

Transcript:

BK King (00:00):

Welcome to this very, very special episode of the artist's room. I'm your host BK, and I am going to be joined today by my lovely beautiful friend, Nadia Ben Youssef. We are cross promoting the show today, so you'll hear the show, not only here on "The Artist Room," but also on "The Activist Files," which is a podcast of the Center for Constitutional Rights. So, I'm still honored today to be joined by my lovely comrade in arms, Ms. Nadia Ben-Youssef. Nadia, how are you?

Nadia Ben-Youssef (02:04):

I am so happy to be here with you and to hear that intro and that voice; this has been such a long time coming to have this podcast, and I'm so proud of you, and I'm really excited for the conversation today.

BK King (02:21):

Thank you so much for joining us. This is my first cross promoted show, and I'm excited about that. Let my listeners know what you all are doing over there at the Center for Constitutional Rights. How's that been going for you?

Nadia Ben-Youssef (02:40):

Thanks BK. Yeah, it's fun to cross-promote and build out our podcast listeners and introduce folks both to your show and to our podcast, "The Activist Files" at the Center for Constitutional Rights. I joined the Center for Constitutional Rights two years ago as their director of advocacy. CCR, if folks don't know is a 55-year-old, radical legal and advocacy organization that has been since the beginning of our work standing with social movements who are fighting against oppression, who are dismantling systems of racism, gender oppression, economic oppression, abuse of state practices, fighting against American empire, shoulder to shoulder with freedom fighters, in the U.S. and around the world. And before coming to CCR, I looked at this organization really as a model of unapologetic, bold litigation, advocacy, communications work.

Nadia Ben-Youssef (03:57):

You know, you and I met doing a lot of work around Palestine and CCR was one of the only organizations in the United States that had a principled stance on Palestinian liberty and I was connected to CCR through that work. And the sort of political coherence of this organization is what has been so extraordinary that, what it means to stand on the side of justice means that you always know where you stand. And that you're constantly challenging yourself to be as principled in struggle with people. And you know, yeah, so it's a constant, a beautiful organization that is constantly evolving. And part of that work is bringing on an advocacy arm. Advocacy has been central to CCR's work for many decades, but it's kind of reconfiguring what it means to be doing advocacy in this moment and pushing the work beyond kind of a reactive work, which is really what legal work often is just resistance, like resisting the world that we have pushing back and moving us into a posture where we are demanding the world that we want affirming a positive vision of the world that we're fighting for and building towards, putting that out there, articulating that and where it intersects with your work and the work that we've done together there is that it's artists who chart that future it's creative, who push our collective imagination towards that world that we are building that we have not yet seen.

Nadia Ben-Youssef (05:40):

So, art has been an integral part of advocacy at CCR before I arrived. And we're continuing to push that as a model and as a strategy, but also, I think there is nothing like aesthetic force in social change and you know, that, and this is why, you know, "The Artist Room" celebrates that and Donkeysaddle Projects celebrates that and is rooted in that. And so, I think that's what's happening at CCR. I mean, there's so much I could say about this particular moment and, and why that's more necessary than ever. And maybe we can get into that a bit later.

BK King ([06:23](#)):

Definitely, definitely. I just want to congratulate you for you know, kind of, I don't wanna say upgrading to CCR, but you know, getting into this space where you're now working apart and being a part of that, that long legacy of folks who are not only prioritizing the arts through advocacy and the legal system, but also like making it a point to, um, utilize artists in, in, in that way. And I don't think we've seen that in such a way in our movements. I mean, we've seen it in small ways. Like there are pockets of our artists and advocacy that kind of, you know, push our movement sport. But I think it's really beautiful and very exciting to see you on that team and to, to know just, you know, the work that we've done together with Donkeysaddle Projects, and there is a field and not knowing that, you know, the experiences that we've had together in those spaces are not going to be over at CCR. I'm excited to see what can come out of that. So, I'm wondering if you could kind of talk a little bit about what it's been like for you to kind of make that transition and some things that you might be excited about.

Nadia Ben-Youssef ([07:35](#)):

I would say that I'm excited about how art and advocacy link and the way that I always have been, in the way that you and I have built work together. Um, not as something separate to the work of advocacy and let and legal work and organizing broadly for social change, but as necessary as integral as, you know, the cultural work that we do as movement, he's the life force of the work, you know, even, and what I would say is that the legal work at CCR that's storytelling, that storytelling work, I think as movement lawyers, you know, what we're doing is we are trying to, at the highest level, have a disruptive public conversation about power and injustice and transformation through the courts. Um, advocacy works. So that's the political and cultural work that we might do to shift public policy and to shift public opinion on our issues and our clients on the systems and structures of oppression in the world depending on stories.

Nadia Ben-Youssef ([09:11](#)):

It depends on shattering master narratives. It depends on our ability as a movement to articulate the alternative world that we are creating to make that world. And I think you've said this many times, irresistible, you know, what is the duty of the advocate, the lawyer, the healer, the teacher in our movement, that's art for me, it's artwork, right? The more that we focus on, again, the power of the aesthetic in our movement, the stronger we are. And I would say that that has been true throughout the history of resistance. You know I was thinking kind of in preparation for this podcast about the time that we're sharing this with, with the world, um, you know, the, the national holiday that is called Independence Day. I was thinking about Frederick Douglass and of course, um, his brilliant speech, "What to the slave is the 4th of July?" Frederick Douglass, as an order as an artist, the aesthetic force of that speech was transformational and resonates. It has an echo into the present that forces us to recommit to changing our material reality. And art does that uniquely, and it is to our detriment. If we do not integrate it fully and even integrate and follow the leadership of creatives and of those who push our radical imaginations, because, you know, really what is possible in our world takes place first in the

imaginary, we have to imagine it, and then we build it and it's thanks to artists. And I say that in the broadest, the broadest definition of what an artist is charts that path for us.

BK King ([11:34](#)):

Yeah. Thank you so much for bringing that up, cause it's true. And I think meeting you was one of the very first times where I kind of understood that, you know, artistry doesn't just have to lie with those who call themselves artists, right? Like it transcends what we, what we can kind of understand art to be. And I think, you know, bringing up Frederick Douglas in that way and to see him as an artist and orator somebody who, you know, can, can use their radical imagination and imagine greater than the circumstances we find ourselves in that takes an artistic mind. It takes somebody who can look at their imagination and say, yeah, what, what can we do that can be better than what we see right now? So in that thought, because one of the very first times that I've met you and we, when we started working together again, it was around the play project that we did with Donkey saddle Projects.

BK King ([12:35](#)):

There is a field which highlights a Palestinian family's struggle for justice after witnessing the murder of their 17-year-old child during protest. The story resonates on so many levels for me as a Black woman who witnesses those types of injustices, so often here in the United States. We question what freedom really looks like in this nation so much, because at the end of the day, Black lives aren't free, indigenous lives aren't free, Latin X and immigrant brothers and sisters, they don't, they don't get to see freedom. So really who is free? I digress a little bit, but the very first time we were in session together, uh, you taught a course around demystifying empire and it, it stayed with me all these years because it, it really, for me encapsulated, what's so hard about like going up against empire because it's, so it's made to be so mystical and unattainable. So, I just want to ask you if you could break down how we can demystify the empire in today's world. Do you think about that or is there anything that you can speak to around what that looks like?

Nadia Ben-Youssef ([14:07](#)):

Oh, goodness. There's so much that came up in there. I love your question. What does freedom look like? Um, who is freedom for, um, and as Fannie Lou Hamer would say, "if it's not for all of us, then it's for none of us. Until all of us are free, none of us are free." So, I love that question and I think empire is the antithesis of that. Empire is the antithesis of freedom. Empire is the structures and system that uphold white supremacy that allow for subjugation. Empire is the lie of the hierarchy of human life and empire. You know, it's you and I do the session on "The Four I's of Oppression," as we're trying to understand, and to really take apart the, the elements of empire, you know, in ideology, in institution how empire is expressed in our relationships or interpersonal relationships with one another, how empire is internalized, how we accept subjugation and exclusion, how we are complicit in subjugating and excluding others.

Nadia Ben-Youssef ([15:35](#)):

To dismantle empire, one is to see it as it is, right. I think the truth telling aspect of it is important. Can we create the contour so that we can understand the empire beyond the sort of the mythic and overwhelming presence of it, and we understand it? Can we see ourselves within it? Can we understand how we are part of that project, the project of exclusion, of hierarchy, of subjugation, of oppression, you know, can we engage the empire within, are we willing to do that? Um, you know, and then as we're dismantling it, this is where the artistry of abolition in all its manifestations across time helps us, which is

that as we're dismantling the empire, what are we creating in its place? And I think that the effort of, of creation of creating the alternative, imagining a decolonized, um, a decolonized world, imagining the end of empire requires us also to, to build the world that we are to build the world that we want.

Nadia Ben-Youssef ([17:04](#)):

And I think we do that in the smallest ways. And that's, what's exciting too, about the project of dismantling empire, as huge as it is, is that it can be done by all of us in a myriad of ways. We can be involved in the project of dismantling empire and creating beloved communities, in all the ways, in whatever way, you know, you are called to do and to engage in this world. And I think to go back also to just the role of the artist that sort of unlocking of what is possible is a crucial role for artists to play. But I don't know if that answers the extent of the question. I think we did a lot of exercises because we wanted both people to embody, um, to understand, uh, to, to locate empire in themselves and in a society. And we also encourage people to locate freedom, to locate hope, to locate alternatives in themselves and and move us kind of as a collective towards that future.

BK King ([18:20](#)):

Yeah, no, I think he answered it. Well, thank you so much. That's what makes me think of the role that artists and for instance, lawyers can play, we don't often see those two entities collide. So, I'm curious, do you have any thoughts around how those two worlds can collide more effectively? And I mean, what are, what are some ways that, you know, artists can kind of, I guess, inject themselves into, into those spaces that may not often seem like, you know, those are spaces that are meant for the artists. I know you talked about earlier, you talked earlier about lawyers being storytellers, right? So I'm wondering, I'm curious if there are ways that, you know, as artists, we can either kind of help those stories come to life more, or we can kind of be in the service of being more out allied with folks who, who want to be on that side of abolition with us and of demystifying empire and like unpacking the empire that, that has been ingrained in us. Um, do you have any thoughts about that?

Nadia Ben-Youssef ([19:42](#)):

Yeah, definitely. I mean, I think this is the work that we did there as a field BK. It was in large part a story about the limits of the law in pursuing justice, right? So you have this teenage Palestinian kid who was murdered by Israeli authorities at a protest. There was an official commission of inquiry. In Israel, there was opportunities for lawyers to gather tons of evidence to prove to the state that he was indeed murdered to prove that the murder was unjustified, um, to use the system of oppression, to try to demand the rights of the oppressed, which itself is the system is not designed for that, right. We know that the legal system is not functioning perfectly as unjustly as outcomes are, right.

Nadia Ben-Youssef ([20:49](#)):

That those are what is, what is possible in a legal system. So, you know, I think what the play did and what there is a field did by taking that story of one family's struggle for justice in a legal system and putting it in a new venue, um, which is the venue of, of the artists and of the, you know, of the actors of the playwright. What Jen Marleau, the playwright, did is in line with this. It's a documentary-style play and what it does is gives Palestinians and those who experience oppression, the permission to narrate their stories. This is the side, who, who talks about this, the permission to narrate and why moving from the object of inquiry be the object of discourse, the person who's most impacted becomes the subject becomes the narrator of their own story.

Nadia Ben-Youssef ([22:02](#)):

And in that you take it out of the realm of the oppressor. So out of the realm of the law, and you put it in the realm of the artist, the realm of art and creativity, and there you create an alternative venue for justice, right? Where the story is, folks who understand how the law works in these systems, of course, the family didn't get justice in the courts. You know, it's now 21 years later. And there's still no justice for what happened to the young, the young Palestinian who was killed. Um, and as you said, as a Black woman in this country, as Black people who experienced and understand that the law was not designed to protect the rights and when, when it happens, you know, we saw earlier this year in the trial of Derek Chauvin when it happens, it's an exception to rule of kind of perpetual injustice.

BK King ([23:07](#)):

When it happens to underscore that injustice is still going to rear its ugly head, we see, as this is happening, another murder is happening. So not only do we have to grapple with the little small semblance of maybe justice that we might get, then we also have to compound it with the fact that, oh, but we're going to continuously be terrorized and murdered.

Nadia Ben-Youssef ([23:33](#)):

So yeah, I didn't want to interrupt you, but you have to, that's it. Right. And, then how, if there is not an alternative venue for justice in that system ends up legitimizing it in some way, right? Like it's, artists play a role of kind of taking the best of what is possible, which is storytelling. Um, the best of what is possible in law, the conversation about power that you're trying to have the disruptive force of taking a case like this, um, and putting it in a venue where actual justice, actual accountability, actual healing as possible, you know, and I think that's what, you know, in terms of a partnership of artists with lawyers, lawyers, as artists seeking out those opportunities to ensure that our view in our clients, are those who are impacted, are those whose story we're trying to tell through the negotiation have the best opportunity to not only own their story, but to shape its trajectory beyond the legal system.

Nadia Ben-Youssef ([24:51](#)):

Right. And as you said, it's, it's an exception to even get to court for systems for, you know, when you're challenging systems of systemic oppression, systemic anti-Black racism, when you're trying to fight, you know, structures of capitalism, when you're trying to fight systems of oppression, of gender oppression, when you're trying to fight that it's exceptional even to get to court on some level. Right. Um, and so it's critical that those stories have other platforms and, um, and then are able to do the work in the way that does justice to, um, the story itself.

BK King ([25:40](#)):

Thank you for saying that. That's such a beautiful client. Um, I'm going to switch gears just a little bit because something that you said made me think about, you know, our current circumstance, um, you know, in the wake of, uh, an aftermath of a Trump presidency and, uh, in the aftermath of last summer's events, uh, with the uprising around George Floyd, and then the insurrection at the Capitol at the beginning of this year, um, you know, you would think logically you would think that, you know, legislation being passed in the wake of all of those things would kind of move us in a direction that would look like we're trying to change and trying to grow and adapt and learn from those moments. Right. But as we begin to see sweeping legislation being proposed and passed, that is furthering limitations on our voting rights, and its furthering limitations on our access and ability to protest. I'm wondering, and I'm curious how do you understand what we can be doing to combat all of these really

regressive policies that are starting to come out of our, um, of this system? What do you think we can be doing to, uh, to further push the notion that more folks need to be paying attention to what's happening at the legislative level? And what do you think communities can be doing to help us as artists really start to stand up in the wake of these legislative policies?

Nadia Ben-Youssef ([27:19](#)):

Yeah, thanks. Yeah. It's disheartening at best, right. And an exhausting time. I think folks are so tired because it's an onslaught. These are waves of racist, discriminatory, deadly legislation. You know, I know that you and your comrades in Florida are really pushing back against policies that are criminalizing protest. And I would say, it's not to put a positive spin on, on what is, um, you know, the manifestation and the, and the entrenchment of oppression. But I will say that the empire is trembling to go back to what we were talking about before. And I think, you know, you raised the uprisings of last summer in your question, and my mind was flooded with images, BK, like the aesthetic power of a movement rising up for those in power.

Nadia Ben-Youssef ([28:51](#)):

That's a threat. It is a recognition amongst all of us that we are the multitude. And so the powerful are using the tools that they have, the tools that they have designed, the tools that protect them, the tools that they have control over. Right. We've talked a lot about the law as a tool of the powerful, you know, who owns it, who writes it, um, what are they protecting? And so they're using that right there. They're trying as fast as they can, as best as they can to combat the power of the people. And we know, and they know that that power is so limited when compared what community, what movements, particularly movements with a vision can do and can achieve. Now, you know, you had also mentioned, you know, we were reeling from a Trump presidency. That was also a movement, you know, with a vision.

Nadia Ben-Youssef ([29:55](#)):

I was in conversation with one of our comrades - Ashley Woodard Henderson - on our podcast, "The Activist Files," a few, few months ago. And as she was kind of describing the kind of the racist regressive, um, pro fascist Trump regime and administration, and the, the world view that he represents is a movement with a vision, a vision of, um, annihilation of the other, a vision of white supremacy, nonetheless, a vision, right? And I think the counter vision and the counter public that we are a part of that we are struggling with is tasked with setting that alternative vision. And I think lawyers and artists, creatives and organizers, healers like this collective are obligated to, to make clear that, that alternative vision. And then there are different ways. There's different strategies about how we chip away at the power of oppression, how we engage in it, you know, that there's, there's ways to disrupt power and there are ways to redistribute power.

Nadia Ben-Youssef ([31:26](#)):

And I think we just have to kind of put together the best of our creative abilities and of our skills to seek out the best tactics and, and the multitude of tactics that we can employ against these, these forces. We have what we need, we have everything that we need. Um, and I think part of that is acknowledging it to ourselves and to each other and giving people the resources, um, that they need to first survive, for, to first survive and then to employ their gifts and their joys in the service of our collective liberation.

BK King ([32:21](#)):

Being that we are still in the wake of this very global pandemic moment, I'm curious to see if you thought about what the implication of the pandemic means for us moving forward. A lot of people have suffered a lot of loss, emotional losses, like physical bodies of people that they've lost, people have lost their businesses, their homes. Um, I'm wondering, uh, from legal standpoint, in your lawyer mind, how do you think, uh, the moment that we are moving through with the, with this pandemic is going to shift the way that folks are now seeing themselves in our movements, but then also in our legal communities? How do folks in your field think this will shift the way that they think about the impact of their work?

Nadia Ben-Youssef ([33:24](#)):

Great question. Um, and for full disclosure, I am a lawyer. I'm trained as a lawyer. I think, you know, I don't know that I've been doing advocacy work for all of my career. Um, so outside of the law in part, because, you know, the law is not my joy and there were people who were, it was their joy and they were doing, um, incredible legal work, um, including my colleagues at CCR. So shout out to the lawyers, um, and those of us who studied it and didn't continue necessarily. But I would say that for all of us, you know, the pandemic has, um, I hope BK. And I really hope that the pandemic transforms us. I, if we do not emerge clearer, more compassionate, better from the devastation of this experience. The tremendous loss that you said, it's hard to imagine a more profound test of humanity, you know, then this kind of devastation, you know, and, and so I think what it requires is, and what it has uncovered and made impossible to ignore is the root cause of so much suffering, so much unnecessary suffering.

Nadia Ben-Youssef ([35:17](#)):

Um, so many people died, BK, but didn't have to die. You know, and that's the case for so many of the interlocking pandemics that we are confronted with pandemic of a health crisis, the pandemic of anti-black racism, the pandemic of capitalism, the pandemic of empire, a dependent of white supremacy has caused so many people to die. We've lost so much, we've lost so much potential and possibility. Um, we've lost so much, you know, so much of our humanity and the root causes of those losses has to be our target. You know, I think this in the aftermath of the pandemic addressing symptoms of the problem is no longer sufficient. It has never been. And you, and I know that our comrades know that, but it's, we don't have time. We cannot, we cannot be addressing the symptoms when we know. So clearly what the problems are.

Nadia Ben-Youssef ([36:23](#)):

So what I need in this moment, and what we need to do is be very laser focused on the root causes, asking the right questions, addressing the root causes and creating solutions that are sufficient. Half measures are not enough. We have to be willing to articulate the horizon that we are moving towards. So even if we do have to take incremental steps towards that, sure. But we're not going to be taking two steps back. You can't, we can't, it has to be continually forward towards the horizon of freedom towards the horizon and reparations towards the horizon of abolition. And that's where we're moving. You know, so I think the moment requires lawyers and others to be very serious about a complete recalibration of our national and global priorities. Um, it has to confront the legacies of empire, colonialism oppression, anti-Black racism, um, anti-indigeneity. We have to confront the, the pillars of our, um, unjust society and all be in the service of reconfiguring, transforming that society. That's the work. Now, anything less is an injustice.

BK King ([37:55](#)):

As we've been having this conversation, um, Audre Lord's words have been coming to me, you said that you can't use the master's tools and will not dismantle the master's house. So I completely understand that. And in that regard, I completely believe in the power of the people. So, I really appreciate the perspective that you, you brought today and the work that you're doing and continue to do. I totally admire you as a person and as a lawyer and a fierce freedom fighter. So, just thank you for all of your words and wisdom. I'm going to let you go in a second, but I have two final questions. Well, actually, no, it's just one final question, but I like to do this as my ending question. As the artists that you are, the activists, the lawyer, the artists, the beautiful person, if you could talk to anyone in your room, be it be they living or passed on. Who would you talk to and what would you want to speak with them about?

Nadia Ben-Youssef ([39:08](#)):

What a great question. BK. I think in part, because in my room I have a photo of my grandfather. So I think I will bring my ancestors and elders into this work, um, continue their work. And my grandfather was a freedom fighter, uh, a revolutionary third world anti-colonial, a Tunisian dreamer. Um, he was involved in the anti-colonial struggle against France. He was a Panamera Pan-African, um, organizer and political leader who I don't know. He would have defined himself as an artist, but believed so strongly in a transformed world and knew that that world was possible. And I think I would want to have that conversation with him about building the world that you have not yet seen, and the lessons that he drew, particularly in collective struggle and the transition that he made, you know, to, and the evolution that he went through in his own journey to understand that fundamental truth, that we cannot get free alone, and that our power is in, you know, building the world that we want together.

Nadia Ben-Youssef ([41:24](#)):

He was assassinated in 1961 when my dad was 10. And in part, because he represented that threat to empire, you know, because it was a collective struggle for freedom. And that persists today - artists and they are filled with the possibility of a complete transformation of the world. I can, each of these artists that you have spoken to, that we know that we descend from whose legacies we build upon us. You and I, in our being hold the promise of a world transformed and the possibility of a world transformed. And, you know, I think I know what he was thinking. What was he thinking in pursuit of that world? How did he recognize it in himself and in his comrades? How did he build it? Um, you know, and, and I think the sort of intergenerational questions and stories are also our key. It's, that's, there's also so much lesson and learning in that. And so, we're part of something bigger. We're part of a legacy. And I think I would love to be grounded in that. Um, and that's who I would want in my room.

BK King ([43:39](#)):

Such a powerful room to be in. Thank you so much. And big up to your grandfather and all the work that he did. Thank you for sharing that. So, I'm going to let you go, uh, as we close out. Please let our listeners know what you all are doing over at CCR. How can they follow the work and get plugged in with everything that you all are building and continuing to build?

Nadia Ben-Youssef ([44:08](#)):

Thanks, BK, what a pleasure it was to be with you, and yes, uh, follow us and join our work. You can find CCR on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, our website is CCRjustice.org. Or you can plug into events, you can join our community and build this world together. We were excited to partner. Um, if you are an artist, if you are a love student, if you are interested in getting involved in this work, in whatever way, we welcome you and are excited or excited to build thanks so much for having us.

BK King ([44:47](#)):

No problem. And similarly to you, our listeners, my name is BK. I'm the podcast host for "The Artist Room." It is a podcast of Donkey saddle Projects. We are a ragtag group of really dope artists who are trying to build a better world and better imaginations for our young people, for our organizers and for the artists that we are in community with today. If you would like to learn more about the work that we're doing, go over to our website at donkeysaddle.org. If you want to know more about the show, you can follow us on all of the socials at "The Artist Room." And I look forward to hearing from you all, thank you all so much for allowing us to share space and for listening and for wanting to fight for justice in the ways that you all do. I'm completely inspired by y'all's work. And, um, I hope we can do this again.

Nadia Ben-Youssef ([45:41](#)):

Thank you. Thanks BK.

BK King ([45:45](#)):

Want to give so much love to CCR and Nadia for joining us in the room this week. This was our first collaborative episode. So, I hope that those that listen to CCR's podcasts find something that they like over here in "The Artist Room" and vice versa. Thank you so much for giving us a listen. Please be sure to check out season one and stay tuned in with us here in "The Artist Room." Go check out the Center for Constitutional Rights on their website ccrjustice.org, and make sure to follow them on all social media platforms. You can find them on Facebook and on LinkedIn at Center for Constitutional Rights on IG at CCRjustice and on Twitter at theCCR. And lastly, on YouTube at CCRmedia. Yes. Thank you so much for joining us and we'd love to hear what you thought of the show. Let me know by sending us a DM on IG or Twitter or Facebook at "The Artist Room," or simply sending us an email at theartistroomatgmail.com. Thanks for listening. And until next time, be well.