gallardo. I use she/her pronouns, *ella en Español*. I'm calling from Oakland, California on Ohlone land. I think, for me, my activism was really started by the things that my family and I were experiencing. I was born in Lima, Peru and grew up in Tampa, Florida and grew up undocumented in Tampa. And when I went to college, I was able to give language to what my family was experiencing, but with... not just my family, but just an entire population of migrants who were having a rough time in the states who were... I think this was around 2008 when there were the large immigration marches.

I was in Chicago, so I was taking to the streets and then also asking of my academic institution, why aren't we able to learn more about migrants and Latino people in particular? So I started organizing to start a program with faculty and staff and other students. So that was my first campaign when. And I think for me it was like college was hard enough as it is as someone who felt out of place, but it was really being able to read about the histories of people in diaspora that really empowered me and helped me find a way to organizing. And I can share more about the future organizing that I do now and a bit later.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Absolutely. That type of organizing you did in college is certainly the type of organizing that is still taking place on college campuses across the country and around the world. Students advocating and pushing for their right to learn and know and preserve the truth. Rainier, how about you?

RAINIER MILES:

I struggle with this question, not because it's a hard question, but because I want to be snarky because my initial responses, it's been this way for me since I was born. And I don't mean that in the satirical way. I mean that in all seriousness. So, things that people don't usually know about me or choose to ignore the fact that I have albinism. And so, I am a Black trans man in a world that's meant for everybody but me. And so I try very hard to be as upfront and honest as possible.

So when I say that it started when I was born, that's what I meant. It meant that I had to educate folks as soon as I could talk. I had to tell people who I was and what they needed to know about me. But in terms of traditional radicalization, I would say probably elementary school, when I went to a school whose math teacher was also someone who had albinism. And I saw that she was being treated poorly and while I understood she was new to the school and new to teaching, that moment was the one that had me the most radicalized.

And since then I've worked very hard to not only educate folks about albinism, but also disability as a whole and try to provide representation as well as recognition.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

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I want to follow up on that for just a moment. You mentioned that you educate folks around albinism and disability. What is it that you think folks most need to know, particularly funders around this issue?

RAINIER MILES:

I think the most important thing that I could ever say is listen to us when we're telling you what we need. Don't assume you know. Don't assume that because you're in philanthropy, you're a funder and you've funded before that it's the same. We enter this space and this field and the spirit of philanthropy as whole beings and not just parts. And so while yes, you may be funding something that has to do with disability, the disabilities or disability is not the whole person.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Absolutely. I want to dedicate the first few moments of our conversation here to the transgender kin who have been killed by direct or indirect violence. Are there any individuals who the two of you would like to lift up, celebrate and remember in their full personhood? And Aldita, I'll start with you.

ALDITA AMARU GALLARDO:

Yes. For me, when I moved to the Bay Area, in Oakland in particular, 10 years ago, I started working at a drop-in space for queer and trans youth of color in West Oakland. And there was this young person, this young trans Latina named Mariko Shine. She also went by Aubrey who would frequent our space, and she was someone who was beloved by a community. She was someone who was a part of the nonprofits that were offering services to community because she was systems-involved. She was... I'm sorry, I'm getting touched. I'm emotional because she unalived herself. And it's still a pain that I still have. Mourning her loss because we lose so many young people because their living situations are unhabitable or they don't have adult mentors or people that care for them.

It deeply impacted all of us who knew her and we still honor her life through continuing to support and mentor young trans and queer people particularly trans girls. So thank you for asking me this question.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Similarly, Rainier, over to you.

RAINIER MILES:

I don't have anyone specific. I don't have anyone specific. I am unfortunate in the sense that everyone that we lose is a hard hit and so for me it's just calling in all the folks that we have lost, that have paved the way for us, that have radicalized us, that have shown us moments of joy, have been vulnerable, have just existed and now don't.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

I mentioned indirect violence earlier. Let's explore that a little bit further. For those who are unfamiliar or who simply are not tracking the widespread implications, can you explain how anti-trans legislation is functionally an extension of state sanctioned violence? And Rainier, I wonder if you can kick us off with the answer to that.

RAINIER MILES:

Yes, absolutely. I think it's relevant, very relevant in this moment to speak on that while laws and things that are being passed or being spoken about do not often directly incite violence. It does give folks the mindset to be more emboldened, to do things that they wouldn't because they feel they have the government backing to do so. So that's bathroom bills, cornering folks in the bathroom demanding to be shown what's in our pants that parenting bills that state that the way that we raise our children without gender or in a gender-affirming way is child abuse.

There are so many things happening that are setting the stage for more devastating things to happen. For example, stating that it's child abuse or it's sexual abuse to allow a child to live into their full and complete self sets the stage for the violence. And I don't just mean physical violence, but the mental violence and the abruptness of having children taken away from trans parents or children taken away from cis parents who are trans, the children are trans. So while the laws may not directly state that you should incite violence, it is assumed by the folks who are following these laws.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

You do so much work around racial justice and gender justice issues, and I think about this from the perspective of all the Black folk who have fought so hard to end segregationist laws and to end structural violence, and how much of that is currently under attack? Aldita, I want to bring you in here. Do you have anything to add by way of the conversation Rainier really launched off for us around this structural, this deep-seated violence that we're seeing happening all across different forms of laws and legislations across the country?

ALDITA AMARU GALLARDO:

I just appreciate Rainier's clarity on that. I would just add that the sort of structural violence or the messaging that is being sent at the state level creates a culture that in the interpersonal level, incites violence like Rainier said. It's often the messaging that people are receiving who are transphobic or trans-antagonistic that pushes them to incite violence. But then it's also the messaging that we as trans people receive that we might internalize and actually make us feel small, make us feel not worthy. That is also an issue and we know we lose folks.

Like I mentioned, Mariko, I know that she was suffering from depression and I know I suffer from depression and those messages we have to clearly say that that's not of us. That's not for us. We don't need to believe that. But it is sort of a mental and spiritual attack on our folks. And as Rainier mentioned, it's not just about bathroom bills, it's not just about trans youth in sports. As

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we've seen by the executive orders that have passed last week, that they just don't want trans people to exist. And that's a complete erasure of who we are and we know that that's not true. We'll continue to exist. We have existed since time immemorial and that these laws or postures by the state do have impact, but we should not believe what they're saying.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

You have the right to exist. That's what you just mentioned. And I want to connect that to this issue of bodily autonomy, which has been described as somewhat of the connective tissue between disability and transgender communities. Aldita, can you explain the importance of bodily autonomy and why it fosters such an impenetrable sphere of solidarity between both communities?

ALDITA AMARU GALLARDO:

Yes. I think for me, our movements, both the disability justice movements and trans justice movements have been fighting for self-determination and bodily autonomy. So we know what we need, what our bodies need to exist, to live. And so these attacks are one in the same and I think it is a part of the sort of eugenics era that they also don't want us to exist. They want to eradicate us. And so our fight for bodily autonomy connects all of us and includes also the reproductive justice movement as well.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Rainier, come on in. Anything to add?

RAINIER MILES:

Yes, I really appreciate the viewpoint of Aldita. And I agree, yes, bodily autonomy and our right to exist are important and I find that it's really important as well to acknowledge that when someone wants to eradicate a whole group of people, the thought that comes to mind is why. And it's often that they pose a threat perceived or otherwise they pose a threat. And in this instance, I want to remind the folks listening that the threat that we pose is the fact that we as disabled folks, we as Black folks, we as people of color understand that the movement and movements that we are creating, that we are building, that we are pouring into lead to liberation and that liberation is collective.

And so the thought is that what's happening will keep folks who are traditionally white cis het in charge, predominantly male. And so any chance that they can to disrupt that is what they're going to do.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Rainier, I want to have you extend your thoughts just a little bit on this. What should funders be paying attention to? What should they be learning from regarding the collective efforts of disabled and transgender organizers?

RAINIER MILES:

I would say that they need to be learning impact over intent. Your intent is great and I'm sure is good willed, but are you hitting the mark? Are you impacting the folks that you want to be impacting in the way that you want to be doing it? If this is the first time that you funded in disability, is it necessary as in can that funding go to someone who's already doing what you're trying to do? Because we don't want to create a field where funds are so scattered and the work to get the funds is so hard that nobody ends up getting funds.

So if you can pour into folks who are doing this and doing it well and provide them with other resources that aren't just monetary, I feel that that would be something extremely important to learn. Just because you can doesn't mean you should.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Aldita, anything to add?

ALDITA AMARU GALLARDO:

Thank you. I mean, there's so much to learn from trans, disabled folks and these are times that our communities that have not been met by support, by the state, that they have models, networks of care, mutual aid and just like a care for care and love for each other, that I think in these times feel even more important as we see the state turning more volatile towards us. I think that that ethos also is important. So there's so much despair and yet our folks are finding aliveness, finding joy to be with each other, coming together. That I think is also a beautiful touch point to learn from.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Aldita, you wrote this a few years ago. You said that trans movement building consists of more than our suffering. Can we take a few moments here and just sit in the sunshine by shouting out some of the people and groups that are currently doing extraordinary trans movement work? Do you have anyone who you want to just amplify and highlight, and sit with you in the sun?

ALDITA AMARU GALLARDO:

Oh my goodness. What a beautiful question. I know when I wrote that, I was at the Fund for Trans Generations and now I'm currently the director of the Action for Transformation Fund, which is a new fund that's funding trans-led organizing, healing, and power building work that's housed at Emergent Fund. So I have the privilege of knowing so many groups, so many groups across the states that are doing powerful work and towards that end to what you quoted, so much of my funding work was to build power, to build resources. And all of that is important and there is just so many other dreams that our folks had around what does trans joy look like? What does trans rest look like?

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That was also something that I wanted to focus on as well like trans healing and healing can look like differently. But to your question, there are so many groups and there's an ecosystem of trans-led organizing groups that are really holding down communities locally and nationally. Three that come to mind, I'd like to uplift Intransitive in Arkansas which is a one-stop shop for community in the Little Rock area.

They have a physical space. They have programming. They're breaking isolation from folks because a lot of folks are coming from rural areas. Another group is Comfrey Films based out of North Carolina. They're helping Black creatives, Black trans creatives create films and tell stories. And not just of despair, but of things of community, of finding joy, of gender euphoria. They just have beautiful films that have come out of there and a leadership training program as well.

Then lastly, I think of our dear elder, Ms. Major who launched House of gg a while back. And her oasis is a space that Black trans women in particular can come and take advantage of and meet each other and convene and sit by each other and listen to stories which I think feels like it is power building and it's also a container for the organizing and it's just a place to just breathe together to get to know each other.

So I wanted to uplift those three groups, especially groups, trans-led groups that are based in the south. There's so many more and I think this is why it's important for funders to move to the south as well.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Moving to the south, people having spaces to breathe and just be and to become whoever they wish to be, not only individually but also within community. It is beautiful and it certainly has me feeling warm over here. Rainier, let me pop over to you. Anybody who you want to highlight and bring into the sunshine?

RAINIER MILES:

All of our grantees and all of the folks that we build community with that we maintain relationships with, that we love to see and love to chat with, there's so many. I want to also shout out Comfrey Films who is in North Carolina where I am. I would also like to shout out the LOUD Youth Theater in New Orleans, another southern-based organization. They're doing work in terms of joy. When we talk about joy, we know that joy looks different for everyone. And so they're doing work in theater and bringing youth into theater and bringing those same youth into their own and building their leadership skills.

I'd also like to shout out two orgs that are in the Pacific Northwest and that's Liberation Medicine School. They do a lot of work with healing and a lot of work with medicine. And again, just like anything else, medicine looks different for everyone. And so they explore all of those and provide healing circles. And last but not least, I'd like to most definitely bring into the sun with me Black & Beyond the Binary, which is out of Oregon.

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They do a lot of mutual aid. They do leadership building. They do community gathering. They do it so well. They're so well known in their community and further out that they are looking into seeing how they can help folks outside of their state.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

So much coalition building, so many collaborations, so much good work and good love, and good movements happening just all around the country. Thank you both so much for bringing us a little bit of sunshine, a little bit of sunlight, and what many of us have felt and known to be some dark, and dim, and gloomy days and times. Let's go into that a little bit. There's so many corporations and organizations that are now retracting previous commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion that has many people feeling that it is a dark and dim time, especially when we were once promised that these commitments would be sustained and they would be long-lasting.

So how can donors who are actively funding trans movement building proactively help organizers to defend against attempts to roll back much of the social and political progress that have been made in recent years? Aldita, what are your thoughts?

ALDITA AMARU GALLARDO:

I think my advice is don't fall in line, don't cooperate. We know the efforts of DEI... and just to bring in folks who are from different backgrounds has actually helped business. There's so many gifts that our folks have to offer that the corporations themselves have benefited from. And yeah, this is a time that we should know better and to not fall in line, actually push back, actually double down on your commitment to a diverse hiring and supporting employees who are there.

But this translates also just not just in the corporate space, but also the messaging that it sends to folks about... As people of color, as trans folks, as disabled folks, we have lots to offer and our perspective only enriches the kind of work that we do. And again, not to fall in line or to not believe what they're saying that we're not smart enough or able enough, or able to do the work and to also just live with dignity, I think is really the fight that we're continuing to be in.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Don't fall in line. Folks, don't automatically capitulate to these attempts to resegment this country. Rainier, your thoughts?

RAINIER MILES:

I wholeheartedly agree with Aldita. Don't fall in line. And also I think the other thing that we can do is to stop using the acronym to stop using buzzwords. Start saying it out loud like diversity, equity, and inclusion. Because what we're finding is that a lot of these folks who are so against diversity, equity, and inclusion only know it by the acronym and they equate the acronym with affirmative action. They don't actually understand what the promise was to come from diversity,

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equity, and inclusion. They just assumed that by including folks, it meant that whether they were qualified or not, they were being hired.

And so I would say the first thing is to either find another way to describe it or tell it like it is. You are finding qualified individuals. It's not affirmative action, such a scary phrase to some folks. It's not just you didn't even run the race, but here's a ribbon. That idea that you don't deserve something because you are different than those in power. So find a way that fits your messaging to describe what's actually happening and what you're actually doing.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Indeed. And I want to make sure that people understand, acknowledge and remember that affirmative action does not mean that people are unqualified to do the work, right? There is this fallacy that the way that we have ascended in positions, the way that people have had access to upward mobility and various opportunity was completely based on meritocracy. And if we look at this historically, we know that that is not the case. We know that people of color, Black folk in particular have been historically and habitually, systematically excluded from having an equitable level of access into spaces and places, and homes, and areas to be able to generate not only wealth, but also to be able to generate and sustain a certain level of safety and connection to community as well.

How often those things were threatened as a result of people feeling as if the mere presence of a person of color, the mere presence of someone who was Black was somehow a threat to their existence and their ability to live. And therein lies the issue that we are all trying so hard to combat, right?

I want to ask you, Rainier, if you could give us a message to funders who don't fund any transgender groups or project portfolios, but who might say statements like trans movement building doesn't fit within our areas of focus, but our work also isn't harming any transgender communities, what do you say to folks who have that type of position?

RAINIER MILES:

I think that the mindset of not having anything in your portfolio or not granting to any trans-led or trans-focused orgs is entirely harmful. Your silence is not agreeance. Your silence is deadly. By choosing not to resource folks who are perpetually being threatened, whether it's being trapped in a country that doesn't want them, whether it's being told that they don't matter, whether it's being told that they are lesser than. Not funding or finding a way to fund trans organizations is literally the difference between life and death sometimes. And again, I understand that sadness reigns supreme in funding spaces, but funding does not have to look like funding disparity. You can in fact fund joy and it can in fact still have the same outcome.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Aldita, your thoughts?

ALDITA AMARU GALLARDO:

Honestly, what a shame. You're missing out on funding groups that are building power, shifting culture, and just doing the work of making sure that people are taken care of. I know so many trans-led groups that are doing powerful work and there's so much to learn from them and the ways that they are resourceful and their strategies, and they're dreaming even through, if we look at the arts and culture work that's coming out of Black, Indigenous people of color, trans-led organizations, everyone loves it. It is so impactful. So there really is no excuse at this point. I think there are trans groups that are doing work in all of the portfolios out there, education, criminalization, women's funds, gender justice.

Funders should be learning and understanding the landscape of our trans movements and the organizations that represent them. So I'm happy to share more for folks who are interested, as someone who's been funding in this sector for a little over eight years. And especially in my role as a board member of Funders for LGBTQ issues, we have grant tracking reports that- you know, the stats are jarring. For every a hundred dollars that goes to LGBT communities, only four cents are going to trans communities. So that's actually something that we need to change, and that change is going to have to happen collectively. So happy to talk more to folks that are interested.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

As we come to a close, can the two of you dream us out by way of this prompt? What are your wishes for a gender liberated world? How would each day spent on this earth feel and be different? What would you do with the excess time no longer devoted to having to fight for your very right to exist? Rainier?

RAINIER MILES:

Dreaming in this space for me looks like community and it has always looked like community. It is spending time with loved ones. It is being able to see the folks who were once living in despair, living into their full and utter joy. It is a world full of laughter. It is a world full of progress, prosperity. It is a world full of art, whether it be music, whether it be poetry, whether it be paintings. It is a world full of art. That is what would happen with the free time we would be allowed and able to create. And what we create would be beautiful.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

So much beauty, so much art, so much joy, so much laughter. This is making me smile so big right now. Aldita, your dreams.

ALDITA AMARU GALLARDO:

Oh, I'm smiling really big. Thanks, Rainier. Yeah, my world is also one that is full of joy, where folks feel relaxed, where they feel safe in their bodies, they feel safe in community. A world where folks are taking lots of naps, where we're not having to produce things as capitalism tells

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us to. A world where we're interdependent on each other and that no one is left behind. And it's also a world where our folks get to dream, and become, and exist, and create for our communities and for the benefit of everyone else. So thank you for asking us this.

JUSTICE SHORTER:

Thank you both for being here. I enjoyed this conversation immensely. Thank you so much. It is indeed Black History Month, and I want to close with this offering from the prolific author, Imani Perry. The following excerpt is from her new book, *Black in Blues*. I encourage you to read it if you need some resilience within reach this season. She says this, "I think, and I'm not sure this is true, but it seems right to me that the most important preservation is not perhaps a particular place or thing, but the sensibility that lies in blues. That of living as a protest. It can remain even when recordings degrade and buildings crumble. Spiritual sustainability is a natural condition for those on the underside of empire."

Richard Wright told us something about this when he talked about the blues. He said, "The most astonishing aspect of the blues is that though replete with a sense of defeat and downheartedness, they are not intrinsically pessimistic. Their burden of woe and melancholy is dialectically redeemed through sheer force of sensuality into an almost exultant affirmation of life, of love, of sex, of movement, of hope. No matter how repressive was the American environment, the Negro never lost faith in or doubted his deeply endemic capacity to live. All blues are a lusty, lyrical realism charged with taut sensibilities. We are thereby taught to sustain ourselves by strains, flesh and technique." Happy Black History Month.