

Transcript:
Prisoner Re-Entry: Theatre and Ritual

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Welcome to CRT2, Columbia Race Talks, Critical Race Theory. I'm Flores Forbes. And I'm Kendall Thomas. In this episode of CRT2, our student team, in collaboration with their formerly incarcerated podcast consultants, bring you a story about theater as a ritual for re-entry. Join us for this deep dive into what Critical Race Theory is and why it matters.

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to a CRT2 podcast series. In this episode, we will be discussing theater as a ritual for reentry. I'm Jermell McClure, a second year law student at Columbia Law School that is passionate about reimagining the criminal justice system. And I'll be joined by my co host, Alex Gentile-Waksberg, a second year student at the Columbia School of Social Work. I'm passionate about the abolition of the prison industrial complex. And Noah Russian.

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a third-year law student at Columbia Law School that is dedicated to using law to attain racial justice. Graduations, weddings, honeymoons, birthday parties, and prom. What do all these things have in common? What is it? These are all rituals. Rituals are events that mark the beginning and the end. Rituals structure our social worlds and how we understand time, relationships, and change. A subset of rituals in society are called rites of passage.

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where participants move from one state of social being to another. An example of this would be my Bar Mitzvah when I was 13. According to Jewish tradition, after my Bar Mitzvah, I was officially a man and no longer a boy, despite what my voice sounded like at the time. An American anthropologist, Victor Turner, noticed three key phases during a rites of passage ceremony. The first is separation, which can be the physical movement of people from one place to another.

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The second is liminality, which is the phase between separation and reintegration. And the final step is reintegration into society or the larger group. In this podcast, we will explore how incarceration is a damaging and broken rite of passage. Incarceration leads to the separation of individuals from families and communities. And many of these individuals become stuck in a cycle of recidivism.

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The final step of reintegration is out of reach for so many people who are victims of a carceral system. We are going to explore how the final step of reintegration can be created for these individuals through the arts, specifically theater. With theatrical performance

serving as a rite of passage, formerly incarcerated individuals are empowered to complete the final reintegration step and break free of a carceral system.

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Throughout the podcast, numerous interviewees expressed the trauma and dehumanization surrounding the process of going to court, being convicted, and navigating the carceral system.

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John, you're not drumming.

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What are you talking about, taking it all? I'm not sure. I'm not sure what's in this mask, Carl. See, I wear this mask because I was born black. America's most hated with bulls out on my back. I wear this mask because I was born poor, being forced to go to bed hungry, but food there was no more. I wear this mask to protect my feelings, because I've been through a lot, and I'm still healing. I wear this mask because of how they've treated me, from slavery to prison, robbed of my identity.

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I wear this mask because of police brutality. White being right and black being my reality. I wear this mask because I'm not supposed to make it. With this monkey on my back, me being black, it was hard for me to shake it. I wear this mask because it's hard for them to understand how much it's been for me trying to be a black man. I wear this mask because it's hard for me to compete. I've been held down for so long with shackles on my feet. This audio clip was from the show put on by Rienchi Theater of Harlem.

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We were able to speak with Alexander Anderson, who is the executive director of Re-Entry Theater of Harlem and Ritual for Return. Alex is a formerly incarcerated individual and a licensed social worker. When someone gets convicted, when someone goes before a judge and gets convicted, that's a ritual. It's made public, it's put out there, everyone knows it. And the person usually goes from being a citizen to now being a convict. They take all your clothing.

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all the marks of identity that you had, all that gets taken away from you, and you get a new identity with a number attached to it, and you get different clothes, and you're treated different. One of the speakers we interviewed was Dr. Kevin Bott. He is a founder of Ritual for Return, a program of Estella Adler Studio of Acting through which formerly incarcerated individuals create and enact a homecoming rite of passage to mark the transition.

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from incarceration to freedom. Dr. Bott's scholarly training and artistic practice are situated in the field of community-based theater. He currently serves as the director of online learning at Mason Gross School of the Arts at his alma mater, Rutgers University. We asked Kevin his thoughts on the theatrics and ritual associated with entering into the carceral system. Kevin has seen the extreme negative impact that incarceration can have on a person's sense of self.

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When you're ritually brought into the system, more often than not, you don't get a chance to tell your story. Your story is told for you and about you, and it's a narrative that's made by prosecutors or defense attorneys or by a judge or by a jury or by a story you have to sign at the end of a plea statement. A lot of this revolves around shame and stigma.

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And that's also true of people who experience trauma. There's a, you know, because the trauma response is often to fight or freeze or flee, there's a lot of self-blame that happens when someone is the victim of trauma and looks back at the kind of fragmented story that their brain can piece together and they're always saying, well, I should have done something different. Why didn't I do something different?

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In our conversations with all these practitioners, we kept hearing how impactful theater can be for folks who are incarcerated. Here's Tom Oppenheim. I'm Tom Oppenheim. I am the artistic director of the Stella Adler Studio of Acting. I've been doing this job since 1995 and come by it, honestly, in the sense that my grandmother was Stella Adler. So I've been around this place my whole life.

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Stella Adler has become a collaborator with Ritual for a Return and has incredible classes offered for folks on the inside and for people formerly incarcerated. But Tom wasn't sure what to expect the first time that he brought a theatre program into a woman's prison. It didn't take long for him to see the power in working behind bars. And what I saw over and over were human beings filled with potential.

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filled with aspiration and with the capacity to be elevated, to elevate themselves. And many moments in which the barbed wire outside the windows would just disappear. We also spoke with Josie Whittlesey. My name is Josie Whittlesey. I'm an executive director.

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of Drama Club. I'm the founder as well. I founded it in 2013. I had the pleasure of working for Josie at Drama Club for my field placement last year. The organization offers improvisational workshops for young people who are incarcerated and formerly incarcerated. Josie knew that theater was her passion, but wasn't sure how to build her life

around it. I was just sort of on this searching journey and when I got to Sing Sing and I started teaching I just felt

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I felt like I was vibrating at my highest intensity. It was just sort of like, this is, this is it. This is the work. You know, I like to joke that like, it's the easiest class I've ever taught. You show up and like people thank you for showing up. And then they're excited to hear what you have to say and like, learn what you have to teach. It's like, it doesn't get any better than that as an educator.

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the inside, they also understood that there were limitations to confining these programs within prison walls. Practitioners stressed the importance of not only investing in theatrical programs that take place within prisons, but also investing in organizations that provide opportunities to reimagine oneself and cultivate community when reentering society. In this portion of our interview, Dr. Bott recounted an interaction that he had

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with a participant who he worked with inside prison. And one of the men came up to me and he had just made his parole board and he said, look, this has been life-changing. And I will say that as a positive, I mean, for the individuals involved in theater inside prisons, it is often life-changing. I mean, the arts are really powerful. And so disregarding all of those larger structural issues, you know, the reality is...

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people get a ton out of the expressive arts. And so he said, you know, my life was changed. I'm going back to the city. What can I do to continue with this work? Josie, the executive director of Drama Club, identified a similar desire for continued engagement in the actors she worked with. And also there were some young people in, you know, when we started for the first few years where they really, really loved the program and they were like, what happens when I come home? And I didn't have an answer. And that felt...

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really irresponsible. Young people are pretty traumatized by the experience of being incarcerated and tend not to have a lot of trust for new people. That's feedback I've gotten. So we've built these relationships so I think it's really important to continue those relationships. So it's an easier, it's an easier journey back into the world. There's someone there that you know and trust.

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We wanted to get a sense of what the re-entry process looked like for folks that had actually gone through it. Alex Anderson stated, I never even made it past the sixth grade, dropped out of school, went to prison. It was very illiterate, didn't read or write. But when I came out of prison, I had a bachelor's degree from Syracuse University. So, you know, I

rehabilitated myself while I was in there. But when Alex applied for a social work license, And I applied for a license and the profession said,

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that they weren't giving me a license because I had a conviction like 30 years ago. And that was really devastating for me. We also spoke with Bruce Blake, a good friend of Alexander's. I am currently now an assistant director. I am also a co-founder. I'm also a rights of passage artist for Ritual for Retain and also Reentry Theater of Harlem.

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In reflecting on his reentry process, Bruce expressed similar sentiments of rejection and demoralization, talking specifically about applying to be a peer specialist. I had to meet the criteria, which I felt I met, that I met. And I did the perfect essay. I did all this good stuff, you know, and I sent all my paperwork in and they wrote me back saying, listen, we're sorry, but, you know, we can't let you be, you know.

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coming to this class to be a peer specialist because you don't have a GED. So it crushed me. It crushed me because I worked so hard, you know, to get into this, you know? And the criteria didn't say anything about a GED. It just said you had to have a history of homelessness. You know, you know, I met the criteria. I broke down in tears. I was lost. I called Alex Hutton in tears.

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Alex, you won't believe it. They said I couldn't be a player specialist. I'm done. You know, this is it. I can't do it no more. And, you know, I wanted to go back to using, you know, I just wanted to just drop everything.

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Hold up, hold up, hold up. Just wait one minute. I'm not taking off my mask. I'm just not. And I'm gonna tell you why.

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fell in a hole one day, couldn't get out. One day he saw a social worker and he called out, social worker, social worker, I fell into this hole and I can't get out. Can you help me get out? The social worker heard the man's voice, looked around, didn't see the man and kept going. So the next day the man saw a psychiatrist and he called out psychiatrist, psychiatrist, I fell into this hole and I can't get out.

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Can you help me get out? The psychiatrist heard the man's voice, looked around, didn't see the man, and kept going. So the next day, the man saw his brother, and he called out, brother, brother, I fell into this hole and I can't get out. The brother didn't see the man, the

brother looked around, saw no man, and kept going. As this audio from a performance by Bruce suggests,

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The consistent through line for everyone we spoke with who had spent time in prison was that incarceration never truly ended. Because of the lack of a ritual for reentry, recidivism felt inevitable. My prison time started at the age of 25. It's 25 to 33. I've been in and out of prison. And the total I did eight years for five hours of crack cocaine.

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And that was the hardest because I received no help within that prison system. I just kept coming, you know, me asking for help being on parole. All they did was send me back to jail. Here's Kevin reflecting on what he's seen from his work in the prison system. When you look at the process of entering prison, it is a ritual. And in fact, it's a rite of passage. It's a degrading rite. So.

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A rite of passage as a category of ritual is the purpose that it serves is to move people from one social state to another social state. But when that punishment that we've declared is terminated, there is no formal structure to reincorporate the person back into the community. And so the experience of reentry for many is that it goes on forever.

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What has become clear is that if the criminal justice system is not going to provide a ritual to disrupt the cycle of endless recidivism, then we must create it ourselves. You know, we know that 80% or more of people who come out go back in, right? There's this revolving recidivism door. Ritual for return is envisioned as, okay, they're out of the revolving door, they've been spit out by the system. We need to interrupt the process at that point.

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and do some healing work and build a community so that there are resources, social resources, and concrete resources, because there's a big community involved, that's not gonna allow them to go back in the revolving door. Alex Anderson saw the same void in the reentry process. However, there is no ritual to undo all of that once a person finishes or completes their sentence. There is no ritual.

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After a person pays their debt to society, and now they come back into society, there is no rituals to say, okay, now you're welcome back. Now you're a citizen, and here you're given all your rights. So that is exactly what Alex has done through his programming with Ritual for Reentry and the Reentry Theater of Harlem. Sometimes they tell the stories that have been given to them. And what we do is we help them see those stories, see themselves in them stories.

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But we also look for, we also help them develop stories of positive stories about themselves. It's like taking a picture of somebody at their worst moment and then you say, aha, now I got you. And then that still frame, you know, we use it to describe people. Rituals are about leaving behind something.

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old and negative and picking up something new and positive as you go forward. But the fear that I do is to empower people, you know, also to bring people in, you know, not to exclude people, but bring people in to the space, bring people into the community to be other, other than, you know, some, some outcast. You know, we hear those words, marginalized, outcast people.

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Well, I don't believe that people should be marginalized now. We should bring them in and allow them to also develop themselves. Abolition, as we interpret it in relation to rituals for return, is the process of critiquing the unjust criminal legal system and creating opportunities for formerly incarcerated people to be empowered and uplifted as they transition back into society.

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Empowerment rituals for individuals who have been stripped of their humanity by the criminal legal system, radically challenged the status quo. Dr. Botts detailed the power of rituals for return as a dismantling tool. And so, yeah, I mean, I was just asking myself the question, like, what, what are the practices that we could engage in that actually could help to dismantle the whole institution, not as valuable as it is to

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help individuals, uplift individuals, give individuals tools for their own empowerment, I never saw a way that any of that work inside was ever going to be a dismantling tool. It was, in fact, my worry was that it actually helped to justify the prison itself because, hey, this is the point. We're going to punish the folks. And then when they come in here, we'll help them.

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And so we're doing good, we're actually doing good work. And I would say prisons do not do good work, period.

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Some of the formerly incarcerated individuals we talked with and others involved in this work express strong sentiments surrounding the impact that theater has had on their emotional well-being and skills that come up in their day-to-day life. We talked with Asan, who was involved in Drama Club while incarcerated and became a facilitator when he

came out, about the way the work has impacted him. In most situations, we have to think on our feet to get out of a situation.

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Irregardless whether we've been in that situation before, we have prior knowledge about that situation or if it's fresh and it's our first time, we have to think on our feet to get certain things done. That's all a prop is. Taking whatever an idea or a prop or whatever and using the first thing that comes to your mind and being able to work with someone else as they're doing the same thing.

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Like it's something about coming to drama club or even experiencing improv that changes you a little bit. It changes your thinking subconsciously because it makes you analyze things differently. It makes you look at things differently. I put a little bit of me in every character I do. So funny, silly, angry, serious, it's me.

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because I'm able to tap into those different aspects of my life when I'm like that. That's why I love improv. I don't want to be fixated to any one thing unless I decide. Hassan also emphasized the community building that occurs in programs like Drama Club. And it never fails in every cohort or in every iteration that I've seen with Drama Club that actually want to do something about and actually want to be a part of this.

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we wind up building a tight-knit family. And I call it that because come and go, and everybody that's still around, it's family. Those that I don't see, and forever when I see them, I feel genuine love. Similar to Asan, Bruce was able to give us insight into how being involved in theater has affected his life. It changed a lot. It turned around a whole new leaf.

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You know, I see things different now. It brought out some gifts. You know, I feel like, like, wow. You know, I didn't even know that I even had these things stored inside of me. I feel good about myself. I feel great. Sometimes Alex come with me, you're a celebrity, you know? I no longer believe that I have a learning disability. I no longer believe that I'm a criminal.

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So all those labels and bandages have definitely been removed. And that was my healing process. I learned how to be.

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more compassion, more understanding, how to deal with rejection. We also spoke with Suzy to get another perspective on the transformative impact of theater. My name is Suzy Petrum, and I'm the Director of Arts, Justice Field Programs at the Stella Adler Studio of

Acting. Suzy was first introduced to the power that theater has to break down barriers when she was at an inpatient rehab facility. Ever since, she has been passionate about this work.

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Like what other gig do you know where like a group of strangers come together, two seconds, they get a script and now we're kissing because like we're supposed to be in love. Like it allows for all the humanity, all the good, all the bad, all the beautiful, all the funny, all the horrific, all the pain, just all of it to be present and it to be okay. It's actually you want it to be present. That's what makes it better for however long that class is.

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All that fades, it does, you know what I mean? You have this class, I've been in class in jail where you look out the window and you see barbed wire. You got officers everywhere. It's drab, it's gross, it's dirty, it's metal tables everywhere. But, you know, and you have people from outside and you have the detainees in there and they're like.

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you know, inmate uniforms, but at the end of the day, like we're all laughing. Alex Anderson spoke with us about the therapeutic nature of theater. And then I realized the therapeutic value of it is that when you're performing on the stage, you know, the adjectives that I can describe is it's a very powerful.

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a very powerful and very engaging, life-fulfilling kind of experience. Like when you're on the stage, you got control. You're in control. You have the audience. People are there to see and hear you. Actually, theater really means the place to be seen, a place to be seen and a place to be heard. So now you get a chance to tell your narrative. You get a chance to tell your side of the story.

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The theater that we've created involves not just the general public, but it involves family and friends. It involves people that know individuals before and after they've gotten out. It involves, and we don't even call them audiences, we call them witnesses, because they're there to witness the transformation. After hearing about the power of combining abolition and theater from so many of our interviewees,

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we decided to see a show for ourselves. The event was a performance titled, Echoes of Attica, that took place at the forum on November 14th. Welcome everybody. We're delighted to have you here tonight. The musical theater performance is about the 1971 Attica prison revolt that was performed by actors and musicians who had been formerly incarcerated. The four-day insurrection of New York's Attica State Prison came to a tragic end this morning. The play is based on court transcripts.

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declassified FBI documents, and interviews from men who survived the experience. Prisoners making this the bloodiest prison incident the country has seen in four decades. The main goal of the performance was to raise awareness about the current outbreak of state violence against communities of color and the relevancy of the Attica Prison Revolt. Sitting in the front row were individuals who experienced the Prison Revolt at Attica. The play was heavily influenced by rap and gospel.

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We got the man, die like a man last resort of our plans. First thing we need is amnesty for this calamity. Can you guarantee that we make a whole... Naomi, a 72-year-old formerly incarcerated woman who previously was on death row and worked with Senator John Fetterman to advocate for her release, stole the show with her phenomenal voice and captivating stage presence. ...everywhere, stormy weather, yeah.

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And I just can't get my poor self together

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keeps raining all the time.

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Hey

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We just knew we needed to know more about her story, experiences with theatrical ritual, and the impact she hoped the performances had on audiences and folks who were still incarcerated. I asked Naomi what she wanted people who'd never been incarcerated to take away from this experience. What I want people to take away from events like this is to know that there are other people that are on the inside that are just like me.

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you know, and that are deserving of a second chance. There are good people on the inside. Don't think that because people are behind prison walls that they're bad people or that they belong there. We were also curious to get an understanding of how she'd hoped the work she was doing impacted the family she'd formed while incarcerated. What it does for me, I go inside of the prisons and I visit the ladies that I spent decades with. They're my family. So just to see that hope.

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you know, on their faces when they just see me walk through the gates. You know what I mean? I give them that hope that I know what it's like to be on the inside. It's a lonely place and to know that somebody has been there, understands you, it just does my heart good. I can sleep good at night. I know that I've done something good for somebody, you know,

just to help somebody and it's just, it's a blessing. So I love what I do. I love what I do because I'm giving of myself.

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I'm giving that. As several of our interviewees implied, this work is imperative because it pushes the boundaries of how people understand themselves in relation to the egregious human rights violations that are occurring as a result of the prison industrial complex. It also provides people who endure unimaginable conditions day in and day out with the kind of hope that is palpable.

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This was illustrated beautifully in the echoes of Attica play when Naomi vocalized the shared responsibility we all have to address the issues presented by the prison industrial complex with a beautiful melody.

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Yeah

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Because you

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Yeah, yeah.

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Because all of us, my old man, and the sad part about it, the struggle still continues. These interviews helped emphasize how important it is to have some sort of ritual for reentry for victims of the carceral system.

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for disrupting the cycle of recidivism and helping people heal from the trauma associated with being incarcerated. It's up to all of us to support programs that do this work in our communities to help combat the issue of mass incarceration. Theater is therapeutic. Theater can save lives. I've seen it, I know it, because it saves mine.

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Special thank you to Alex Anderson for all of his help in creating this podcast with us. We appreciate your support. Please check our show notes for more information on all of the programs and theater makers that we mentioned on this episode.

32:06

Thank you for joining us. Until next time, I'm Kendall Thomas. I am Flores Forbes. And this is CRT2, Columbia Race Talks Critical Race Theory.