Punching the Air

- Patrice Lawrence - host
- Ibi Zoboi
- Yusef Salaam

PATRICE	My name is Patrice Lawrence and it is an honour and a privilege to be chairing this session about the YA book Punching the Air with Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam the authors. Ibi holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her novel American Street was a National Book Award finalist and a New York Times notable book. She is also the author of Pride and My Life as an Ice-Cream Sandwich, a New York Times best seller. She's the editor of the anthology Black Enough. Born in Haiti and raised in New York City, she now lives in New Jersey with her husband and their three children. You can find her online at www.ibizoboi.net. Yusef Salaam was just 15 years old when his life was upended after being wrongly convicted in a Central Park jogger case. Along with four other boys who are now known as the Exonerated Five. In 2002 after the young men spent years of the lives behind bars their sentences were overturned, and they were fully exonerated. Their story has been documented in the award-winning film The Central Park Five by Ken Burns, Sarah Burns and David McMahon in Ava Diverny's highly acclaimed Netflix series When They See Us. Yusef is now a poet, activist and inspirational speaker who lives in Atlanta, Georgia. He's a recipient of a lifetime achievement award from President Barrack Obama among other honours. You can find him online at www.yusefspeaks.com. So first want to talk about, Amal. He's a black creative, he's 16, he's a skateboarder, he's loved, he finds himself in this gentrified white area where white children, white young men, are claiming the basketball courts as their own, sort of, territory and a fight ensues which has devastating consequences on so many people's lives. So the first question I want to ask you is, what are the journeys for both of you that brought you to write this book at this time? So, may I start with you Ibi?
IBI	Well, other than Yusef's personal journey that started in 1989, I met Yusef ten years later in 1999 in college in New York City, I had been taking a class called African Civilisation. Our professor was a former civil rights advocate, she was a former member of SNCC in the 1950s and 60s which is a student, non-violent, co-ordinating committee and she had work with the late representative John Lewis. So she was teaching these very African-centred classes at Hunter and one of those days in the spring of 99, in walks Yusef Salaam and the first thing she says to him is something to the effect of "I knew you didn't do it" and she embraced him and we had to, we didn't remember who he was, this is before social media, so many of us in the class we all grew up in New York City and at that time we were all in elementary school or middle school when the Central Park jogger case took place and I immediately remembered that case and I was the editor of my newspaper and I went after him for a news-, newspaper

	interview. I never got that interview but we ended up talking for a couple of hours and of course I remembered him over the next few years because I ran into him again three years ago where he'd been selling his self-published book of poetry and I thought it was unfair that he was self-published having a unique story such as his. And this was before the Netflix series. So, he shared with me that he wanted to, you know, share his story with teen readers. I write for teen readers and the rest, as they say, is history.
PATRICE	Yusef – would you like to carry on with the history...?
YUSEF	Yeah. I mean, as for me, you know, back in 1989 being run over by the courts of justice as a 15-year-old and then of course being convicted at 16 was a traumatic experience to say the least. It was something that, that you really don't know the true depth of it until and unless you are one – or you have loved ones – that are, that have been placed in these kinds of confined spaces. Especially for a crime that you didn't commit. And so, here it is, seven years later I come out of prison and then a few more years go by and I find myself looking for this professor. And when I met the professor and Ibi was in the classroom, you know, I still was hiding in plain sight. It wasn't something that I felt that I really wanted to be as open with my particular story because I still had all of those indelible scars that, I was still wearing those scars, you know. And when Ibi met me a few years ago and I was publishing, I mean I shouldn't say publishing, I was, I was, I was gonna say peddling but that's, that's not the right imagery that I want to give. I was basically selling my own book, the book that I had written, that I had used for the most part to help me get through this horrible time in my life. It was something that I could look at often and remember by reading what the struggle was all about. What I needed to keep my eyes on, which was that sliver of light in the distance that made it easier to get through this particular challenge that allowed me to use as much of that imagination I had to be free, even though my body was in bondage. It's always a tremendous opportunity, I think, and we, we tell the story kind of from that vantage point of 'what is it like to be falsely accused of crime you didn't commit? What is it like for the system to see you, but not really see you?' They see their version of what they think you are. And that begins to kind of become the narrative and what plays out in the rest of this particular scenario. And really this is a kind of a mirroring effect of what we see in society, as relates to cases just like our case. Just like this particular case. And I say case, but I'm not necessarily talking about a criminal case where I'm talking about people in general as they, as society has looked at black people in particular, black bodies in particular we have been kind of relegated to the margins of society and therefore defined as the most violent. The ones who will steal from you, the ones who are poor and, more importantly, poor in mind and attitude and all the things that come along with that. You know. So, the, Punching the Air shows up really to talk about that, to have that conversation. You know, I always say we've had a front row seat to oppression. That oppression that we've seen in

	America through the George Floyd case, through Breonna Taylor, through Sawyer Blan, Trayvon Martin, there's so many names that we have. It's like an unending story. It is what, in some ways, my great friend, my great teacher, even though I never met him, Malcolm X would say that this is the American nightmare.
PATRICE	I was gonna ask you a just a little more about Amal and as I was reading it, you know, as both a victim and creator. He was sensitive, he was aware of his, his internal world but also aware of the – almost like perform identities for the outside world as well. That he was loved, he loves but he also hates, and he understands that there's black and white but, also that there's grey. And I suppose I wondered as you were creating Amal, sort of what conscious decisions did you both make about how you would bring him to life and, I suppose, I suppose for you, Yusef, how much of yourself and your story but also, Ibi, I think, as reading an interview with you, as a mother of black son and also as a witness to what happens around you, how did you decide what to bring to Amal and what to keep seperate? Em, Yusef – would you like to, to speak first?
YUSEF	Well, you know, it was pretty cool, I think, talking with Ibi because I'm the one that would narrate a lot of what was, what was my life and what happened in my story. And Ibi was able to take my story and the narrations that I gave her and give it a 2020 version, right. There was a lot of things that I was aware of as youngster, you know. I was growing up in America and my mother would always tell me that she was raising a Jim Crow. And I really didn't know what she meant because, of course, if you're in New York there's covert racism and then there's over racism and the over-racism is not something that you always see, but you always experience covert racism. I mean int he Central Park jogger case, it was clear that I was experiencing that and a lot of the anger and frustration that I would realise, and then be able to describe later on, was t-, really what we find and can put into the character of Amal. But I think more importantly is the fact that his name is a name that really dignifies him, and that he is the saviour for him – for his own self. They say that you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink. Once that horse drinks. That horse then slicks his thirst. He becomes happy and, and, and great and able to move on and I think that's one of the ideas we wanted to plant in the minds and in hearts of people who read this book. That you have to be your own saviour. You are the one that you're looking for. And once you realise that, you are hope.
PATRICE	Is there, were there things you, quite more narrative than this emotion? Were – and I noticed you added sort of hash tags and a social media and a 2020 but were there other things that you felt that maybe you had to round off, or reign in, particularly thinking you having a global audience, or did just take as it was? How did you shape it?
IBI	Uh, well, you know, I have to add that Amal is inspired by Yusef. It's not just that he is a 2020 version of Yusef. Um, it's also that he shares similar world views as 16-year-old Yusef, um, there was poem in Yusef's self-

	published book called I Stand Accused and that poem was gonna be at the beginning of Punching the Air but it got edited out just to make the, uh, story smoother, uh, so that poem was written by Yusef at 16 and it let me know how incredibly insightful and culturally and politically aware he was as a 16-year-old boy. And we both needed this fictional version of him to be just as politically aware and savvy and the profound thing is that that awareness did not immunise him from the injustices that all black people face, um, in America and all over the world. Uh, so, in terms of making it more universal, um, that was not our intention at all. We're not, we weren't trying to round out any edges just so white readers can empathise with him at all. This is, the fact that he loves classical art is not… It is. Many young people love, you know, appreciate, certain things that are not part of their culture. He can appreciate Picasso and still not see himself in Picasso, so he remixes it, um, I'm thinking of hip-hop artists who take, you know, who take, um, country songs and remix it into hip-hop.
PATRICE	Yes.
IBI	They have to have some sort of awareness of things, not, not that they have to, they already know what's out there in terms of classical literature, classical art, um, anything that is, has a, white aesthetic– they learn about it in school. They can't escape that. So, the genius of black children is that how they're able to take those things that don't represent their culture and remix it so that it does. So that they can find value in it. So there's something that happens in the end of Punching the Air where Amal takes these things, these ideas that he learns an AP art student and flips it on their head and remixes it, remixes them so that they're an outlet for his personal truth. So, none of that is about, you know, trying to, um, kowtow to white readers to make them thing "oh wow, look he is really smart" – that is not the goal there. The goal was that to make him authentic, to make him incredibly aware. Yusef as boy, and even as a young man, and as a man is incredibly well-read. And is not fictional, that is the truth. Um, so 16-year-old Amal is well read in the same way that 16-year-old Yusef was well read and I was well read. We wanted that that sort of arc to exist on the page because we know them. Those are my children, those are kids that I worked with and those were us at, at, as teens as well.
PATRICE	Thank you. I suppose, I also want to ask you about some of the secondary characters as well, so, his teacher, em, Miss Reneldi, the, the white teacher who, in the sense, gave the character witness that sent him possibly, into, the prison. Em, she, a bit of her reminded me of, is it, Miss Morello in Everybody Hates Chris, that's, em, about somebody who thinks they're quite liberal but actually has the, sort of, racist undertone that they don't pick up. Was she based on somebody specific, or, was she

	representing something, a sort of, white liberalism with the system – em – were, were you saying something specific with her?
IBI	You know I, I don't remember asking Yusef about his school, his schooling, his teachers, um, what I did know is that he did go on in an arts, to an arts school and performance arts school LaGuadia High School win New York City which was formerly the Fame school. That particular teacher was not gonna be there in the book until I had an exchange with my son's teacher. Um, my son's.
PATRICE	You gotta.
IBI	Yes, I, um – he's, he was in seventh grade last, you know, when I was working on it, the book and, um, he was very, he was sick but he wanted to go to school so he kept putting on his hoodie and kept laying, or putting head down on the desk. Um, and the teacher made it sound more sinister that it really was, and even got administration involved just to let me know that he was being disrespectful by putting on his hoodie and putting his head down. I happened to know that he was exhausted, he was up all night coughing, but I told him to stay home, but he insisted on going to school. Lo and behold by the last class of the day he was exhausted. Um, but it's the way that the teacher framed him in the email. And this is, at the beginning of the school year where she doesn't quite know him, tight. She doesn't know us as a family, um, and she doesn't know him as a 12-year-old boy and, because of that – and not just because of that, because of her assumptions about him she, you know, attributed behaviour to him that was not real. So, there's a poem that Yusef likes to read from Punching the Air called Clone. And that's where he got that idea. It, um, to just, like, in, and there's something that Yusef says to about the worst place a black child is in a white person's imagination. So, in Miss, in Miss Renaldi's imagination Amal is all these things. In my son's art teacher's imagination, my son is all these things and if I were the kind of parent to, to think that the teacher has, you know, has the last, he would have gotten in trouble. You know, he would have gotten in trouble, he would have been punished, I would have yelled at him, he would have felt some sort of rage – and imagine if that kept happening throughout, you know, the rest of his middle school years and on to high school and college and for the rest of his life.
PATRICE	It's something that will resonate with many parents of colour in the UK, and it's these sort of conversations that we have amongst ourselves, and I certainly remember meeting one parent, before I had my child, who's Nigerian and saying that her oldest son was in prison, but she said he's almost like a sacrifice to the system because she believed everything that the teacher said at school. So, after that with her children she fights, she will fight for them. And it's, eh, almost, you know, a, a, like a sacrifice of a, of her son's life to believing that the system was working on his behalf. Can I also ask you, then, about Stamford? Stanford was a sort of curiosity in a sense that he might have been, for instance, in the UK where you get

	black policemen and if there's a sort of, em, a sort of protest they're the ones who get abused by black protesters more than what policemen. And I wondered how does Stanford survive in the system? What does, what are the black prison officers in the prison or, where, were you trying to make a point about how black people can be part of a system and sometimes find little ways to resist?
YUSEF	Well, if I can, if I can really chime in on that particular idea, you know, dare, I think for the most part when you look at systemic issues and institutional systemic issues that deal with racism, the black officers aren't always allowed to participate in a full way with black inmates. Because in that particular dynamic you see the black officer will almost take on the, um, the idea of a father figure which is necessary, you know. Whereas in my, in prison I was in there were a lot of officers that did take on those particular ideas in the youth facility. Now when I got to the adult facility, diametrically different. I mean it was like woah – you know – definitely a lot more white officers there. Definitely the good ol' boys' club, um, to me it, it, it, as I think about it now it's more like of a, more of a game kind of mentality. Um, because there's this desire to show them, you know, I'm gonna show the black people, you know, what this really is by further continuing to oppress them, you know. And I think that, you know, just from a, from a perspective of lived experience, you know, I'm looking at that from that particular vantage point because that's part of what reality is – that part that, you know, often times we don't get the opportunity to hear form a person who's been incarcerated, um, but we always want to know, you know, what was the experience like? You know, um, and that experience can be a very challenging experience because you're fighting for survival, you know. And you're trying to figure out how to get through.
PATRICE	It's interesting, I think, also as some of the moments of kindness were the ones that made me burst into tears. So, there's the big thing that was going on, but one of the moments that I did burst into tears was when Stanford left the watercolours in the cell, and just that moment of kindness in, sort of all this harshness. Em, the, sort of the guys who are there who, sort of, in a sense have Amal's back, and, it was interesting how you played with this, as it turns out, you know, it's actuals about friendship as opposed to, sort of, control and sides. Again, was that, does that reflect experience or was that something that you added in?
YUSEF	I think, I think that does reflect the true experience but, the, beautiful thing is that describing those kinds of ideas with Ibi, um, found its way artistically on the page, right. And so the, the thing that we are looks and want the reader to look at as well is not necessarily just the words as they read it, but also the way the words are placed on the page. It becomes a bit of artistry, it, you know, um. There is camaraderie. There is safety nets that you find in spaces like that. Um, and those, I think those things are necessary, you know, I think that at some point the idea of survival becomes greater in, in people's minds and they look to, so to speak,

	things that are familial, they look to friendships, they look to…really what I think it is, they look to things to insulate themselves. You know, so that, oh yeah – you know, when I go, when I come back out of my cell and I see someone that, you know, um, I've, I've developed a certain, so to speak, camaraderie with. Not that this is about controlling or anything like that, but I think that that's part of the survival tactic as well. That you actually have a sounding board to talk to and to talk with, going through these kinds of things. Therefore, it makes a difference because it's now you're realising that you're growing through something as opposed to just going through something.
PATRICE	Was it possible to trust anybody?
YUSEF	I think it was, it was incredibly difficult to trust people. But the more, the more you understood someone, the more you would trust. But you always have one eye open and one eye closed, you know. So, you sleep, you sleep with one eye open and one eye clo-, because it's just that it's the nature of where you are, you know. I mean, and in the black and brown communities in America, you know, we have this really, kind of, cool-ness about how we translate and transfer ideas. And so, sleep is actually a no-no, right. I say we never sleep. Sleep is the cousin of death. And so, it's the matter of you're always on point, you're always, awa-, you know you always have your head on the swivel. You're always hyper aware, you know. But then at the same time you realise that that's unnatural. The naturalness is supposed to be the, you know, you're supposed to be able to have a downtime of, an opportunity where you can just sort of breathe a sigh of relief and let your guards down – 'cos to always be on point is really to always be in a state of war. And the reality is that in America it almost seems like that's what's true. That we're always in this state of war. We're battling, we're battling against, you know – not necessarily just ideas – but this true oppression that is now become so blatant that they're not even trying to hide it.
PATRICE	The other two characters I was interested are in how you write, you wrote female characters as well, and I think, years ago when I was doing a Masters I was looking at, em, black fatherhood in films, mostly UK, but there weren't many UK films so I went to, sort of, US and I remember watching is John Singleton's Boys in the Hood and actually feeling quite frustrated by the female, depictions of the female characters, em, but in this you've got, sort of, the characters are warm and loving but, an even, sort of Zenobia comes back and she's writing a letter but, the way bits written it's not like she's expected to save him. It feel quite equal and I just wondered again if you thought about how women would be depicted in, in this sense? Ibi?
IBI	Yeah, I really had to think about how women would be depicted One of the, well I had asked Yusef straight up, um, how does he feel about me co-writing this him. I'm a woman, um, and wondering if he would've preferred, um, a man to do this with him. Um, but, um I was really, really, um, I admired his response, just reminding me that his mother played a

	pivotal role, um, in his life, um, not just by giving birth to him, but just when the trial happened, while he was incarcerated, after he was released and now, eh, you know, I, I did meet his mother and I remember -, I, I didn't…his mother is part active in the Harlem community and I knew of her, you know, even before I reunited with Yusef, uh, again three years ago. So, for me as a mother, I had to bring my full mothering self into this project. I can't write from the perspective of, um, I'm a boy going through this – or a man reflecting back on his boyhood. I had to think about this, um, from the lens of a mother. And this is why the book opens up with Amal being born, um, and, very few people point this out, but he was born at home. And ho-, a home birth – and I had three home births, um. A home birth is one of the first, um, expressions of freedom, you know, that a mother can impart on you, you know. I have the option to be born at the hospital but here's a right that I have, I have the right to give birth to you at, in the safety of my home. And this child is born, a mother cares for him, a mother feeds him, clothes him, takes him to school – there is love there. But there is something about our society that can easily pull that child out of the womb and at 16 you're kind of still in the womb, you're being nurtured and reared by the people who love you. You haven't quite left the nest yet. Uh, so that sort thing is to remind readers that he was a child int he same way that Yusef at 15 was a child, Kevin Richardson – the other, one of the other members was 14 and still in middle school. So, as a parent I know that a teen boy is still grappling with some basic things like hygiene you know. Um, and if you're sending your son to boarding school you prepare him in certain ways to take care of himself. So when your, that child is taken from you by the system – whether you know, he was, you know, guilty or not – you have not prepared him for one, the basic things and then, two, the other things that might happen to him when he's incarcerated. So it is, sort of, this child being ripped from your arms, so that the mother had to be there on the page – so society can remember that that is part of what makes him human. Being born.
PATRICE	It's something that you already talked about, the sort of home birth the, a sort of, a home birth, but now actually thinking about almost, in, that feels quite political, when we think about disparity and, child deaths between a maternal, deaths between different communities in hospitals, so, from that moment she's protecting him – from having a birth in her own environment and not in a hospital. So, it does make it that much more, just, so much more tragic, I think. Eh, I suppose now, I mean, I do want to talk a little bit about, about the system and about, in sense, a systematic racism but also the sort of personal racism, em, and I sort of looked at the, the video where you, you sort of, talked about, em, how future prisons, eh, plans – possibly based on results of, eh, nine year olds, and, that deeply, sort of, shocked me but, I also thought about how England and Wales – not Scotland I hasten to say, but em, England and Wales in a sense a reflection of what happens in America so, em so I advise you look at a group, an organisation called the Howard, em, League for Penal Reform and they're trying to put

	together resource to stop over-representation of young people of colour and I was kind of looking at some figures just before I came, and, that, obviously that children are more likely to be excluded in school in England and Wales. They're four more, four times more likely to be arrested than white children, more than twice a likely to live in, em, eh, poorer neighbourhoods, em. They make up probably about s-, a third of the under 18 population but over half in prison, em, so we are sort of following very much in, in sort of, in those footsteps. Em, but I think what's clear in your book as well is that Amal's journey, in the book it starts in the courtroom – but actually you back in history, don't you? You know, you look at enslavement, em, and I thought, were you again when you wrote that book very, very conscious that you wanted to put that timeline of history, that it does not just start when the first punch was, was thrown – it doesn't start in courtroom, but it started long before that, em, was that something that was always part of your thinking before imprisonment – or is it something that you reflected on during imprisonment?
YUSEF	Yeah, I think, I think that that was something that was enhanced during imprisonment. Because one of the things that happens is that, children, children quite often don't have the opportunity to imagine their parents as children. And, even though your parents may tell you things, you're still kinda like 'this is my mum', you know. And it's not until you become an adult that, and you have children yourself, that you realise what it is that you need to be giving them. And so, it, it dawned on me – I mean, I knew this, but it dawned on me in a very, very powerful way that even though I was going to school I America. My mother was also giving me a parallel education. That wasn't an education that caused me to buck the system, but it was an education that taught me the truth about what was going, but allowed me to learn and understand what is was that I need to know in order to operate in this particular system and society. And so, the understanding of struggle was there. Being told that she was raised in a Jim Crow south and here we are in New York, and the description of what that meant was there. But it wasn't necessarily seared in until prison. Then I had to do a men-, like I often call it sankofa – where you go back and get back, did something, but you really begin to rely on memory. You have to remember that you know these things. You have to remember that inside of self you can even go deeper and further back than you think you can because through the DNA is the history of your family, and of struggle, and of everything that we have gone through. And so, I think the beautiful thing about this was that idea that this wasn't just a incident, but the incident is connected to something in, in, in order for you to understand the fullness of what this is you have to understand the connectedness of it. And so, you know, often times you hear people talk about poverty. You hear people talk about gentrification. Um, in this book we talk about a gentrifying neighbourhood - because then you realise that the truth of the matter is that neighbourhoods don't just shift overnight. But it, but it happens in way where people are there already. People are familiar with places and landmarks and they go to different areas, even if those areas

	weren't necessarily, um, created for them and I'm gonna use that kind of idea, um, because what happens in gentrified neighbourhoods, of course, is that the beautification comes and the people who were already there see the new ballpark being created, the skateboard park being created and they want to go and experience that. They want to be able to feel that kind of niceness that, that, that happens in these beautiful spaces you know. And then you listen as you read, to the other characters who are coming or knew something was gonna happen so, I took out my cellphone - and I didn't know this individual, but I knew they were up to no good. All of this, kind of, um, definition of, or defining of, a people when you've never asked them who they are, you know. And I think that that part is, is important.
PATRICE	Just, sort of, just about the gentrified neighborhood, em, is that, a sort of reflection of what, for instance, has happened in Harlem? 'Cos certainly in, in parts of London – in Brixton in east London where, initially, eh, people came from the Caribbean 'cos nobody else would rent, you know, their property to them and they lived in these places and now suddenly the, the prices mean most people can't stay there. They have to move out. And I wondered if that is part of what is happening in your areas at the moment as well and you wanted to incorporate that?
YUSEF	Well, I mean, I didn't, I, it's, it's absolutely happening but I don't necessarily think that we wanted to incorporate that, because of, because of it happening. Part of the incorporation was also the be, to kind of give a history lesson. Right. And I say that because sometimes when you are – look, there's a statement that I've said often but it's really attributed to doctor James Baldwin when he said – to be African American and to be relatively conscience in America – conscious in America – is to be in a state of rage all the time. But imagine a young people-, a young person who's, who's coming into that kind of consciousness. Who's looking around at the conditions that they're under, and realising that– wow, this here because of redlining. Someone came into our communities, you know, years ago and chopped it up. Perhaps with a red marker, calling it redlining. The fact that you have, um, California, Texas and Mexico right there, but then someone came at some point and said we're gonna carve this out and this is gonna be America, and therefore our family and community that was just right there yesterday, now we have to cross a border in order to see them and visit them. So that part, I think, had to be described in a very nice way – to give a person the understanding that things, things don't just, like, this is not just – people are not just poor. Especially in a black and brown community. Part of the perpetuation of poor, or poverty I should say, in the black and brown community is to allow the person to believe the definition of what we're try-, or what the system is trying to give them. And so, they truly become poor because they are poor in the mind as opposed to being poor because of circumstances.
PATRICE	I see you nodding your head there about the gentrifications - is, was, there something you wanted to, to add to that?

IBI	Yeah, do you know we don't name the city in the book. I think people assume that this is New York City 'cos we're both from New York City, um, but this is 'any city, USA'. And gentrification - this idea of what was once, um, black and brown communities – and of course they weren't always black communities, uh, there, you know, you have upward mobility amongst African Americans or black immigrants and white flight. Uh, it's not that we came and pushed you out as, we didn't want to live around us and now what gentrification there are new residents coming in. Now they want to live around us but not really, um, so here are the prices going up.
YUSEF	Uh huh.
IBI	And you are, um, detheft - you know, that is happening in New York City. Uh, so, you have redlining on one hand – now it's detheft. Um, so what Yusef, um, a, Yusef said about drawing a line in the middle of where your fam-, family lives and then you have to cross a border to, uh, see them – it, it's bonkers to me, the way that he just put it just now was just like 'wow, that is really what happened' and we think about the roads that are built. Highways that were built in the middle of brown, em, black and brown communities, um, and those highways went through certain communities, and disrupted those communities and you have two people coming together. Are they going to play nice? Are the children – are our children going to play nice when they are observing all of these disparities. So, when that night when Punching the Air there's one heated moment when the boys don't play nice – they don't know how to share because they're seeing grown-ups not sharing. So they are mimicking the behaviour in a different way, you know. We, you know, adults do it a civilised way with redlining and detheft 'civilised' – and then young people they fight it out, you know.
YUSEF	Yeah.
PATRICE	That's just suddenly made me think about, we're taking about the redlining, I suppose, of Europe and Africa as well so, sort of carving up the countries and giving them to different European countries so it feels there's a pattern sometimes for how communities are split and have to somehow have to come together and, and try and heal not always successfully. Em, I kinda what to talk about creativity now. Em, there was little while where I worked in organisational arts in prisons organisation bringing sort of creative writers into, into prisons and working with a theatre company – and the kind of aim was to work with prisoners that had no literacy, or lower literacy, to say that, you know, everybody can tell a story and that everybody's got creativity and, if you can't, it doesn't matter if you can't write, somebody'll write it for you and you would see people transform during that session, to think "I can actually do this, when I've been told I can't do this and I'm nothing" but essentially they can tell a story. And it's actually, going back to that classical art – 'cos I was looking through and I think, possibly very similar. My mum is a, I suppose, my mum's a bit of a, sort of, anglophile so – or, em, my stepdad's Italian so

	we've always gone to the, sort of, galleries, you know, we, we sort of been to Italy and, and I was, like, looking at your, sort of, you know, some of the, em, the titles to the poem, some of the references, you know – you got DaVinci, got Dali, you've got Rodin, you've got Münster Scream,eh, Picasso's Guernica – and I thought it was interesting, from what you were saying that, you know, at one point , you know, Amal complains that all he gets to look at is old white artists, em, but at the same time he re-, recognises, em, and sort of appreciates their, their beauty. And I was wondering how – for both of you – how as creativity sustained you through incredibly difficult times, em, I'm saying that as a writer, knowing that when the other writers – in the first three months in lockdown in, in England, "we can't do anything – we can't do anything"…so how, but you have got so many things happening in America as well as, as the virus – how is creativity sustaining you both? And are you managing to be creative? To Ibi – would you like to go first?
IBI	Well, em, growing up in New York City, the more Yusef and I do these talks, the more we realise it was traumatising. You know how, you know the, there's some metaphors that's saying when the fish are in the ocean, they don't recognise the ocean for the ocean. You know, so because violence was so pervasive in our upbringing, uh, New York City when people see it, ah, think of New York City as a melting pot but don't know that New York City was incredibly segregated, um, and 80s New York was violent but we still played outside and we still children. But I think, uh, subconsciously we were incredibly creative to make sense of our world. As you know hip-hop started out in the Bronx, um, in New York City. There was incredible art all around and that was through graffiti and we expressed ourselves individually all the time, especially in the 80s where had the freedom to do so. And Yusef has a great example of how incredibly creative he was as a teenager. You wanna show them, Yusef so please share that with… do you have it around? Do yo-, yeah.
YUSEF	Yeah. These were the pants that I wore April 19th, 1989. This is the e-, exa-, the actual pants that I wore and of course this side has some art and different scenes on it, then of course the front is really the big part, because you want – as you're walking down the road – you want people to see what it is that you're doing. And so, you have Bob Marley there, you know, and I choose to be fine in 1989 written underneath that with Rastaman Vibration as a part of it. And then, of course, you have on this side, you know, just a, just cool artwork, you know – Doctor Love, you know this, this was the type of things that we did, you know, of course we couldn't afford, um, Gucci back then and of, you know, you had Dapper Dan creating culture, creating the, what was hip and things like that and now he's a part of that expression today which is still, um, amazing. Um, but yeah, this was.
PATRICE	Do they still fit?
YUSEF	Eh, I don't know. I haven't tried them on. These pants have not been washed since 1989. They were taken from me and then they were

	examined and, you know, you had this woman who lost three fourths of her blood and so they were trying to, in a similar way, connect us to this particular crime as they are trying to connect Amal to the crime, you know. And the great thing about it is Amal's attorney at least has the wherewithal to say hold on, like, there is no evidence on a skateboard. Why are trying to make it appear as if he physically assaulted this person with a skateboard. That's not what happened, you know, and so in the same way they were trying to get me and the rest of us to be connected with this crime even though there was no deoxyribonucleic acid, you know, that DNA was not there that would have sealed the deal.
PATRICE	So, tell us does that this represent more than the creativity, it's also a kinda legacy and, eh, memorial isn't it, I suppose to a youth at that time?
YUSEF	It's interesting. I think, I think most of everything that I have personally is part of that, so to speak, legacy, you know. I even, I still have the shirt – my mother gave it to me – I have the shirt that she wore back in 1989 that said 'Yusef is innocent'. I actually have one of those shirts hanging in my, my, in my, um, what do they call it…the foyer.
IBI	I wanna add that this was, that, you know, when you're thinking about a child committing, being accused of a violent act I wonder if they would have thought of to bring psychologists/whoever across to think of these things. This is what this boy is doing to his pants. Look at the detail. Look at the intention, attention to detail and, I mean, at what point do you fit in that sort heinous crime in that process, you know. Do, what are you, what are you thinking when you're making art, when you're thinking of wearing something like that outside, to be seen, right? This is, you can't miss him wearing those pants and he had a flat top, a tall flat top. That's not something you wear when you're going out to wreak havoc on people, you know. So, it's one of those things where you like, was anybody anyone thinking critically at this point?
PATRICE	I think also maybe you know it's, like, in the book is that dissonance. Nobody even sees that, they just see Amal, they just see his black skin and that's it. Anything beyond that – and there's monsters of the, sort of, white imagination – that's what they see. They don't see the creativity, the detail, the sensitivity – all of those things. It's just sort of, down and I think brings it really, sort of, em, alive. And I suppose, we haven't, we haven't got much more time so there's a couple more things I just wanted to ask. One was about, in a sense, creativity – two things that, sort of, art can do – one is that it can ask questions, which your book does. It enables, you know, art people to talk and ask questions but also art can bring people together and I was just wondering if you're seeing anyways at the moment, in current society, in the, sort of, US society that are, might be bringing different types of people together?
YUSEF	Wow. I think, I think art is bringing different types of people together in a very powerful way. So as we, as we've been, um, sitting in our front row seats through social media, for instance, watching the tragedy unfold,

	right. We also see very beautiful outpourings where murals are being created – right in DC, right in front of everything, right. So, you know, that, I actually was just at an unveiling this weekend , um, down in Florida - first time, I, I think it's the first time, um, I think so, where they created a mural, a black lives matters mural in the parking lot of the church. And then on all of the, the stops where people parked their cars are the names of victims of tragedy, you know. You have Malcolm X, you have Medgar Evers, you have Tamir Rice – I mean it just goes on and on and it's such a beautiful, so to speak, expression, um, but then it also shows that we all are part of the great artist's work. The creator. And in that expression, you know, unfortunately we, we, we are taught that that you should not judge a book by its cover, but we all do it.
PATRICE	Mmmm…yeah…
YUSEF	We all do it. And I think when, when racism is, when oppression is mixed int that, so to speak, thought 'wow, this person is this' you then have xenophobia. You know. That, these, these are not – they're not like us. We, we, we breathe a rare air that they should not be privy to. *(laughs)* We still on the planet *(laughs)* you know. We're all still experiencing human-ness and, in that beauty is the human race. And in the human race is the opportunity for the kaleidoscope of the human family to create positive, beautiful things together. Collectively, as opposed to destruction and war and all of the things we've seen in history and that are still continuing to play itself out. And so, you have people saying that we need change. That change now is coming in the form of young people saying this whole system is not broken – but needs to be completely replaced, you know. And I think that that's part of the beauty of it all.
PATRICE	I suppose, in a sense, it's what was happening with the mural as well in a prison when they, sort of, work together to create that mural with even Stanford in the background clowning around but also, I could imagine, that being what he wanted until it gets painted over by the, by the sort of racist – well, not painted over by the racist, em, prison officer but, ever since, he's the one who instigated it – and until that, this moment of creation when they came together just as, to, make something that was very beautiful for, for everybody. For, like a, I suppose, a metaphor, I suppose, for how art can bring people together in very difficult, sort of, circumstances. I suppose the last thing I want to really think about it is, is hope em, and what was interesting, I think, from the, one of the interviews you spoke about hope you could have anticipated perhaps in the past you'd write a book that'll be read primarily by, sort of, er, white librarians and school teachers 'cos that's the demographic of, white female librarians, , white female teachers in the US. It's very much the same in, in the UK as well, so, I must, you know, say personally that a lot of librarians saw us as children's writers in the UK and schools, and are ones who really are getting our books into young people's hands and are getting us into schools and, er, and it's Black History Month in the UK at the moment so

	there's not many black writers. I'll pop on to twitter, I'm on another board for Black History Month, that is fantastic and there's many white librarians doing that work for us. Em, so the, sort of theme, I suppose, for, for Book Week Scotland in 2020 is the future and, of course Amal is hope, so I want to ask you both, how can we pass on hope to future generations? So, Ibi would you like to answer this dissertation of a question?
IBI	I think, um, and I've been re-thinking what hope means 'cos, because we say it so much, uh, that it starts be-, becoming cliché a little bit, um, to me as I say it, uh, right. And I had to think 'well, what does that mean', uh, to me it means that things are not too well right now, but it's going, knowing that it will get better, right. We say this to young people all the time, but it is this idea of not being disillusioned, not being pessimistic. I think that is, that can be dangerous ground when we can see everything that is happening and think that I'm never going to get a job, um, I'm never going to own a home. Uh, I was in a school visit in Cleveland, Ohio here in the States and I asked an audience of about 200 teenagers "what is your biggest fear?" And a good number of them said getting shot. Um, and statistically it won't happen, I'm hoping, but – and, I'm thinking of getting shot the, by the police, I thought that's they were saying – but that's not what they were saying. They were saying 'yes, getting shot by the police, getting shot in my own neighbourhood. Getting shot at school so, you know, if we have to go to war, this idea of gun violence is pervasive in lives, so what do I say to kids who think like that? The whole part of it that you can change it, you can start working on yourself right now, and that self can be whether you're thinking of being an artist, whether you're thinking of being a journalist, or policy maker, or politician, or an educator – that is part of the work of changing those things that you fear right now. So, to me that is what hope means. The hope is that I have the skills, I can start working on the skills that will allow me to change things in the future so that it's better for me and the world.
YUSEF	Uh, you know, I've, I, I think that is a good, so to speak, aliyoop for me in that I was thinking about how to tie in the mural with hope and Ibi just said it all in a, in such a really profound way. Um, what happened – and what happens often in prison is people begin to accept and believe what it is that they're trying to tell them that they are. And that is the word 'criminal'. And so, they become criminal. The beautiful thing about this particular mural as it relates to hope is that once it is created there is opportunity. And the opportunity is something that's being born inside of the creator of that particular mural that can never be taken, even though the mural was painted over. And so, you want to be able to see it again, but what you have to do is rely on memory and the hope of what you are. Because what happens is that you just began to believe. You believe the possibilities. You realise that they, they can never paint over the transformation that happened as a result of the participation of the inmates creating that particular kind of expression. And I think that's the beautiful part, because it's always a fight. It's always a struggle. Yours fighting against the ideas that they're trying to give to you of self li-, of self w-, uh, uh, um, of, um, what's the word, I'm thinking about? I was going to say self-worth but

	that's, I'm thinking of about, they're trying to you you're not worth anything. But the truth of the matter is that a child is born. And that child was born against great odds. Being one of over 400 million options that child was born and the fact that the child is here, thriving, alive signifies that this is the caretaker of tomorrow. And it behoves us, who are wise enough - which this officer wasn't – which, which he is an example of many – those who are wise enough are realising that we have to pour into the child so that the child can take care of tomorrow in a most profound way. In a caring way and a loving way. In a hopeful way, in a way that provides the insulation we need as a, as a, as a part of the human race to be able to be successful. To be able to create properly. To be able to be.
PATRICE	I suppose it is actually a hopeful book. So, thank you for so much for joining me in your afternoon – my evening…and we managed to avoid anyone, only one police car went by so that was good. Ehm, and I just need to, just to sort of finish off by saying, em, that this, eh, em – start again – this Book Week Scotland event has been brought to you by Scottish Book Trust and Scottish Book Trust wants everyone living in Scotland to have equal access to books, because better access to books means better life chances and you can help by gifting a book to a family who are struggling this Christmas. If you've enjoyed this event – and I hope you have – please consider sharing your love of reading by, with others, by making a donation to Scottish Book Trust's Christmas appeal at scottishbooktrust.com And thank you so much to our guests on this panel, Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam. Thank you so much. Thank you.
YUSEF	Thank you.
IBI	Thank you so much Patrice.
PATRICE	You're welcome.