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Imani Mixon ([00:00:00](#)):

I'm Imani Mixon, an arts and culture writer and host, and this is Subject Matters, a podcast about artists, the worlds they live in, and the worlds they wish to create. A lot of us use the phrase safe space, but what does it really mean, and who does it keep safe? The phrase is beginning to sound a bit vague and tired. So I spoke with harpist Ahya Simone, artist Cristina Tufino, and maker Nour Ballout, who have all created artistic spaces of their own, whether tangible or intangible. We considered the limitations of safe spaces and why we need to be more specific about the words we use and the spaces we create and uplift. Hey, y'all.

Ahya Simone ([00:00:40](#)):

Hey.

Nour Ballout ([00:00:41](#)):

Hey.

Cristina Tufino ([00:00:41](#)):

Hi.

Imani Mixon ([00:00:44](#)):

So first up, I want to know what you all think when you hear the phrase safe space. What kind of environment comes to mind? What does it feel, taste, and smell like? And we can start with whoever feels comfortable.

Nour Ballout ([00:01:01](#)):

We're getting none of us knowing what a safe space is because we've never felt it.

Cristina Tufino ([00:01:05](#)):

I mean, it's loaded, right? Especially if you suffered violence or if you've been stigmatized in your childhood or during your adolescence or throughout your adult life. It's a difficult thing to define. But I think I know looking back at my own history that I did have it, that I have had it. And now looking back, I can recognize it, but only in retrospect. At that moment I didn't know what it really was, until recently until the last seven years, eight years, I haven't known what that really is.

Imani Mixon ([00:01:52](#)):

And can you talk more about what that space was for you even if it was in retrospect?

Cristina Tufino ([00:01:56](#)):

Sure. Yeah, I grew up in a really violent home, and it was when I was about 11 or 12 that I came to live with my grandmother. And she was... And this has been a part of my work, talking about her in video and essays and sculptures and such. But living with her, she created a safe space for me. And she had created a safe space in her home for herself and for other people, and so I was able to thrive. I mean, family can be a safe space. They should be a safe space for children to be who they are and explore their identity, whatever that is.

Ahya Simone ([00:02:39](#)):

When I hear a safe space, I'm just like, what does that even mean? Why are we saying it, and what purpose is it serving? You know? Because it's hard. It's hard when I'm questioning the idea of safe spaces, because what is safety in a world, under this current regime, under this current oppressive society? Because for some it could be free from harm or free from abuse, right? We can talk about what it means to minimize harm, minimize abuse, but that doesn't mean safe because if there's one thing about human beings it's that we all have needs and we all have desires. So we're always going to be in a place of negotiating our safety or negotiating, and as a result, conflict can happen and also harm can happen. And then if harm is repeated, it becomes abuse. And so I think what I'm trying to get at is that none of us is getting out of this life alive without harming someone.

Ahya Simone ([00:04:22](#)):

However, we could focus on minimizing abuse, right, as sustained prolonged suffering, but that does not mean safety. I think right now... Because also we're talking about safe spaces. People are getting killed out here in the streets and in their homes. People are without food. People are without resources to adequately take agency over their lives. And I think right now we can't even think about safe spaces because we're... But I do think we as people under this kind of society and as a black person or as kind of nice people, we might be able to find a bond that helps sooth the ache. Right? We may be able to find contentment in gracefulness. We may be able to resist right now, but I think we're putting the cart before the horse with safe space. You know what I'm saying? It's never been a safe space that I have not been near that has not replicated some harm, and so I think... Yeah, that was ultimately what I was trying to say.

Imani Mixon ([00:05:36](#)):

Yeah. No, that makes a lot of sense.

Nour Ballout ([00:05:38](#)):

Yeah, and I agree with that a hundred percent. I think the language that we use is incredibly important. I think to say that this is a safe space is often an issue because what's safe for one person may not be safe for another human. And when I'm building a relationship with a human being, I'm not going to be like, "I'm never going to harm you." But I'm going to be like, "When I fuck up, I'm going to own it. When I because harm, I will hear you, and we will talk about it." And so to say safe space, it just feels like... And also we show up to places with a lot of our own trauma. Even if harm is actively happening, we're interpreting things as harm, or sometimes we interpret conflict as abuse because we're bringing our own past and our own trauma to a situation. And so I think it's really complicated. Yeah, I don't know. I agree with everything Ahya said.

Cristina Tufino ([00:06:47](#)):

Yeah, the idea of safe space, I think it comes from gay culture, LGBT rights, I think. It's a term that came from the gay community and being able to be at a nightclub or a house, someone's house where you could, if you were transitioning into being a woman, you could be that identity and become who you are without being discriminated against. I think when we talk about safe spaces, it's our basic human space where we can be ourselves, so I think it's about that. And I think looking back at my relationship with my grandmother who became my mother, there was definitely sections that the way she raised I felt neglected, but she allowed me to be myself and to thrive. I think the culture, though, our culture right

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now people are very sensitive, which is a good thing. But sometimes also we have to be really strong and move past when people fuck up. And I liked what Nour said. That doesn't mean that we're going to be perfect all the time. [crosstalk 00:08:00] creating space, and these spaces have been very important to me throughout my life.

Nour Ballout ([00:08:06](#)):

Yeah. And I say everything I say, and I'm someone that my life revolves around creating spaces. Right? And I've used the word safe space in the past. I think because I've used the word safe space, I really have to think about it. I'm getting closer to saying that I'm building a space where maybe I feel comfortable and I invite people to be in, and I'm inviting people to build something with me rather than just the safe space. I'm glad you brought this up, Cristina, how maybe the word safe space was rooted in LGBT culture. And as a trans person and also a Muslim person, I've been in queer spaces where I haven't felt safe. I've been in spaces where I've felt really unsafe because people are incredibly Islamophobic, and white trans spaces where I haven't felt safe to fullness of all of what I am.

Nour Ballout ([00:09:13](#)):

And so I think those places, and I think if that's where the word is rooted, which I'm not going to be like that's... I think parts of it may be informed by LGBT world made for cis gay men. And so to me, I think I have a desire to question that word, and I have a desire to go deeper into what do we want out of a safe space, rather than what is the word? And so for me, I don't want to just live in a world where I'm never uncomfortable. I want a world that's going to challenge me. I want to be in relationships that are going to challenge and push me. Do I want to get harmed? No, that's crazy. But I do want to feel uncomfortable sometimes, and I want to grow, and I want to be part of environments that push me but simultaneously hold me. And I think that is what's important to me is a space that can hold me when I'm moving through whatever I'm moving through.

Imani Mixon ([00:10:37](#)):

Yeah. And I think that's powerful because I wrote... I try to do mantras every month, and one time it was, "I am safe and protected." And I wrote it, but when I said it aloud in the mirror, I was kind of like, "Mm, but am I?" And I think that is where we're at, where it's like, I want to be those things. I aspire to those things. But because of the environments and the world that we're in, that is not something that is everybody else's way of handling me or responsibility even. So I think we definitely have to just be more specific and realistic, and I think there also is a way that sometimes safe space can be used to block people off from being held accountable. Like, "Oh, this is a safe space. Nobody's going to step on your toe. Nobody's going to talk bad about you." But then all those things happen, and there's nowhere to go to be like, "Actually, I was hurt in this beautiful place," or, "With these cool people harm still happened." So I think that that definitely speaks to everything you all have said.

Nour Ballout ([00:11:41](#)):

Also, the harm can be greater when it is a safe space. When my guard is down and I'm in a place and the harm happens, that has a larger magnitude because we're existing in this space under this utopian presumption where harm will not happen, and that's really scary. Right? And I've caused harm in those spaces simply by being masculine in a space that was queer and mostly fem with an undefined rule that it's fems and Nour, but then my masculinity in itself caused harm and triggered someone. And so I think clearly stating something and acknowledging it is important.

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Imani Mixon ([00:12:33](#)):

Yeah, that makes sense. And I'm happy you brought that up because I was trying to think of a way to talk about the gender/binaried way that also safe spaces can exist. And I think a part of that, for me personally, has been that I feel like I'm rewarded most when I recreate capitalism and do lightweight massage knee or whatever. We've learned all these things from old white men. So for me to have to intentionally think about the way I'm going to do this as the person that I am and how I exist in the world has been very tough. So I wonder how you all engage with the different parts of yourselves to create a safe space. Is there a moment where you're like, "Oh, I'm showing up in this space like this or like this to signal to other people that they can come along as well"?

Nour Ballout ([00:13:31](#)):

I like to think about what Cristina was saying about her grandmother. Did you ever feel harm when you were living with your grandmother? Were you ever hurt? Maybe not intentionally, but [crosstalk 00:13:46]-

Cristina Tufino ([00:13:46](#)):

Of course.

Nour Ballout ([00:13:46](#)):

Yeah. I mean, that's-

Cristina Tufino ([00:13:47](#)):

No, no, she was the kindest person, and she was a professor, so she dealt with all the young people. But you're a teenager, so you'll constantly feel older people misunderstand you. Yeah, for sure, I felt ignored by her or misunderstood, for sure.

Nour Ballout ([00:14:13](#)):

But you still felt safe.

Cristina Tufino ([00:14:14](#)):

But I felt safe, and I didn't feel safe when I was a little kid. But I think, to go back to Imani's question, I think she also gave me materials to kind of get to know myself. And that, I think you were asking... Sorry. You'll have to rephrase the question, but how do you bring those people, how do you attract them? And not only feeling safe or feeling free within boundaries, but also friends. She has what we consider safe space artists, and for queer people here at just my neighbor. And she has all these materials, and there's a part of the house where you can read, another part of the house where you can do screen printing, you can draw, you can use the computer, and you can say whatever you want and be yourself and express yourself. But I think that having something to do together is really important.

Imani Mixon ([00:15:14](#)):

Yeah.

Nour Ballout ([00:15:14](#)):

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And it makes me think it's [inaudible 00:15:21]... It's important for us to just name things how they are. You know, a safe space is so deceptively vague that it leaves too much room for interpretation. It leaves too much to the imagination to where you can say safe space, and you put mother fuckers in a room, and they have a whole different perspectives and orientations that they're actually coming from. And then they come together, and you said this is a safe space? Where's my almond milk and my... You know what I'm saying? They can give that, and I think space is a loaded word where we...

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Ahya Simone ([00:16:03](#)):

... and I think space is a loaded word where we can even just call it a social thing, because when I think safety, I think belonging, I think comradery, I think of support, whether for your goals or mental, emotional, or physical support, I think of connection. Connection and space for a person to be a person. And if a person gets out of line... But also the other hand of it is, when a person maybe violates a rule or violates someone that there is adequate measures in place to repair and to [inaudible 00:16:57] to move forward. And that's what I think of... When people mean by safe space, that's what I hear. That's what I kind of deduced from what people generally mean. But to that end, again, what I'm getting clear on, what to call that, or getting clear on language but also what would kind of... I think the thing about it is that this is not about trust. When people hear safe or safety, they here, "I don't have to use discernment or trust. I don't have to take the risk because it's already stated in the title, or it's already stated on the board, when you walk into the room that this is the..." You know what I'm saying? What am I trying to say? It's about trying to minimize having to use, or rather minimize risk almost to a point where it's actually not even possible.

Imani Mixon ([00:18:23](#)):

Yeah.

Ahya Simone ([00:18:25](#)):

Because all life is risk, all the choices made are risks, all the ways that we connect with each other and how we learned to trust it and to be in community with each other and in relationship requires trust and risk. And exercising and practicing being in relationships with people helps you to develop trust, which is what I think safe spaces are supposed to represent.

Imani Mixon ([00:19:02](#)):

Wow. If we went into all the places that were previously labeled safe spaces as trustworthy spaces, I think that would change things. It also makes me think about the activity we would do in school, like a trust fall with all your random classmates. And I will always be like, "Why do I need to fall into these hands? I don't know everybody, they don't know me, they're not looking out for me." So I think that is also what we're talking about is, is there a space where you can fall back and not worry and not have as much risk or harm as you were before and still be held and not touch the ground? And I think that would also change the way we think about what we call these spaces.

Cristina Tufino ([00:19:43](#)):

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I think also safe space for who? As a Latina, I grew up in Puerto Rico, and then I once leaved in United States. There I went to these very white, very privileged art schools, and that was a safe space for them and they had a great time, and I was always like, "What the heck is going on here? Why do I feel so out of place?" But I'm sure if they look back, that was the safest they probably felt together as a group and [inaudible 00:20:17] they could expose, but sometimes you might be in a safe space and there might be people who don't exactly... And they're forced to... And art school's supposed to be a safe space for creativity and for blah, blah. But it's really not necessarily, especially if you're a student of color or if you're Hispanic or black or don't fit the traditional mold of what that space is like.

Imani Mixon ([00:20:48](#)):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And you know-

Cristina Tufino ([00:20:50](#)):

But I was in a lot of [inaudible 00:20:52] for white people when I was in the US. I was just like... And they were supposed to be liberal, blah, blah, blah, but they were really not actually, they were very narrow thinkers and did not question the space that they were in.

Nour Ballout ([00:21:06](#)):

Art school is maybe the least safe place on the planet.

Cristina Tufino ([00:21:10](#)):

My God. It was shocking.

Ahya Simone ([00:21:13](#)):

The beautiful thing is about resistance to write that down to transphobia to homophobias and white supremacy, whiteness, but the beautiful thing about resisting whiteness is really just saying to two white votes to whiteness, "I don't got to see shit the way you see it." You know what I'm saying? "You may be in denial about your racism, but I see it clear as day and I'm going to call it how I see it. And it's no shade. Well, actually all shade." But that's the beautiful thing about resistance.

Cristina Tufino ([00:21:51](#)):

I feel in this era that we're in it's problematic. It feels bad, but I think in a way it's a very necessary moment for a lot of wrongs to be outed. It's a very painful process that we're going through. The United States is a really pretty messy place, and right now coming to terms and they real seem to be in denial. At least when I got there, they just seemed so in denial. And now I talk to people and they seem a little bit more open to discussing the problems that I had seen from the moment I got there because I grew up with a Marxist family and for queer people, all the things that seem now normal to talk about openly and before it was just stuffed under the rug and everybody is [inaudible 00:22:43].

Ahya Simone ([00:22:44](#)):

Yeah.

Imani Mixon ([00:22:45](#)):

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Yeah.

Cristina Tufino ([00:22:52](#)):

I got there 2001, right after... During the 911. And it was just a completely... It was completely different. But yeah, I like this idea of just because she said that... Just because you see it that way, and I... It doesn't mean that that's the reality.

Imani Mixon ([00:23:15](#)):

Yeah.

Nour Ballout ([00:23:16](#)):

Yeah. I don't know. I just think the idea of safe spaces is so hilarious and terrible at this point. And I'm just like, "Instead of saying this word, why don't we actually say what we're doing, and say what do you mean?" I was saying like, "I have my definition of coming in and you have your definition of coming in." And it leaves too much room for miscommunication. And then also these institutions that are like, "This is a safe space." It is so not a safe space. It's a dangerous space. It becomes not only not safe, but incredibly dangerous. For someone coming in that is not a [inaudible 00:24:07] white person, for someone that's coming in that has a multitude of different needs to think that they are coming into a safe space because then I don't feel like, oh, I need to ask for all of these things and assuming this is a safe space, I just come in with the assumption that they're going to be there.

Nour Ballout ([00:24:26](#)):

They're not there. When I'm interacting with the world, when I'm in Detroit surrounding myself in my little bubble, I'm just like, "What are the racism?" I'm just kidding. I know racism [crosstalk 00:24:40].

Ahya Simone ([00:24:44](#)):

[inaudible 00:24:44], but they won't let me.

Imani Mixon ([00:24:52](#)):

Right. Don't act like I haven't tried, yeah.

Ahya Simone ([00:24:55](#)):

Yeah.

Nour Ballout ([00:24:56](#)):

But, there's the certain understanding, not understanding, but there are certain things that I can feel in my community and in the bubble that I've built. When I'm just in this bubble, we all... There are things you can't escape in America bottom line. But then when I travel across the country and I'm in nowhere, Oklahoma or Kansas city, my life literally doesn't matter. If you're in a hospital and you don't have a car, you're automatically homeless and a drug addict because you're brown and, "Where's your wallet? Oh, you don't have a wallet." And I speak as in, this happened. And then you end up in a human trafficking situation. And you know what I...

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Nour Ballout ([00:25:49](#)):

It's just like, that's how the disposable your life is outside of the city. I think this is more of the idea of being gentle and constantly creating spaces where the expectation is, "I'm fine, and I'm never going to be caused harm," is kind of like a catch 22.

Imani Mixon ([00:26:07](#)):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nour Ballout ([00:26:07](#)):

It sets you up to be more harmed. I think I've been harmed more in safe spaces than I've been harmed in the general world. And so, I don't know. I feel like it's such a famous world that I think we need to think about why we feel a desire and a need for a safe space, but to not just jump in and be like, "This is a safe space." It's similar to non-violence when it comes to a revolution. A nonviolent revolution. It's great idea. It's a really good idea. Would love a nonviolent world, but is it really what's going to happen? Is that really what we're going to exist in? Because if I'm having a non-violent protest and someone throws tear gas at me, there's violence and we're going to engage in some kind of violent interaction.

Imani Mixon ([00:27:11](#)):

Yeah.

Nour Ballout ([00:27:11](#)):

And because of the police-

Ahya Simone ([00:27:18](#)):

[inaudible 00:27:18] it's going to be a violent.

Nour Ballout ([00:27:20](#)):

No, it's okay. Anywhere where there's policing and anywhere where there's law enforcement there's violence because they initiate. And in any world where we have policing, we learn a structure in which we police each other. I think the police itself as harmful, and it's an institution that causes very direct harm, but the institution and the ways that that institution teaches us deal with harm, the way it teaches us to deal with situations manifests in our personal relationships, and then we begin to replicate that way of handling a situation. We become punitive in our ways that we love, we become punitive in the way that we interact with someone who caused harm when that's not the world we want to live in. I think abolishing the police begins at home, it begins in our most intimate relationships.

Imani Mixon ([00:28:30](#)):

Yeah. And I think what we're coming to is just that a lot of the language that we have is just old. It's outdated, it doesn't feel right or true. As a journalist, it doesn't feel accurate or responsible even because in the same way you were saying, Noah, if you're harmed in a place where you're not supposed to be, and the consequences that you have are way bigger than maybe some of the people that are causing that harm or that are also in that space, then we're not doing the right thing. This is not the right time or space to do this thing. But I am very curious because the reason I kind of put you all together is that in my mind, you all have created spaces that signify your work or hold your work or invite other people to



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it. And I just want to talk a little bit more about the spaces you have personally created, whether tangible or intangible and your process for bringing it to life and yeah, how it came to be. So we can start with Christina since I've never been physically to the space that you create.

Cristina Tufino ([00:29:36](#)):

I've worked in sculpture and I've done sculpture shows. And I started attracting a lot of young women who felt safe to talk to me. And there's a little community that I suddenly had in my life that I had never had before. That was really lovely. And I think that is... You could say that's a safe space. And then coming back to Puerto Rico, I didn't know what was [inaudible 00:30:05] here. Pandemic made me stay. I inherited this house and I live in. Belonged to my grandmother. We had been through the hurricane, so I was really devastated by this natural disaster and this giant tree fell on it. And I think I wanted to create a garden, a sculpture garden outside.

Cristina Tufino ([00:30:33](#)):

I think I wanted to recreate that idea of attracting people to come see this house as a same thing with a sculpture show that I had done abroad in Mexico and New York and Philly. I'm hoping that it attracts more people. I'm really out in the middle, not a very... It's not in the city, but people will come and it will be an exciting... I want it to be like people can perform outside. It's taking a long time because the hurricane was so brutal. So I have done so much cleaning. The last six months have been just cleaning, and cleaning, and cleaning, but now I'm at a point where I'm actually working on the... I worked on the tree, I'm doing an intervention on the tree.

Cristina Tufino ([00:31:18](#)):

So ideally we don't... I want to say that... I was thinking about this is that ideally in a world, we don't need same spaces. People are just respectful of basic human interactions, but you allow another person to be themselves and you don't discriminate, et cetera. Ideally in the future, we don't have this need, but human beings, especially in the United States, they love to, "I'm this and you're that and this is my space and this is my property." And these are very capitalistic too. Safe spaces can be very capitalistic as well. So I hope in the future we don't have this kind of thing anymore. Ideally, kids can be together and just express themselves.

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:32:04]

Cristina Tufino ([00:32:03](#)):

... can be together and just express themselves without these formal ways of communicating. Anyway.

Imani Mixon ([00:32:12](#)):

It's beautiful to rebuild a place where there was once harm, or destruction, or disruption. I think that is so much of a lot of our processes, whether it's a facade of a building or inner work where you have to be like, okay, something major happened here. This is a wound and I need to like massage it a little bit, or cover it up, or figure out what to do with it. So I think it's super brave to be working on the house the way you are. That that doesn't sound like small work at all. That sounds like really big work.

Cristina Tufino ([00:32:43](#)):

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It's been a lot.

Ahya Simone ([00:32:45](#)):

Yes, that sounds so good. I want to come.

Cristina Tufino ([00:32:48](#)):

Yes, you can come.

Ahya Simone ([00:32:51](#)):

I've been wanting to do pottery, but also sculpture. I'm really trying to get my multidisciplinary career on. You know what I'm saying?

Cristina Tufino ([00:33:04](#)):

I think I want to do a little sculpture residency area. So if I get it going, I'll definitely leave. It's still in the process, but if I show you pictures, it would blow your mind. The change that I've done in six months has been..., But I do want to get a little ceramic. Also, we do have a satellite residency in screen-printing, who's my neighbor, and that's also a very safe space for an artist. There's everything in her house for a whole year and she loves having people.

Ahya Simone ([00:33:37](#)):

[crosstalk 00:33:37].

Cristina Tufino ([00:33:41](#)):

[inaudible 00:33:41] In the winter is the best time.

Ahya Simone ([00:33:43](#)):

Okay.

Imani Mixon ([00:33:44](#)):

We just match made an artist residency. Love it, love it, love it.

Nour Ballout ([00:33:49](#)):

I'll be there in December, putting it out there. Someone will have to screen print for me. My little princess hands can't do it anymore.

Imani Mixon ([00:34:05](#)):

Noted, noted.

Ahya Simone ([00:34:08](#)):

I think for me the question was tangible or intangible quote, unquote "safe spaces" that we've been able to kind of create and what was the process of getting there?

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Imani Mixon ([00:34:19](#)):

mm-hmm.

Ahya Simone ([00:34:21](#)):

I think a huge part of creating a space to facilitate my work. Really, it just has been me doing inner work to figure out how can I have a better relationship to myself? I'm a Black Trans Woman that is born and raised from a Baptist family, real churchy, Southern Baptist. You know how that goes, the homophobia, the transphobia, all of those things. My early life had been Chronicle by a complicated relationship to the church and, and to God, or spirit, and also a complicated relationship with my body and my gender and how I'm read or, or appear to be. And so, a huge part of even getting to the process of me getting to this point in my life has been me trying to have a better relationship to myself and so that I can reverberate that out to others. So a lot of the stuff around like safety for me was starting with playing the harp and like sticking with that.

Ahya Simone ([00:35:49](#)):

I say all the time that the harp is my way to be feminine as a young teenager in a public space where I was feminine, and yet they would call me names and bully me. Trans phobic and homophobic insults. However, they'd be like, "but they can play the heart though". You know what I'm saying? That was my armor and my weapon, for navigating the world and functioning through the ad. I feel like trans people, we fall through the cracks cause we're in between the binaries, beyond the binaries and in so many different ways and parallels. However, it's part of making a mark on the world part, is really honoring your presence here. And how did I do that? I focused on doing my inner work to have that better relationship with myself and working on my craft helps solidify for me, a sense of belonging to the world, that is not as chaotic as motherfuckers would want.

Ahya Simone ([00:37:16](#)):

The next step was once I started to forming this niche kind of space, this sense of existing and co-existing with other people. I think I wanted to reverberate that. What has shined in me outward. And one of the ways I did that was with a founding, with Bream Rivera and six, seven other people trans is a color project in Detroit in 2015. That was my way of trying to reach out and to collaborate with other trans women, black trans women to materially meet our needs, or response to the violence and respond to the oppression that we face as black trans women who are working class. Excuse me. That was kind of how it manifested.

Ahya Simone ([00:38:27](#)):

And so, even with founding that organization, although I'm no longer a part of it, that kind of went along with my music, and, my art and career. Once I got to the point where I was able to shoot them queen Chronicles. Then Queen Chronicles itself, was born out of wanting to talk about my city from my vantage point. Where it's not often talked about at all. When people think of Detroit, you already know what all the outsiders think of Detroit. My main point and my process for making this film even across my art is, really how can I tell, how can I make art that connects? And also how to tell the truth about where I'm from, how to tell the truth about what's going on and also responding to it to make shit better.

Imani Mixon ([00:39:38](#)):

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Yeah.

Ahya Simone ([00:39:42](#)):

That's how I contribute to resistance. That's how I contribute to quote unquote safety or space is. In the future, I'd want to even do more and find land and do more cultural work because I know that art changes the world. It influences the world. A lot of people de-value in music, but we make the world go round as artists. I just want to do my part with cultural work. Where communities in Detroit can have accessible art spaces to create and to belong, even if you aren't queer or trans. Yeah, that's basically what I'm trying to say.

Imani Mixon ([00:40:45](#)):

Yeah, no, that makes a lot of sense. I feel like we just went through all the levels, to go from inside out, and then even further is kind of the goal. I'm just thinking of a heat map, just like we're going to spread this further and farther. Everybody can get a little bit of heat.

Ahya Simone ([00:41:00](#)):

Okay, spread that hot sauce on that shit [crosstalk 00:41:06] I'm just hungry.

Cristina Tufino ([00:41:08](#)):

I want to say that, Arya. I'm saying it incorrectly, that I like that you can say something about children and art spaces. Right. My father was an art teacher for many years to children and something that he said last year during the rioting, he lives in downtown New York and we were just conversing. He said, part of us being criminalized, the Latino community and black community. He said "Art is a safe space for children and for teenagers to not be criminalized". They can express themselves, they can do other things. I think taking away art from school has been a disaster. So I like that, I feel the same way. I really want it. I'm back to my island where I grew up and after 20 years of absence, and I definitely want to contribute to my community. Covid Has definitely made that complicated.

Ahya Simone ([00:42:17](#)):

Let's call it B-dry.

Imani Mixon ([00:42:18](#)):

[inaudible 00:42:18].

Ahya Simone ([00:42:20](#)):

[crosstalk 00:42:20]

Cristina Tufino ([00:42:23](#)):

I got vaccinated. So hopefully I'm a little...

Imani Mixon ([00:42:28](#)):

We are prepared for the world. Noor, Can you tell us more about Habibi house?

Nour Ballout ([00:42:35](#)):

Sure, yeah. The question around the spaces that we've created that have become safe spaces and why we do them. I often think about the question that everyone asks in artists was like, who's your audience? And I'm always just like me. You can benefit from it. Sure. But the bottom line, I'm making it for myself. So had it been how it comes out of this desire for me to create a space where I'm going to be held. I want to build a space out of the things that I needed. I needed a place as an artist to go and make. I needed a place where as an artist, I don't have to worry about rent, where I can go and know that people care about me, and care about my wellbeing and care about like the shit that I'm making. If it means I'm there and I'm not making anything and just kicking it on a porch and just hanging out, if that's what I need as an artist, or as a curator, as a creative, then be it. That's what you need, that's what I'm going to give you.

Nour Ballout ([00:43:50](#)):

If it is a few months for you to get it together and just bust out an album, then be it. That's what I'm going to give you. If it means it's going to be like nine months a year, you need a space where you could refine your writing and whatever. I'm going to give that to you. But simultaneously I want it to be a space that isn't coming into a neighborhood and being "we're here and we're ready to do this thing". I want it to be a space where I come in, I get to know the people around me and have the space, also give back to that community I'm coming into. I'm an immigrant. I wasn't born in Detroit. I've lived most of my life in Detroit, I'm not from here, but I also know that I have something to offer. Right?

Nour Ballout ([00:44:39](#)):

I'm not just coming in and I'm like, "I have nothing to offer, take me in". I come from a community where food is deeply a part of my life culture. My mom's family were all farmers. I come from a community where hosting is a big thing for us. It's the way you show love and care. So, I wanted to create a space that held all of that, right?. That helped me as a trans person, helped me as a brown person that was informed by where I come from, and what I come from. A place that valued its neighbors. I wanted to learn from my surroundings and I wanted to give something to my surroundings in a way that felt good. So that's what I wanted out of it and it's sort of like similar at the Bottom Line, right?. It was a coffee shop, but it was also a place where I want to make the space that people can come in and hang out, or where I can employ artists who can like work and on the job and building a sculpture in the cafe. Bottom line was never intended to be the moneymaker. It was just intended to be a space where black and brown folks walked in and they saw the space reflect who they are because that's what I needed. I needed a coffee shop that wasn't white and Midtown, I wanted a space where I could talk about my queer identity and my Arabness and my Muslim hood on a mic. We created this space where so many people came in and were like, "this is the only place I've ever felt comfortable saying this, but I'm queer and they're Hijabi". It created this atmosphere where folks felt comfortable. It wasn't a safe space, I sure as hell fucked up. I sure as hell fuck up all the fucking time. But I feel always lucky that I surround myself by people that are willing to have conversations with me, that are invested in my growth. If I'm sharing space with somebody, I'm invested in their growth. And that's how I like creative space.

Nour Ballout ([00:47:17](#)):

Also, within my visual practice, I'm building this project called Muslims North America. You look at it, it looks like it's about visibility and creating all of these images of trans Muslims across America, Trans and non-binary Muslims but the project is a lot deeper. The project is a project where I share authorship,

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where I'm like let's transform our ideas of what a photograph is. Right? I want to transform what it means to operate and utilize a colonial tool. I want to not only make these images, but I want to utilize these images to build the fun that goes beyond my lifetime. I don't want to like, "okay, if we're selling...

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Nour Ballout ([00:48:03](#)):

On my lifetime. If we're selling these images, what is it called when you sell something, but if it's sold again.

Ahya Simone ([00:48:11](#)):

Resell?

Nour Ballout ([00:48:14](#)):

Huh?

Imani Mixon ([00:48:15](#)):

You said resell?

Nour Ballout ([00:48:16](#)):

Yeah. If someone sells it, you still get a cut, like a percentage of whatever it gets resold for. There's a word for it.

Ahya Simone ([00:48:22](#)):

I don't know.

Imani Mixon ([00:48:25](#)):

You know fancy art terms.

Cristina Tufino ([00:48:28](#)):

Can you say that again? Sorry. Can you say that again, Nour?

Nour Ballout ([00:48:32](#)):

Like, if you sell something to someone and they sell it again and you still get a percentage of that sale, I

Imani Mixon ([00:48:41](#)):

Like a commission?

Cristina Tufino ([00:48:41](#)):

That's a law.

Ahya Simone ([00:48:43](#)):

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Royalty of something.

Nour Ballout ([00:48:44](#)):

Royalty, that's it.

Imani Mixon ([00:48:45](#)):

There we go.

Cristina Tufino ([00:48:47](#)):

That's now a law that if your work sells itself you'll see you get like 90%.

Nour Ballout ([00:48:53](#)):

Oh, wow. I mean, that's what's happening with NSDs, right? They're building these things where if it's resold, you still get a cut of that. So I want to build a thing where if I sell one of these images, one, I only keep 50%. The other 50% goes into a fund for trans and non binary, binary, Muslims, to help them with post-op expenses to help trans and non binary Muslims start families.

Nour Ballout ([00:49:23](#)):

Can you believe that there's not a single fund to help trans people have kids. That's insane. Trans people cannot have children with without the extra shit. How are we supposed to build on this word? You know what I mean? Kids are a big deal. We need families.

Cristina Tufino ([00:49:44](#)):

Totally, I completely agree.

Nour Ballout ([00:49:44](#)):

And there's just no support of that. This fund, in the way that I'm trying to reimagine how we sell art and how this stuff is distributed and how my artwork is going to exist in the world as the art market, is going to create an opportunity for even after I die, there's still going to be money being created and put into a fund through my estate where this fund is going to keep happening and I'm not looking to make an impact just today.

Nour Ballout ([00:50:19](#)):

I want to have an impact beyond my time, because it's something I wanted. I needed this, so I'm making it and maybe some other people need it. Maybe people find the spaces I make safe. It's because I made them so I can feel comfortable.

Imani Mixon ([00:50:37](#)):

Yeah.

Nour Ballout ([00:50:40](#)):

Maybe I'll fail. Maybe it'll just be-

Cristina Tufino ([00:50:45](#)):

Nour and Aya, I think I realize now, meeting you two, it's very obvious statement, but you've both created not anti patriarchal spaces to exist. I think obviously, I inherited that from my grandmother and now she gave me that gift. Otherwise, the world has been very difficult. I've been having to move up an artist and I always have to pay rent and I have to pay that, but I have to invest in my production. But I think legacy, Nour's what you're talking about, because that's what she gave me. She gave me this sum of money and this real estate. So they'd be like, you want to be, go be an artist, here. Here's a space. I know we're not going to be forever young, young, beautiful glamorous artists.

Cristina Tufino ([00:51:39](#)):

We're going to be older at some point. But I think it's important to what she did for me, I want to be able to give to someone else. Whether it's a black woman, a Latino woman, a Muslim person. I want to be able to give that same space eventually. I think that's what I'm working towards as I age is that I want to be able to continue that legacy. When you said, "I can't believe that there's no fund for it." I hadn't thought about it, that there isn't that. They're killing us. So it's like, we're just trying to deal with like basic human stuff. But hopefully, yeah.

Nour Ballout ([00:52:22](#)):

I mean, trust me, I did so much research. Before I started hormone therapy, I didn't do it for years because I was just like, "I want kids." I want to have kids and don't want to do this before I secure the fact that I'm not, I mean, I could adapt, right? I probably will at some point, but I also want to have biological children. That is a desire of mine. Even if I wanted to adopt, there's no money to do the process. I think that's a problem. I think that's a really, really major issue. There's nothing being done about it. Also, if you're a cis and are in a partnership with someone of the opposite sex quote, unquote, insurance is going to cover it sometimes. But if you're trans and your partner is of the same sex insurance is never going to cover that, it's just never.

Cristina Tufino ([00:53:24](#)):

When you say cover, when you say-

Nour Ballout ([00:53:26](#)):

Like cover the cost of IVF. For me, if my partner was a cis dude, and I had on my ID that I'm a CIS woman, I could get IVF, I would qualify. But simply because my partner is not a cis man, and I don't identify as a cis woman, I no longer qualify in the insurance system for IVF treatment, which crazy.

Imani Mixon ([00:53:58](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. And for me, it just raises the point that I don't know, I feel like we can't separate our identities from our existence. I'm moving in this world a certain way. There's, no other way for me to be. And it also informs the way that I'm operating and what I want, which makes it feel even more like a big responsibility for us to figure out what we can create in these spaces and how we can carry it on and what needs we have that should be met by these spaces as well. Christina, you mentioned today that you were feeling a little bit heavy before this conversation because of things that are going down in Puerto Rico, are you able to share a little bit more about that and the best ways to support.



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Cristina Tufino ([00:54:44](#)):

Sure. Sorry, I am very emotional in the last couple of days and I am emotional right now. There's been recent murders of women here and there's been unresolved murders of trans women. We have a pandemic of femicides and the government has been just uninterested in really implementing gender education, which would actually help a lot to have gender education in schools and it's just been a fiasco.

Cristina Tufino ([00:55:20](#)):

A lot of my friends have been really depressed and it just feels like I live in a bubble as well. I think I try to not to surround myself with people who would harm me or my friends, but it is out there and there are ways to support. I can send the links to support certain organizations that are very much for education, for children and young people, because I think it would help a lot with just the violence. It's been 45 women in four months and it's this tiny island and it's completely unnecessary. A lot of them are trans women too. So it's just been horrible. Here you can't escape the violence. It's around you, you see it because it's such a small space. So yes, I wanted to share that.

Imani Mixon ([00:56:24](#)):

Yeah. That makes sense and thank you so much for bringing it up. I can never just have a straight up artist conversation with people because we are so many other things and we still have to exist to be able to be alive the next day to make art. So I completely appreciate that. I do want to close out. I'm sorry, go ahead.

Cristina Tufino ([00:56:45](#)):

Say that again.

Ahya Simone ([00:56:46](#)):

I'm just sending my love.

Cristina Tufino ([00:56:48](#)):

Oh, thank you so much. I'm really in pain. I just don't want to exist on an island where this is happening. It's just heartbreaking. I can't.

Imani Mixon ([00:56:59](#)):

Exactly. Yeah. We know how it goes. So I did want to ask everyone if there are any upcoming things that you all are working on, that people could check out, even if it's digitally and then we can wrap up.

Ahya Simone ([00:57:16](#)):

I am still working on my first season of Femme Queen Chronicles. A story about three black trans women that are in the city of Detroit, navigating love, life, shade, and trade. I am working on, I'm going to release I think sometime next month, an ambient album of heart music, called [foreign language 00:57:46] which is Japanese for a life of the heart. What else? Yeah, that's pretty much it.

Imani Mixon ([00:57:59](#)):

Thank you.

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Nour Ballout ([00:58:02](#)):

I'm really excited about that. I'm putting an event on, it's under this project programming that I'm doing titled Arab, a Real Arab Blueprint where we're mapping out the work of Arab artists across the world. We're bringing it to Detroit and Dearborn to present this work to the community, to an Arab community to shift the ways that Arab communities view art and the way that a general audience views Arab art, and to be like Arab art is just art made by Arabs. It's not just calligraphy and belly dancing.

Nour Ballout ([00:58:52](#)):

But anyways, there is an event in June that we're doing, I believe it's June 12th. It might be the 10th.

Imani Mixon ([00:58:59](#)):

What is time?

Nour Ballout ([00:59:07](#)):

What is time? I would have to check the calendar, but we have a series of programming happening actually across the next year. We're doing at least one event each month and it spans across mediums of music, dance, we have a photo exhibition in July, film, that's the events we're doing in June. We're throwing a huge birthday party for me in September. And that's going to be in person.

Cristina Tufino ([00:59:35](#)):

Are you a Virgo?

Nour Ballout ([00:59:38](#)):

Yeah.

Cristina Tufino ([00:59:42](#)):

Yes. Okay. Sorry.

Nour Ballout ([00:59:45](#)):

I've got crazy Virgo vibes. I'm also a sag rising and the Leo moon, which is why I'm throwing myself a birthday party.

Cristina Tufino ([00:59:53](#)):

Leo moon says it all.

Nour Ballout ([00:59:56](#)):

I'm dramatic. So dramatic. When I'm upset, it's terrible. When I'm happy it's terrible for everyone. It's just like over the top. But yeah, so there's a series of events. Y'all can check it out and I'll post all of them on the [inaudible 01:00:15] Instagram. So folks want to know what's coming up, what's happening, it'll all be posted there. Over the summer, there's going to be some in-person events around weed and wine and things in the garden, like weeding get it. Weed and wine.

Cristina Tufino ([01:00:42](#)):

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I don't remember everything right off the bat, but I think I'm going to be working with an organization in Detroit. We're creating a Puerto Rican film screening. It's going to be online and it's called [foreign language 01:01:00], A Various Awakening is the translation because I hope that in the new area is an air era of technology and ideas. It's one of the last things that Walter Mercado, I don't know if you guys follow amazing Walter Mercado, if you haven't please Google him. He passed away last year, I went to his funeral and he said that. So anyway, there's going to be a screening based on this idea. In Detroit, it's called mile, Detroit Mile I believe.

Nour Ballout ([01:01:40](#)):

That's in the north end.

Cristina Tufino ([01:01:42](#)):

Yeah. So I'm working with them and that's going to be in June and I'll also post it. I'll follow you guys on social media, if I'm not already. Then, I have a show in London, which is cool at Lychee One gallery. I'll post that. Then I have a show at [foreign language 00:14:01] here in Puerto Rico that has to do with the house and the project that I talked about. It's just the very beginning. It's been a lot of physical labor. I've hurt myself physically working on this house.

Imani Mixon ([01:02:14](#)):

Oh gosh.

Cristina Tufino ([01:02:15](#)):

Hopefully, I do want artists to come and stay here. I think that's the end goal. I think eventually that's going to happen. If I invited you, you would be camping. I'm going to have when it's really done.

Imani Mixon ([01:02:29](#)):

So let me get ready.

Nour Ballout ([01:02:29](#)):

Definitely not a teacher's helper, but I'll help you build-

Cristina Tufino ([01:02:39](#)):

Yeah. I think in a year it'll be where I want it to be, but the guardian project is more just like an installation and that's happening. I'm sending out some of that work out there in the world, but hopefully people will actually be able to come see it in person.

Imani Mixon ([01:02:53](#)):

Beautiful.

Nour Ballout ([01:02:54](#)):

I'm so excited.

Imani Mixon ([01:02:57](#)):

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Yeah. So good to see you all, like this was a better conversation than I ever could have imagined. So I thank you so much for being honest and showing up and having cool things to say. So I do just want to thank you all. I can't wait until we can be all close and cozy together, but this really warmed my heart. So thank you so much.

Nour Ballout ([01:03:16](#)):

Thank you.

Imani Mixon ([01:03:18](#)):

Yay.

Nour Ballout ([01:03:19](#)):

Thanks for bringing us together. Bye.

Cristina Tufino ([01:03:20](#)):

Ciao.

Imani Mixon ([01:03:23](#)):

Shout to the artists who joined me. I'm your host Imani Mixon and this is Subject Matters. A podcast presented by Kresge arts in Detroit and Red Bull Arts Detroit. Thanks for listening.

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