

Audio Transcript: Culture x Policy: Representation and Participation

March 18, 2021

Solana Chehtman:

Goodnight, everyone, and thank you for joining us for this third and last Culture Meets Policy conversation, Representation and Participation, in conjunction with *Howardena Pindell: Rope/Fire/Water* on view at The Shed until Sunday, March 28. My name is Solana Chehtman, and I'm the director of civic programs at The Shed. I am a Latina woman with short curly, salt and pepper hair in a gray shirt sitting in front of a white wall. And I want to start the evening by going through a few of the forms of access that we have available tonight.

In the bottom of your window, there's a live transcript button where you can find real time captions. We also have American Sign Language interpretation that will be visible at all times. And finally, we've asked all participants to share visual descriptions when appropriate. At any point if you have any questions, comments, or you want to share any additional needs for you to fully enjoy tonight's program, please feel free to contact us through the Q&A button also on the bottom right of your screen.

The idea for this series of conversations was born out of anger and sadness and willingness to continue fighting against white supremacy and racism with all the tools at our disposal. From my personal and institutional place, we felt it was key to create space for dialogue that was inspired by, and included, and also went beyond culture and arts. Dialogue that is intersectional and that centers important work being done to tackle injustice in only some of its main systemic forms, be they economic, political, institutional.

And this week's racist mass shooting in Atlanta by an anti-Asian white supremacist only stresses how important and timely these conversations continue to be. We will keep making space for them, digging deeper, and expanding more broadly so we can continue to take action. We cannot be more grateful to all our participating speakers throughout the series and tonight, and by all means to our amazing program moderator, Prerana Reddy, for all the ideas articulated, for the examples shared, and for the leads on to how to continue individually, but most importantly, collectively doing this work.

I cannot wait to hear tonight's conversation that will delve into some of the main issues that are wrong in our democracy. After our country barely survived last year's attempt to subvert the national election results, with the current attempts in Texas and Georgia, and during a key mayoral electoral year in our city this is such an important topic to continue moving our country forward.

But first, I want to thank and acknowledge everyone who made this program possible. The Ford Foundation and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs for the generous support of the commission and the program. The Howard Gilman Foundation for providing the Zoom platform that we will be using for this evening's conversation. And I also want to thank our co-presenter for this series, Weeksville Heritage Center in Brooklyn, and introduced Derek Mikell, their marketing and community engagement manager so he can share a few words.

Derek Mikell:

Hello, good evening. How are you? My name is Derek Mikell. I am from the Weeksville Heritage Center. And Weeksville Heritage Center is a historic and cultural center in central Brooklyn. We use education, arts, and the social lens

of social justice to preserve, document, and inspire engagement with the history of Weeksville, one of the largest free Black communities in pre-Civil War America. We do that through using the historic Hunterfly Road Houses and the preservation efforts surrounding those to tell the story of the community.

Our vision is to be a real leader, and the authority and resource for the scholarship, and the exploration, not only that, but the dissemination, of the history of Weeksville and other similar communities, Black communities of the 19th and early 20th centuries. We also want to ingrain a modern day artistic and intellectual, social justice imperative that exemplifies excellence and inspires those into collective action. We like to engage, educate, empower. And we are so happy to be a part of this. And I will throw it on back to Solana. Thank you.

Solana Chehtman:

Thank you, Derek. We are so happy for your partnership. And now without further ado, so we have the most time to hear the actual conversation. I will introduce tonight's moderator, my colleague and friend Prerana Reddy, former director of programs at A Blade of Grass and the Queens Museum, current participant at Creative Time's Think Tank Cohort. Thank you, Prerana. Thank you, everyone.

Prerana Reddy:

Thank you, Solana for this amazing opportunity to speak with so many people on the frontlines of expanding representation, participation in the political process for Black and POC communities throughout the country. It's such an honor. Before I go forward, I just want to describe myself, I'm a brown-skinned South Asian woman with long brown hair and a yellow and black graphic sweater with some framed artwork behind me.

And now I'm just going to talk a little bit about the format of the conversation. I'm going to do a couple of questions to each of the panelists in turn. And then we're going to join all together to have a shared conversation at the end. And I'm going to try and roll in the audience questions from the Q&A in an ongoing fashion into my own conversation as well as the group conversation. So please do put in those questions at any time, you don't have to wait till the end.

In the interest of time, I'm not going to meet reading everyone's full bios, we're just going to jump right in. And I do want to say that while I may be referencing the work of organizations that the panelists are working for, or have worked for, I'm addressing them as individuals, and their answers are to be understood as their own personal opinions. So we're going to start first with Molly McGrath. And Molly, would you like to do a visual description of yourself and then I'll introduce you?

Molly McGrath:

Yes, thanks, Prerana, and thank you for having me. My name is Molly McGrath, pronouns are she/her and I am a white female with long brown hair and brown eyes. And in the background are some wood doors and two plants that I am keeping alive in Covid.

Prerana Reddy:

Molly, you're the senior campaign strategist on voting rights at the ACLU's National Political Advocacy Department and you lead policy campaigns to

protect and expand voting rights across the country. Just so that we could get a little background I'm wondering if you could go back a little bit from our contemporary moment and talk about the long history of voter suppression in the US. Who are we trying to prevent from voting over time and through what means?

Yes, so it's really no secret that we have a really sad and ugly and racist history of voter suppression in this country. Thinking way back to the beginning, the only folks who could vote were white men who were landowners. Only through reconstruction did Black men were granted the right to vote, women just 100 years ago, and Black women really fully realized the right to vote with the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

And so looking at that landscape, I think of two themes here. And one is that we see restrictions after power. So if we look at the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendment, and Black men achieving the right to vote, we saw registration numbers, we saw a Black senator in Mississippi, we saw power. We saw that political power. And then what did we see? We saw voter suppression and the birth of a lot of the Jim Crow laws. We saw the birth of felon disenfranchisement laws. Laws that stripped the right to vote of people who've been convicted of a felony, who we know voters of color are more justice impacted, disproportionately.

We saw poll taxes, we saw literacy tests. And so we continue to see that theme. And even now in the modern era, with increased voter participation, if we look at 2008, and record numbers of Black voters turning out. And then we see that met with cutbacks in 2010, with ID laws and new restrictions on the right to vote, cuts to early vote, voter purges. And we're seeing that now in 2020 with high turnout and now another wave of restrictions.

So that's one theme is just this restrictions after power's achieved. And then the other theme, you really hit right on the head is that this is about exclusion. This is about excluding who is participating. And if I look at one example, and voter ID laws, that the racist and malicious intent is very apparent, and that these laws are uniquely curated to exclude certain folks. The North Carolina case, a judge said it's even surgically precise, that this had a racist intent in who would be excluded.

And I have a photo here I'll share of a voter I worked with in Wisconsin, her name is Gladys Harris. She is a Black woman in her 60s, she's sitting on her walker in this photo. Her walker that she used to go and vote in 2016. And what she's holding here is a government issued photo ID issued by the City of Milwaukee where the majority of the state's Black voters live, 90% or so of the Black voters live. And an ID that Black voters have, but an ID that was not included in the photo ID law in Wisconsin. So when she went to go and vote for the first time in her life, after growing up in Mississippi, in the Jim Crow South, her vote was not counted. And so when you say who is excluded by this, this is part of the design, this isn't the bug, this is exactly who these laws are trying to exclude and trying to take the voice of.

Prerana Reddy:

You touched on some of the legal means, the voter ID laws, et cetera, and tests, what are the other types of barriers that may not be legal, but maybe logistical or other kinds of ways, or even just misinformation, et cetera, that people might have that act as barriers that aren't legal?

Molly McGrath:

That's a great question. And one, I think that we saw really happening in real time, all of us, in 2020. Because we see the laws on the books, we see the increase in laws, but then we also see this kind of voter suppression through deterrence. And it's by some people, including our last president, telling folks that their vote doesn't count, that it doesn't matter if you vote or not. And so when people are deterred, and feel disempowered, by engaging in something, using this tool, that is one of the most powerful tools of political change, that in and of itself is a form of voter suppression. And it's incredibly dangerous. It's one that we've seen multiplied in the last four years, especially with attacks on our institutions. But the good news is it's one that we can all together continue to combat by having conversations even with friends with family, in those relational conversations about why voting is important, what it means to you personally, because you are the most important person in those relationships with others.

Prerana Reddy:

Yeah, and just thinking even about the kind of rhetoric of voter fraud, et cetera, that was promoted without any kind of evidence, the idea of the vote just not being valid, also is something that kind of makes the idea of voting less legitimate. I think the other things around kind of polling places, and how many, and where they're located, and all the other type of logistical things, too. But one of the things that came out of the 2020 election was really a kind of another story about how much activism there was both on an individual level, I know that you've done a lot of work getting people the IDs and getting people to the polls that really made a difference in terms of overcoming these barriers.

Now, I'm going to ask you perhaps a little higher level, I know a lot of things change state by state in terms of voter laws. We live in a country in which we have very different ways of voting, and there's a lot of changes from state to state. But now that we have a Democrat controlled Congress, is there something that the Congress can do or the federal... Can we do at the federal level that would really expand the ability of folks to vote?

Molly McGrath:

That's a great question, and one that I'm getting a lot. And we can see on the map on the screen for folks is a map of the United States that has almost every state highlighted. And this is from January, and is even a bit out to date, because we're looking at about 253 laws in 43 states. So I know that we can add Wisconsin and a few other states that aren't highlighted, but in all of these states they've been introducing laws to suppress the vote. And so what can we do? Is there something at the federal level, how can we stop this?

And the answer is yes, that there's two really main huge pieces of legislation that would help. One is HR-1, and this really sets a floor for some of the voter access pieces that states would engage in. Things that are in place in other states, same day registration, Election Day registration, early voting, a lot of these pieces, automatic voter registration to not just be in certain states and go state by state, but just set a federal floor for this is the baseline of what we expect in American democracy. So that's one and that's passed through the House going into the Senate.

The second is to restore the Voting Rights Act that would give... Essentially all these states like Georgia, Alabama, that have this history of racial discriminatory voting laws, they would have to check with the federal government

before they change their laws. So these laws that are going through Georgia right now, they couldn't pass them before checking with the federal government to ensure that there was not going to be a discriminatory impact or intent with them.

And so there is things, absolutely, that the federal government can do. Are we going to get 60 votes in the senate right now, for this to happen and for legislation to pass? Only if we fight is the answer, and it like we're going to have to fight like hell, like heck, is the other answer to make this happen. Because even something like the Voting Rights Act that had been renewed and signed by Republican presidents and enjoyed bipartisan support, we're at a place right now where we need to make sure that voting is the one of the civil rights issues of the time, and that we need to pass these laws and hold people accountable if they don't.

Prerana Reddy:

Thank you, Molly. And we'll come back to you at the end in our group discussion. Now, I'm proud to introduce Xamayla Rose, who is a deputy public advocate of civic and community engagement here in New York City working with Jumaane Williams's office. She's responsible for monitoring infrastructure for immigrant communities, specifically around with electoral processes and democratic participation, the census and so forth. And I wanted to ask Xamayla, if you could do a visual description, and then I'll jump into the questions.

Xamayla Rose:

Sure. Thank you so much for having me. And my name is Xamayla Rose, I am a Black woman. I have an afro and I'm wearing a floral top with French doors in the background. That's my visual description. And you wanted me to just introduce myself briefly?

Prerana Reddy:

No, I did a little bit of an introduction. But the first question will kind of allow you to, I want you to share your own personal journey. How did you grow up and turn into a community activist? How did that get related to more public service in the legislative arena? How did you enter politics?

Xamayla Rose:

Yeah, the way I entered politics is a little different from most people. I mean, it's the same as some others. But prior to entering government and working for the City of New York I worked for a family business. My parents were both entrepreneurs. And I think the only thing that's different with me is that on afternoon in July, it was July 4 weekend, my brother was targeted by a local gang. It was a gang initiation, him and his friends were chased, beaten, and he was murdered in the process.

And throughout that process, it was very traumatic for our family. We did create a nonprofit organization. I did a lot of work in community, I started community organizing, I didn't know what organizing was, I didn't know that I could even organize. But when these things happened to you find strength from somewhere. And in the process of organizing in my actual neighborhood I began to organize beyond my neighborhood, which was East Flatbush into Brownsville in East New York.

And then the borough president at that time, who was Marty Markowitz got wind of some of the work that I was doing and actually extended an offer for me to come on as a youth policy strategist, youth policy analyst and I began as an analyst working for the Brooklyn borough president and specifically focusing on youth violence issues. Researching how do we make violence a public health issue, speaking to elected officials about ceasefire models, and now seeing like, Cure Violence being actually an actual thing, it makes me really happy. I've been doing a lot of work around juvenile justice reform.

So that's really how I entered... The saddest thing about my brother's murder was he was 15 years old. He was with two other 15 year olds, one of them was 11. And the young man who went to jail for life was 16. And within the first month of him being locked up, he tried to commit suicide. So that really softened my heart towards the plight that young people were going through when they were in adult prisons at the age of 16.

Prerana Reddy:

Well, that's a powerful story and one in which I think we're seeing now that a lot of the work that you've done... In our previous panel, we kind of devote into the criminal legal justice system and the changes, and it's very heartening to see that people are starting to understand it as a structural issue and not an individual issue, and to think beyond punishment. So I'd want to ask now, in terms of your work with Jumaane's office, Jumaane himself is a first generation Brooklynite of Caribbean descent, and has a history of a community organizer like you. Housing and police accountability, were key. But can you tell me how is it as a kind of oversight office, how is it that you're hearing from communities? What are their complaints to the city about what's not working in terms of... I'm sure, there are many complaints, but what are the kind of methods you're using to hear from people? And what are the mechanisms in making changes on those issues?

Xamayla Rose:

Sure. So I guess I'll start by saying the way that our office is run is very different from the previous offices and every other previous public advocate. So the first thing the public advocate did was hire a bunch of organizers. So almost everyone on our team from legal to the actual constituent services are previous organizers. And, of course, our charter mandated function, the charter, the constitution for the city of New York, is to actually process claims from the constituents and from regular everyday people. So we have a unit that does specifically that.

But then we also make sure that we center the voices of marginalized communities, we're constantly meeting with advocacy groups, constantly meeting with local activists. When some government agencies may take all of their content and information from maybe some of the larger nonprofits in the city, we're meeting with local people who run mutual aids. And that's how we're crafting our food policy, because we want to know what's happening on the ground.

So change the best change, I feel like, starts from the bottom up. And so that's the model that the public advocate uses. And so even in my department, some of the things that we're working on is we're looking into municipal voting, which is giving green card holders and work permit visas the access to vote in municipal elections. And we're also looking into some other things as well, as well as holding the city accountable. But I don't want to talk too much because I know time's short.

Prerana Reddy:

Well, I guess one question I'd ask you is do you have any words of advice for other people, particularly women of color, like yourself, people who started out working at the grassroots level, if they're interested in entering public service or in government positions, what advice would you give them based on your own experience?

Xamayla Rose:

I think, probably a barrier to many women is [inaudible]. And I think we always think that we need something else, we need a better degree, we need more experience. What I found is that sitting at some of these tables is that a lot of people don't know more than you know so I would just tell women, to take a stab at it, organize in your community, if that's what it is. If you want to organize on a citywide level or within government. Reach out to those agencies, send your resume, and just connect with people who are doing the work. There are actually people who are on the ground on the front lines and connect with them. And there's no shortage of work to do. So they say many hands make work light.

Prerana Reddy:

Thank you, Xamayla. We're going to now move on to our third panelist. Andre Richardson is a political practitioner and founder of the boutique consulting firm Paragon Strategies and founder of Build the Bench, a diverse network of professionals who are creating a new ecosystem for people of color to organize and mobilize and enter the political system in New York City. Andre, can you turn on your camera and do a little description of yourself, visual description, and then I'll jump into questions.

Andre Richardson:

Sure, sure. My camera's working, I just turned it on. Excuse me, I am a Black man. I have two cornrows right now and what I think is a tan shirt with a colorful Basquiat image over my left shoulder.

Prerana Reddy:

Great. So you also, I think coming out of the questions I was asking Xamayla, I'd like to ask you as well. How did you come to be a political strategist? You worked on several election campaigns for progressive POC candidates such as Hakeem Jeffries, Eric Gonzalez, Zellnor Myrie. How did you get into that work? And what did you learn about what prevents more progressive folks of color from entering politics and public service?

Andre Richardson:

Sure, sure. I think thank you for that question. Thank you for having me. I just want to take the first five seconds to just hail up Xamayla, because she does such amazing work. And I know that because some of the people that she's mentored in her office, I've met randomly and have sung her praises. So I just wanted to take a minute to hail her up.

Andre Richardson:

But in terms of my journey, how I got started, I just kind of fell into politics, I never really had an interest in government, in electoral politics, anything of that nature. But I always had a desire to serve. So I accidentally wound up on

a campaign back in 2003. And thought this was my calling, because again, I wanted to serve. And this was the way that I could empower my community at the time, which was Jersey City. And decided maybe this wasn't the path, stepped out for a bit came back, but then saw different avenues in which I could help whether that would be policy, whether that would be through different means of community organizing, outside of electoral politics, around community based initiatives like affordable housing, criminal justice reform, and things of that nature.

In terms of just working with really dope candidates again, it was luck, but it was meeting them. And really honing in on how I wanted to show up in this political space, which could oftentimes be very negative, very visceral, very depressing, I'll even say. But I've aligned with progressive candidates who have always centered the community. And with that being my passion, it was just a natural progression from there to continue to work with those candidates. And I've been fortunate enough to be very selective, in who I decide to lend my personal skillsets to. And that was a decision that came later in life. But things have been very harmonious professionally, I would say since then.

Prerana Reddy:

And in addition to your own political strategy work, you recently started. Build the Bench, as I mentioned, could you tell us a little bit more about Build the Bench? And what are the key aims and strategies, what are the different pieces that you felt like were missing, that you're putting together to kind of widen the pipeline for more people to enter this field?

Andre Richardson:

Sure, sure. So as I was saying, I started in politics in 2003, I launched Build the Bench with five other colleagues, for that version of myself in 2003, who did not have the interest, who did not have the network, the resources, the means, to want to do the work that I wanted to do. And I look back on that year, which was a very defining year, because it was always important work that I was doing, but I just never knew how important it was, as I've gotten older, I've gained that knowledge.

And the one thing that I realized is, in politics, there's a language oftentimes spoken, that's not digestible to the average person who wants to either participate, who wants to make a difference, or some sort of change in their community, their city, their state, their country, or even coming back to their neighborhood, and even on their block. So we're trying to make the political jargon more accessible to the everyday individual that feels that drive to want to do something, but may not necessarily know how to get started.

And we are one of many means, and avenues for people to get involved. Whether that be policy, again, whether that be community organizing, or whether that be to just come and commune with people of color, on a really dope level, very cool vibe. And to just hang out. Our first event, we just had our anniversary event last month. Our one year anniversary event, I should say. We launched February 7 of 2020, a couple of weeks right before the pandemic, and then it hit us like it hit everybody. And then we went virtual, but we've still been able to try and keep that connectedness to folks, but like many others looking forward to the day that we are in person again.

Prerana Reddy:

Yeah. Well, one of the things that struck me when I looked at the website is your particular invitation to bring creative professionals and entertainers into

the mix as it were, into this network. What do you think this being a cultural organization that's hosting us. What roles do you think that they have to play in this fear? And why is there a particular invitation to them?

Andre Richardson:

Sure. So I think that artists and entertainers have a different perspective, oftentimes, than folks who traditionally work in politics, and work in government, and there's no better missing piece to a system that is broken than creativity, in my personal opinion. Whether that's being creative with policy, issues like criminal justice reform, cannabis legalization, and these are oftentimes folks who have a different approach. I think we would call them right brained, I don't remember. I'm criss-crossing my own.

But we need different types of thinkers in this business, we don't need the traditional folks who want to move forward things that are going to impact communities of color. And we need folks with lived experiences, and who are independent thinkers, which creatives tend to be. And we need folks that are Black and brown in our political culture. Because it's in our creative and artistic culture. And even with the worldview view, Black folks move this country. Black women, in particular move this country, and folks tend to follow in their lead. So as we think about who needs to be driving conversations, I think folks who are moving the culture need to be at the forefront, driving these conversations with the necessary support from folks in other communities.

Prerana Reddy:

Thank you. I see in the Q&A somebody kind of seconded marijuana or cannabis legalization as an issue that is a social justice issue. And I think that's one of the things, there's obviously, like racial equity issues are very clear when we talk about education, racial wealth gap, prison abolition, et cetera. But sometimes there are other means, other types of legislative approaches to address this that may not be what people think about. Do you want to address how that type of legislation is one that addresses racial and social justice?

Andre Richardson:

Sure, sure. So I believe my numbers may, might be a little off, but I believe 32 states have medical cannabis, 14 have legalized cannabis. And being someone who's in Brooklyn, New York, we're looking to have legalized recreational, full adult use cannabis, in the very near future, as early as maybe next week. Not passed next week, but introduced. And this is a way in which we could kind of level the playing field in regards to social equity.

And I think part of the thing that folks often forget, is that when we talk about cannabis, in this day and age, we're not talking about the criminalization of Black and brown communities in the 70s and 80s. And the war on drugs in the 70s by Richard Nixon and the DEA. Essentially we're talking about a plant with medicinal purposes and value. And in that we can retroactively reverse engineer the harmful effects of the war on drugs, to include Black and brown folks present day to be entrepreneurs. Job training, helping out marginalized communities in regards to the revenue that will be raised. And it can have a tremendous impact. And this could not just in New York, but globally be the way in which the American government can say maybe now, we see you a little bit more than we did.

Prerana Reddy:

Right. And I believe Evanston, Illinois, an example of using some of the tax profits from cannabis sales to fund reparations and direct financial aid around housing inequity. So there are models in place that we can already look to.

Andre Richardson:

Exactly.

Prerana Reddy:

Thank you for sharing that. And now, we're going to talk with our final panelist Camonghne Felix. Camonghne is a great example of how creatives can transfer their skills to politics, communications, or played this role for Senator Elizabeth Warren's presidential campaign, and is the author of *Build Yourself a Boat*, a debut collection of poetry that was on a long list for the National Book Award. Camonghne, welcome, and can you do a visual description quickly?

Camonghne Felix:

Hi, thank you so much for having me. My name is Camonghne Felix, I am a Black woman with small braids, in a leopard print turtleneck and hoop earrings. Next to me on the wall is an Elizabeth Warren poster, a Toni Morrison poster, and lots of depth and lots of light.

Prerana Reddy:

Thank you. So as a poet, can you tell me, we're talking about communications and representation, what does poetry bring to the political narrative, both in terms of how politicians communicate, but also what is heard by the public? How can poetry really change how we think about political communication?

Camonghne Felix:

Sure. So like Andre said one of the sort of easiest, and most obvious things to say about utilizing poetry in the political realm is that it provides a different kind of accessibility. When the public hears rhetoric, they are often used to hearing it without meter, without sound, particularly for communities of color that often come from oratory traditions, it's really important to hear the politicians who are talking to us speak in the kind of cadences that are familiar to us, and use the kind of textures in their language that are familiar to us.

So on a very practical tactical level, it is just a smart tool to be able to get potential voters and just audiences that are used to hearing from old white men hear you a little bit differently. So that's one thing. But one thing that I say all the time, about why poetry in general is so important to me, but also why it's so important to bring it to this realm is that in a poem, when you're writing about people, when you're writing about the human experience, it is virtually impossible to write a poem without a person, without acknowledging whether or not they are dead.

And part of what that does is it requires that you really locate what it means to be a person. Any criticism that you have of humanity, or of an individual in your poem has to contextualize how human beings are made, how they understand the world, what is fundamental to their needs. And so in a poem, you'll be hard pressed to find a poem or a poet who won't acknowledge that every human being deserves to have a place to live. We understand as poets that that's a fundamental necessity for human beings to be able to not just exist, but also to create and feed back into the artistic infrastructure.

So I think when you bring that idea and that framework to policymaking and to legislating, it requires that you really think about people, as I said, as they are. And so you can no longer talk about systems without thinking about the people who are directly impacted by them. You can't talk about policy without thinking about the real sort of lived application of that policy on human bodies. And it really centers the person, the individual and the collective humanness in that development of policy. And one of my theories is that if we can get legislators who are interested in thinking about policy in the way that poets think about poetry, we will have policy that is more human, more humane, and that understands the human condition, a lot more smartly.

Prerana Reddy:

Well, I gave everyone else the opportunity to tell a story about their own trajectory. And I know you started out with slam poetry. Now you moved into written poetry and communication and strategy, both for foundations and elected officials. How did you make that transition? Tell a story about your journey.

Camonghne Felix:

I would call it less of a transition and more of sort of an evolution that was certainly going to happen. So in high school, I'm from New York City, I grew up in the Bronx, I went to like four different high schools. The school that I spent the most time at was Bronx Law, Government, and Justice, which has a really well-known policy debate team.

And so in high school, I didn't really want to go to class or enjoy school, it was just very difficult, for obvious reasons if you know New York City public school systems. But policy debate was one of the first places where I felt like my voice and my analysis was necessary and useful. And I was able to apply that to global systems and global ideas. And at one debate, I don't remember where we were, it might have been in another state, a young woman, a young Black woman, in a round I wasn't in, brought in a poem as evidence. And that was the first time that I had thought about evidence in that way or thought about poetry in that way, that they could serve each other.

And that sort of opened a lot of different doors for me and really made me want to invest in how poetry is evidence in general in our lives and in our work. And that's sort of what brought me to starting to just write and I saw the Malcolm X movie for the first time. I'm a very emotional person, I experienced things very viscerally, in 10th grade and it really messed me up. And my teacher, I couldn't... I was inconsolable. And my teacher was like, "You should write a poem about it." And I was like, "Okay, whatever, miss, I guess." And I did. And then she asked me to perform it in front of the school. And I did, even though I'd never really seen slam poetry. It wasn't a thing that I was exposed to just yet.

But after that performance, people said that they liked it. And I realized that I really liked it too. And so I started to just look into like youth poetry. And I discovered an organization called Urban Word NYC, which is a youth organization that helps young people develop their voice through a bunch of different mediums, but the primary one is slam poetry. And I went to my first slam, and I thought I was going to be... Of course I was like, the one of the smartest kids in my class. And I always knew I was a good writer, and I went to this slam, and I was like, "Oh, I'm going to kill this, whatever, I'm just going to take this scholarship money." And I walked in to send me vinyls.

And I had never seen anything like what I'd seen that day, young people who were not just bringing their emotions and their feelings to the stage. But young people who were just like me, came from similar hoods as me, had the similar socio economic backgrounds, but who were so profound in the way that they understood those backgrounds, in the way that they understood those systems. And immediately, I just felt at home in that community. And it's through that community that my practice has evolved and has sort of like taken on two legs. The spoken word community, and the literary arts community is one community. Usually people evolve in and out of it, it sort of depends on where you are.

But there's so many people who were early mentors to me, Aracelis Girmay, V, formerly known as Eve, Mahogany L. Browne, Gregory Pardlo, people who took their robust literary careers back from universities and brought it back to these young people sitting around at a table who just didn't want to go home and taught them about meter. And so even on the stage, you're applying those literary devices, really figuring out like, how do you write a poem that is interesting and unique. And also that is smart and good. And at some point you get tired of the stage, whether because, for me, it felt limiting, I felt like I could do more on the page, I felt like there was more performance to do on the page that was important to me.

And it also left space for me to stop performing in that way. I wanted to not be a performance, I wanted to play on the page. And the first politician that I worked for him, Michael Blake in the Bronx, he knew a friend who knew a friend, saw one of my poems at the Nuyorican, and was like have you ever considered speech writing? And I was like, "Duh, of course I have. I'm a policy debater." And so my first experience was really, him being like, "You clearly have some really smart talents, we should bring that to the campaign trail." We did. And that really helped me both understand who I was in electoral politics, but also how I could use politics for community organizing, to help politicians just like write better politics and better poetry. And so all of those things sort of conjoined around each other. And just sort of sent me into the political sphere, where I've been for the last 10 years and just doing them both at the same time writing and politicking. Yeah.

Prerana Reddy:

So you don't have to name names. But what are candidates still getting wrong about communicating with Black and POC communities that they may not be part of? Do you still have a lot of assumptions to correct when you're working with them? Or is it more about how you're communicating? Or are they still communicating the wrong things?

Camonghne Felix:

I think it's all three. I think obviously, there are some candidates who in many ways are getting it right. Or at least trying, getting closer. I think one of the things that people misunderstand about communities of color is that they are... And to the people on this panel, it won't be surprising, but they're incredibly diverse. They are microcosms of larger communities, but those microcosms have their own cultures and their own nuances.

And they forget that the one message that might work with Black Americans who come from the south may not necessarily work with Black immigrants who come from Haiti, or that in immigrants comms or immigration communications, people often think only about Latino Americans, as the

people who are being targeted where Black Caribbeans, especially Black Haitians, are some of the highest groups of people who face immigration threats, and deportation threats. Excuse me.

So I think that's one obvious thing is like really understanding that you don't lose anything by getting specific. And there's a way to get specific and also create messaging that is holistic and overarching. But that's a lot of work. And people don't often know how to do it or don't have staff who can. So I definitely think that's one thing. And the other thing I'd say, too, is that, because of our unique, in many ways, organizing history and the way that Black people in particular have transformed electoral politics, I think people forget that Black people are still like any other human being self-interested.

Individuals want to feel like their safety is guaranteed, whether that's economic safety, cultural safety. And while of course, we think in community framework, because we have had to, it still doesn't eliminate the fact that any unique individual wants a better life for himself or, I'm sorry, for themselves. And it's really problematic the way that certain politicians in their outreach, sort of neglect that and put the onus of Black organizing on Black people versus wanting to organize on their behalf or organize with them. And I think just this assumption that because Black people have had to be in community that they are just going to, is one of the ways that we never actually get over those organizing humps and miss opportunities to organize smartly.

Prerana Reddy:

And then my last question has to do with younger folks, and a lot of times they get blamed for not voting in the ways that, and the numbers that people had hoped for, et cetera, or for being apolitical. And also just that perhaps some of the ways, the traditional ways that people have thought about political advertising or outreach aren't really kind of hating the ways that young people are living online or are influenced. So, I'm wondering whether in your own experience what have you found to be really effected or effective in terms of candidates or electeds being successfully reaching and engaging youth.

Camonghne Felix:

I think one of the biggest mistakes that most politicians... Not most but many politicians make when they're courting young people is that they often place the outcome of the race solely on that group. And so even though, as we saw in the selection that youth turn out was super important. There were so many other communities that really needed to turn out to make sure that we were able to get the vote that was best for the country.

But folks spent so much time saying that young folks are disaffected, and that they don't care about their communities. And as an individual, every person on this call can acknowledge that if someone tells you that you're aren't into something, before you even get the chance to explain that you are, that's going to make you check out pretty quickly. And so I think it's really important that politicians watch the way that they talk about young people and the way that they talk about how young folks have organized. Student activists are the bedrock of activism in this community and in this country.

And I think it's really important that politicians tap into that student activist framework. And student activists are again, diverse, and they're not necessarily all organizing around an elected official. They might be organizing around labor, they might be organizing around health in their direct communities. So being better able to tap into those student activist communities, even if they're not organizing on behalf of a candidate or a campaign is really important.

And also just be willing to listen. One thing that I really loved about Elizabeth Warren and why I was by her side is because out of every politician that I've worked for, she's the one who seemed to have the best that listening. And so really, just being willing to get in a room with people that you don't know who sort of fit one demographic and just hear them talk to you about what they care about, versus trying to tell them what they should care about, is a really useful way to both feel heard by them, and also to understand how to actually actively organize them.

Prerana Reddy:

Great, thank you so much. Now, I want to bring back everyone for the group conversation. So if every panelist can turn on their camera, and I'm just going to throw out question that anyone can answer if you feel so moved. I also want to say that I know some of you know each other or work in similar fields, and so if you want to address each other and ask different questions than the ones that I've put out, feel free. We want it to feel more like a dialogue and get out of the like me being the only person asking questions. But I guess one of the questions that I have is around are we actually at a moment of inflection right now? As governments and institutions are at least saying that they want to respond to the public call for change and around racial justice in particular. And what are the kind of cultural shifts that demonstrate that the conventional wisdom around politics and representation is being challenged? Or maybe another way of saying, what are the signs and omens and things are changing?

Andre Richardson:

So I'll jump in. So I think we are at a point of inflection, absolutely. I think this is just one of many that have taken place over the course of history. And last year, we saw the largest civil rights movement in this young country's history. And I would say that activists would probably argue that we got very little in the way of moving the ball down the field. But it was a good start. And there's many other moments that are going to take place to have to progress this country with the aggressiveness that is required in regards to social equity and social equality. So, yes, we're at an inflection point, but America's young. And we have so far to go. I thought we would be much further along than we are right now. But it's best for myself, and maybe some others, we just have to plant the seeds for the folks who are going to come behind us.

Prerana Reddy:

Anyone else have thoughts on kind of where we are, and the pace of change and what we can point to, towards indicators for how things are changing?

Xamayla Rose:

I mean, I guess I can just add this one point, which is very specific to New York City. But I do think we're at a point where culture is changing around representation and how people participate in the democratic process. I know that even in New York City there's been some opposition with what we have, which is rank choice voting, which was just implemented in January. But it's a law, pretty much that changes... It's a change in the city charter that changes the way that we vote by ranking candidates.

And we had the first election where they actually tabulated the results and everything. But I think just the way that we're beginning to look at access,

whether it's like through making sure that we have voting centers in New York City, the rest of the New York State already has their voting centers during early voting, they're able to go where they want to go. They don't have to be assigned to one particular poll site, which in essence, creates barriers for people.

The fact that we passed automatic voter registration, which increases the franchise for so many people who may be entering governmental institutions. Like I said, rank choice voting, and then also that we're really looking at restoring the vote to people who are on parole, as well as looking at felony disenfranchisement as a whole in New York State. So I think the times are changing, there is a cultural shift. And I'm actually looking forward to the next few years, especially as we elect more progressive people into office.

Prerana Reddy:

I guess this is a time too, maybe if any of you want to lift up organizations, candidates, organizers, that you feel like are doing the needed work to increase political involvement or representation, and especially, perhaps ones that aren't the most obvious. Everyone's heard of Stacey Abrams, perhaps, but there's so many people who are working on the front lines, there are so many organizations that are doing that work throughout the country, that I think we can all learn from. And so if anybody wants to lift up some examples or inspirations that you look to, in your work.

Camonghne Felix:

I want to lift up, Survived and Punished New York and their Survived and Punished network in general. And organizers, especially at Working Families Party and through Justice Dems, particularly folks who are organizing around abolition, obviously, we are a very, very, very long way from that being implemented in any sort of policy framework. But I think that these folks are doing what poets tend to do best, which is imagining the future that isn't upon us yet and articulating our way there. And I think the faster folks get onboard to the idea of abolition, to the possibilities of abolition, I think the closer we get to just having a better justice system for everyone. Even if we never get to abolition over the next 30 years, the fact that there are people in organizers who are pushing the idea of imagination, I think, will be better for politics, all in all, and will certainly add to this inflection moment.

Prerana Reddy:

Right, thank you. And one other thing, and I think you touched on this a little bit Camonghne is what would you say to folks who have lost faith in politics or voting altogether as a useful tool for change? Why is it still important to vote or support progressive candidates? Even if they have uphill battles, in enacting their agendas, or there might be a long game? But how do you help people see the long game when things are dire or feel dire now? Want to take that?

Andre Richardson:

I could jump in on that. So I would simply say, I'm right there with you. I lost faith in politics, and I lose faith in politics on a consistent basis. Sometimes with what I do for a living, or at least prior to where I am now, consciously, I used to feel like I was waking up every day and going to the dentist office, it wasn't a system that I wanted to participate in. I spent four years of seeing a white supremacist in the White House. If there's anything more disenfranchising than that I'm not aware of it.

But what I would say is that hope is always on the horizon. And I think oftentimes, we look to elected leaders to provide this. And they are just one piece of this. And the sisters on this call have lifted folks up. We have that, we have advocates that are out there fighting as well, we have people of color, and women of color in positions of leadership in city government, that are lifting folks up, as well. And then just as individuals whether we're in politics, or we're not in it. As I often say, we are our best advocate, and nobody's going to fight harder for us than us. And we could push things just as well as anybody else that's trying to advocate for change in this country.

Prerana Reddy:

Thank you. Camonghne.

Camonghne Felix:

Yeah, I would also add, that it's exactly that. I think many of us are disillusioned and frustrated. But the thing that keeps us all in the fight and in the game is having people to organize with having people that you trust, who even when you lose, you're still happy to have been in the trenches with them and throw down with them. So just find your people. And also be gentle with yourself, if you need to tap out for a cycle tap out. If you need to be more involved than you've ever been before, to feel like it's worthwhile, do that too. But this isn't a requirement and you're not doing anything wrong, if you don't feel like doing it. This is life and it's tough to stand up for yourself and for the people that you care about.

Xamayla Rose:

I just wanted to add one thing, only because I often speak to people who are apolitical, and they're like, "I'm sick of this, voting makes no sense. There's no reason for me to be involved." And I try to explain to them the role of money in politics. And the reason why you need to be involved is because our voices need to be louder than their money. And so it's so important for us to just continue to engage and share and to press and to push. And that's the only way change is really going to happen because if not the only voices that are there are the white supremacist voices and that's the problem that we're in now. And we got to fix it.

Prerana Reddy:

Well, I think, Xamayla, with that you may have the last word. We're at 7:33 but thank you to all of you for sharing both your personal journey as well as your wisdom around kind of where we are collectively in this fight for expanding voting, for expanding the progressive and people of color agenda and increasing the number of people who can participate whether individually or as electeds. And we're in an amazing moment. I do believe that as well. Here in New York City we're in a place where we have a mayoral election coming up, half the city council is changing. So a lot of change is going to happen one way or the other. And we need to get in the game. And I'm super excited to see so many new candidates, and the networks of support that they've built oftentimes from community organizing in their own neighborhoods, as we've seen today, and that gives me [inaudible]. And I'm going to pass this back to Solana, to close it.

Solana Chehtman:

Thank you, Prerana. And thank you so much to Molly, and Xamayla, and Andre, and Camonghne. Everyone's forthright conversation, and most importantly, for your work every single day. Thank you for sharing your personal journeys, they are so, so inspiring. Thank you for naming this inflection point, and also for getting past this moment of disillusionment. And my hope is everyone is leaving this room tonight, feeling that there is something for them to continue moving racial and social justice and democracy forward.

And it's about us, as you said, finding your people and getting started or keeping at it. I want to thank our access workers tonight who did such a wonderful job. I want to thank Derek and the wonderful Zenzele at Weeksville for your partnership. I want to thank our Shed team, our civic programs, IT, marketing, development teams, our VX team who does such a great job of receiving our guests in the space.

This conversation for everyone will be posted next week in our website. Also, I invite you to check our past conversations that's part of the series as part of the Pindell's Legacy series and check out *Fighting Dark*, our audio on video tours of New York by Kamau Ware the founder of Black Gotham Experience. And just to close I want to thank once again, the Ford Foundation and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs for their generous support of this commission and our public programs and Howard Gilman foundation for providing the Zoom platform that we've used for tonight's conversation. We will hopefully see you soon at The Shed. Thank you all.