

Episode 2: “Sense of Possibility” with Jewelle Gomez

YouSpeak Introduction:

Jasper: This is you speak radio. With generous support from the Dwight Stuart Youth Fund, an intergenerational project by one institute and the outwards archive on Tongva land.

[MUSIC]

Episode Introduction:

Charlotte: My name is Charlotte. I'm a high school student in Los Angeles, and I have strong interest in journalism and performing arts. Today, I had the privilege and fortune of interviewing Jewelle Gomez, who is an American author and playwright. In this episode, we talk about activism, writing, intersectionality, and finding a stronger connection to not only ourselves, but also those around us and our communities.

[MUSIC]

Jewelle: I'm always trying to deliver that sense of possibility that whatever time you have in this world, you get to do something. It doesn't matter how small it is, as long as you're consciously doing something, you're contributing to the way the world can progress forward. Most people think, "What do I have to give? It'll be fine. Somebody else will do it." I think that is totally the wrong way for us to look at social change. Social change, it's like a relay race. Each of us is in charge of our own little section. And if we do the best we can and move that baton to the next person, we've contributed.

Charlotte: I enjoyed writing articles. And the newspaper at my school, I began to take pride in the articles I was writing. And when someone did mention, "Hey, I read that article," it was good to know that I was sharing something with my community, even if it was something small like our field being renovated.

Jewelle: Some writers don't write a lot, but they change other people's lives. That's the story I want to come through. If you do your bit, and you do it sincerely and consciously, you can contribute to changing the world. Even if you're not a vampire, it doesn't really matter. Hahah!

[MUSIC]

Interview Begins:

Charlotte: My name is Charlotte. I am currently going into my senior year of high school and one of my main interests is journalism, so I'm excited to be here.

Jewelle: I'm Jewelle Gomez. I'm a novelist and a playwright and a poet and also very interested in journalism. So I'm so excited to get to talk to someone who's also interested in journalism. The last ten years I've written and had produced three plays in San Francisco and New York City. Now I'm going back to write a sequel to my vampire novel, "The Gilda Stories," which has been in print for, mmhm, a little over 30 years.

Charlotte: I'd like to know what was your experience like growing up?

Jewelle: We lived in Boston, and we were quite poor.

Jewelle: I was raised by my great grandmother who was part Native American, and her daughter, my grandmother lived nearby. So, those were my two primary influences growing up. I was very fortunate.

YouSpeak Radio 2024 Audio Transcript



My grandmother and my great grandmother were interesting personalities. My grandmother had been a singer and a dancer in her youth, so I got a lot of great stories. My great grandmother was a big reader, so I got to read anything I wanted. Even though we lived in a very poor neighborhood— I went to a really crappy, poor school— I had a lot of privilege in that the people who raised me were incredibly thoughtful and well-read. I was just so interested in them in their lives and how they managed to survive, I ended up, I think, wanting to follow in their footsteps, and because they were such great storytellers, I think that's one of the reasons I became a writer.

Charlotte: So, you were inspired by the people you were surrounded with?

Jewelle: Absolutely. At the time, I don't know that I felt inspired. They were just, the people who told me to be home by 8:00. But as I grew older and listened to my friends responses to their parents or caregivers, I understood that I was in a really fortunate situation because I had the great example of two women. My great grandmother was born in 1883, so understanding how she survived the earliest part of the twentieth century, I understood that there was something about independence that was really significant to her. She used to say, "Yes, I've been a widow for 50 years," and then she gave her a little smile. For my grandmother to be able to tell me stories about being on the road as a dancer and a singer and a woman of color, it became a part of me, that idea of succeeding in whatever it was that I wanted to do. They were definitely an inspiration to me. I had the good fortune of coming of age during the Civil Rights Movement and when I was in college, the women's movement and the anti-war movement. That sense of activism as something that was part of your everyday life, and it was a moment when the culture, or maybe it was the counterculture, was starting to appreciate a lot of the things that had been left behind by the mainstream culture, like women's accomplishments, the accomplishments of people of color. All of the things people are trying to send back into the shadows now, we were starting to uncover them, you know.—That was a real part of my everyday life.

Charlotte: I really resonate with what you just said about it becoming a part of you. Could you describe maybe 1 or 2 moments in particular in your youth that sparked your interest in activism, theater, or writing?

Jewelle: In 1968 when Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated, a lot of TV stations around the country decided to produce television shows specifically aimed at African-Americans. I was in school in Boston, I got a job working at WGBH, the public television station in Boston. It really changed my life. It was like the epicenter of learning about culture I had never really been taught in school. It was a place where we celebrated the arts and music coming out of the African-American community. And we participated in community activism. We were out in the Roxbury and South End communities of Boston quite regularly. I felt like I got a view of what media could accomplish and an understanding of how important arts and culture were to most communities and certainly to poorer communities. From that moment on, my life was really changed. I understood I wanted to be a writer and could be a writer because of that experience. It was everything from the ridiculous, to the sublime. Getting to sit and listen to James Baldwin as we recorded him on a campus with a bunch of students asking him questions. It was like my mind was completely rewired just from listening to him for an hour. To being stuck in a trailer with Smokey Robinson in "The Miracles" when there was a riot outside because people were so excited to see them, and we were supposed to be recording their concert, and trying to reassure Smokey Robinson he wasn't going to be killed by fans who were overly-zealous. It was amazing to understand that you could do something for someone who was, *quote unquote*, "bigger than yourself."

[MUSIC]

Charlotte: Can you go into more detail about your own experience navigating life in America as a Native American, African-American, and lesbian woman?

Jewelle: Layering in all of the identities is really important to me. Audre Lorde, who was my friend and mentor, was very adamant that all of her personalities, all of her identities, were present at all times. That has been important because this is a culture that tries to wrangle you into a box and hopefully you stay in that box, and one box never meets another box. So, I feel it's something I have to be constantly paying attention to. Especially being raised in a community that was very poor, at a school that had very little support from the city, I felt like my class issues were always right there, along with everything else. Being

YouSpeak Radio 2024 Audio Transcript



a lesbian and a woman of color. I felt like I was always on the lookout? When is someone saying something inappropriate? Or when is someone ignoring me? I would say something that I thought was helpful in meetings and have men just talk right over me. Two minutes later, a man says the exact same thing I said, and everyone goes, "Oh, that's perfect!" I think that is so common. I know very few women who haven't had that experience even today.

Charlotte: It's one issue of not being heard, but then it's amplified because of the multiple identities that you hold?

Jewelle: People say this all the time, and it's true. If you're a lesbian or any one of the initials, LGBTQIA, you have to come out all the time. I mean, unless your looks particularly identify you as queer, you have to come out all the time because people make the presumption that you're heterosexual. Sometimes you hear things you really don't think people should be saying and, being a lesbian feminist, I've thought about all of the issues in an intersectional way before the word intersectional was created, so that I can approach the discussion of each of the issues as they come up.

Charlotte: You mentioned how many communities want to put you in a box based on that certain identity and that those two boxes will never touch. In my experience, it's almost the opposite in a way where we almost predict or assume that those boxes will overlap. I owe that to you and your peers for progressing that idea. Would you say you were part of the conceptualization of intersectionality?

Jewelle: Yes, many of the feminist thinkers in the 70s and 80s proposed that the only way that we will make any progress is to start to understand that what happens to one group is also happening to another group and another group, and for us to try to look at how that all comes together. What kind of solutions we should be thinking about. Many years ago, when I worked at WGBH, I was part of an organization about Blacks in broadcasting in the late sixties. And we were having a convocation to figure out what we were going to be called. And the men wanted to be called, you know, "Blacks in Broadcasting." I argued, "Why start in a single lane, when you could say 'People of Color in Broadcasting'?" Because we have our moment in the sun right now, people of color are going to start to do broadcasting as well. And what if we created a whole entity that encompassed all of us; we would be much stronger?" And they were like, "Our problems are so different. We're really different from this one. We're really different from that one." And my theory has been, "Yes, we are all different, but the people who are trying to oppress all of us are the same. It's that same crowd, and if we could look at where our issues meet, we would be much stronger." It's hard to get people to want to work outside of their own specific interests, to understand that you can do more than one thing at once. I was in a criminology class at Northeastern, and the instructor said, "We're going to talk tomorrow about working class immigrants and Black people," and I said, "Excuse me, working class immigrants and what kind of Black people are we going to talk about? Are we going to be talking about working class Black people? Are we going to be talking about upper class Black people? There's no such thing as Black people as a monolith, and you thought it was significant to preface, immigrants with working class, so let's be more specific." I talked for about ten minutes. I could not get this guy to see what I was saying. Of course, that was in the last century because I graduated from undergraduate school in 1971. It's not that different because who we are as people of color is kind of like aliens. We might as well have dropped down from outer space sometimes when you're talking to people. I feel like those are the kinds of things that radicalized me and made me know I had to be listening all of the time. At the same time, you're really listening as opposed to sitting anxiously waiting to pounce on somebody because they make a mistake. There's so much anger at this point in this country that it's almost impossible to hear what people are saying because everybody is so angry and self-righteous. I try to listen with an open heart, and when people say things that are absolutely stupid, I have no problem saying, "Oh no, no, no, no, no, no, that will not stand," but not assuming that it's always going to be bad. If you assume that every time someone speaks to you, they're going to be denigrating you, that's not going to be a happy life. I do believe you can be an activist and go through tough struggles and have a strong inner life that is positive.

[MUSIC]

Charlotte: What are some struggles you faced regarding your identity and intersectionality, or in your work?

YouSpeak Radio 2024 Audio Transcript



Jewelle: I used to be disappointed that my Black lesbian vampire novel was turned down by so many mainstream publishers back in the er- late 80s. However, I have evolved to feel like it was very fortunate that I was published by a lesbian feminist publisher, Firebrand Books, after I was turned down by the big publishers. As an independent press, my book can stay in print forever as it has. That publisher and then the ones who bought the rights subsequent to that, City Lights Books in San Francisco, they do not have to depend on me selling 500,000 copies a year for them to keep my book in print. So in the long run, I got the benefit of being rejected by those presses, so I feel very fortunate, but that was a big hurdle because, it's your writing, it's your ego, and you're feeling like, "I want to be up there with Stephen King." It took me a long time to get over. Two years ago, I won a Legacy Award from the Horror Writers of America, and I was like, "I've only written that one black lesbian vampire novel, but clearly it has a legacy." And I felt like Horror Writers of America really made me appreciate even more that I was published by an independent press, and that I could let go of that disappointment that me and Stephen King were not under the same book publisher. But, on the other hand, I ended up being a playwright in residence at the LGBT Theater in San Francisco for the last ten years, and they commissioned and produced three of my plays. That does not happen that often. It's very, very hard for playwrights to get their work looked at and published and produced. So I feel very fortunate to have landed in a place where a producer is interested in my work. And that's not to say that I haven't had opposition— certainly I have— but it doesn't seem to have dampened my spirits.

Charlotte: What drew you to writing about vampire stories?

Jewelle: Dracula, was always interesting to me because it was such a complex character. I've probably seen various versions of *Dracula* at least a hundred times, including on Broadway and in films. Then, I- I read Anne Rice's *Interview with a Vampire*, and I was mesmerized by the idea of how a vampire maintains what they brought from their human life, and the complexities of that, psychologically, morally. I didn't start out thinking I was going to write vampire fiction, but I ended up doing that, because of an incident on the street where these guys were harassing me. This was in the 80s, and they didn't think they were doing anything particularly weird. They were just interrupting me talking on the telephone, to tell me all the things they wanted to do to me in really vulgar language, and I think they were drunk. I don't know what happened. I don't know if I'd had my vitamins that day. But I was furious, and I reamed them. I turned around and I just started screaming. It was in Manhattan. It was in the evening. It was on a residential street. It wasn't like I was on Broadway, and I just started screaming and really went off on them. One of the guys was sober enough to say, "This bitch is crazy. Get out of here!" and he dragged his friend away. But, the adrenaline has shot through my body. They could have killed me. They ran away. I went home. The adrenaline was, like, "RARAH," coursing through me, so I just sat down at the typewriter and started writing. I wrote about a woman who gets assaulted on the street and kills this guy by throwing him two blocks into the Hudson River. Hahaha! Then, I finally started thinking, practical that I am, "How could you have the power to do that? What kind of person would be able to do that? What kind of character? Oh, it could be a vampire!" and it took off from there. I wrote the story as if these guys attack this girl on the street not knowing she was a vampire, and he did not live to regret it. And then, the *Village Voice* published the story in their fiction section, and it went from there. And I didn't know that people would be so interested, partially because it's about a woman who escaped from slavery and becomes a vampire, and it's a vampire of a different kind, you know, it's a much more humanistic vampire, a feminist vampire, not a predatory vampire as we have seen. I think people got really interested in that difference. I had no idea that was going to happen. Haha! And I was reading from it at salons and poetry readings or fiction readings all around Manhattan and Brooklyn, and my character, Gilda, had a fan club before there was a book. And I used to hold the record for the person who had the most lesbians' cats named "Gilda." Wherever I'd go to a reading: "I named my cat Gilda!" It was very sweet, so I said, "Okay, I must be doing something that is interesting." And then universities started holding classes on speculative fiction, both writing and in discussing the genre. And Feminists had published many, many speculative fiction stories as part of feminism from, uh, Wanda Ground to Joanna Russ. It was a tradition in the feminist community that I think I just kind of fell into.

Charlotte: It's so interesting how you came to write the Gilda story. How do you translate your own struggles into your work?

YouSpeak Radio 2024 Audio Transcript



Jewelle: I think there are so many parallels among all kinds of stories. Whether you're a lesbian or a person of color, the first thing that writing teachers used to say is, "Write what you know," and that was misunderstood to be "Write about people who are just like you." "Write what you know" is essentially saying, "the emotional and interior life that you have is very specific to you, but it could also apply to other people." When I started to write my play about James Baldwin, I wasn't quite sure where I was going to go with it. Then, I met someone who told me about when James Baldwin started writing *Giovanni's Room*, which was his second novel about two white men in Europe who became lovers, and it was a very tragic story. James Baldwin was told many times that this was a problematic novel for an African-American civil rights activist to be writing. When I heard that, I thought, "Oh, my goodness, this is the pushback I got when I would tell people, 'Well, actually, I'm going to turn my vampire stories into a novel.'" I heard lesbians say, "Why would you want to connect lesbianism to vampires, predators?" I had African Americans say, "Why would you want to connect Black people with predators?" I suddenly realized, "Oh, gosh, I have something in common with James Baldwin. How likely is that?" As tenuous as that connection was, it really gave me an insight into looking at Baldwin and that he was twenty four when he was writing *Giovanni's Room* and that, of course, it could be devastating to be told it could ruin his career, so I got very interested in that connection. That became the core of the play I wrote. You can always find some kernel of emotional truth that connects with other people and whoever you're writing about, I also think that's true in journalism. Whatever story you're going to be writing, you've got to find whatever emotional truth in there resonates for you, or you're not going to be interested in writing the story. What do you believe is the importance in sharing your own experiences, your own messages through literary means or arts? Humans learn in different kinds of ways, and I think we learn a lot in ways that are not directly educational. I think we learn a lot from our reading. I read *Dostoyevsky* in high school, and it terrified me, but I learned about sin more so than my classes in Catholicism. I learned about pain. In college, I read the *Dune* books, and I learned so much about appropriation of cultures, the power of desert cultures. And the same with theater. People learn a lot when they're laughing. So when I'm writing plays, I'm thinking a lot about, "How do I get people to open their mouths and laugh and really take in a different perspective?" Fortunately, each of these plays, of this trilogy, involve laughter because Baldwin was the wittiest person ever. My second play about Alberta Hunter, the witticisms of a lesbian alone on the road singing in the 1930s are endless, and my last play about my grandmother and her retired vaudevillians, they were performers, so they're performing all the time. So, I feel like those two genres offer the opportunity for people to get in another world outside of their own in a way that doesn't feel like hard work. And I think people feel a lot more when they're taking it in through fiction or theater.

Charlotte: I feel like we had a full circle moment, and it's just like, "Wow."

[MUSIC]

Charlotte: Alongside the reflection of yourself or others in your works I was wondering if your works have any messages to your audience?

Jewelle: I'm always trying to deliver that sense of possibility. I don't want to say optimism because optimism sounds too *namby pamby*. That sense of whatever time you have in this world, you get to do something. It doesn't matter how small it is as long as you're consciously doing something. You're contributing to the way the world can progress forward. I think one of the big problems is most people think, "Oh, well, you know, what do I have to give? I don't have any money, so I can't give any money. I don't have any time. I don't have any expertise. It'll be fine. Somebody else will do it." I think that is totally the wrong way for us to look at social change. Social change to me, it's like a relay race. Each of us is in charge of our own little section, and if we do the best we can and move that baton to the next person after we've done the best that we can, we've contributed. I think my writing is meant to show what those possibilities are. You know, Baldwin, he was an incredibly smart, young man with incredible talents. He could have been killed on the street at the age of eighteen, or sixteen, but he survived, and he figured out what to do with himself. That his writing could change a generation, my generation, and some subsequent generations, just because he wanted to write his stories. And that he was aware what he wrote was going to hold some weight. He did the best he could, and we all benefited from that. That's the story I want to come through: if you do your bit and you do it sincerely and consciously, you can contribute to changing the world, even if you're not a vampire. Hahah!

YouSpeak Radio 2024 Audio Transcript



Charlotte: You mentioned a lot of people throughout this interview, like Audre Lorde and Baldwin. Would you say there's anyone else that had an influence to you?

Jewelle: Audre because I studied with her, and she encouraged me a lot. Baldwin because I read so much of his work, and the first time I ever heard him speak, my life was changed. Alexis DeVoe, who I also took a writing class with, meant a lot to me in shaping my identity as a writer. Joanna Russ, was a speculative fiction writer and also encouraged me. E.M. Bronner, who's since passed away, was one of the first writing teachers. She was a powerful writer and thinker and believer in women's spirits. Octavia Butler had a delightful influence on me because she was the first woman of color I knew who wrote speculative fiction. That gave me more permission to step into that world. There's so many other activists who were not writers who I really admired. Activists who were doing that hard day-to-day work in communities. Fannie Lou Hamer, I still stand in awe of her. There are always people who could influence us, and the thing is for us to look for them whenever we're feeling down. We forget how many people have done some really good and hard work before we came along, and they can be very helpful.

Charlotte: Hearing you talk about all those people was very inspiring. You also encompass those attributes that you take from your influences, and I will always remember this interview.

[MUSIC]

Charlotte: What is something you'd like to share with younger generations of not only the LGBTQ+ community, but also communities of color and other marginalized communities?

Jewelle: Sometimes it feels like there's so little to hope. It feels like, "Oh, there's nothing out there for me. I'm not going to be able to get a job except at some burger joint," or, "I'm never going to be able to raise enough money to live the American Dream." I believe it's what's inside of us. You may not be able to get a job. You might get a Ph.D. in poetry, and you're never going to get a job, but if you have a focus on what you think is important, both in your own life and in terms of what you'd like to see changed in the world, you can be fulfilled. What is it you need to do to be fulfilled? And what is it you need to do to contribute to making the world better? If you can decide those things, you can do those things. For me, it was working in philanthropy. I totally fell into it and realized I can make a huge difference and it made going to work every Monday morning valuable to me. I hope people think about how much is within their control. Decide what you want to do in the next ten years. You may do something totally different. But if you start out with an idea, it's going to be interesting. You're going to encounter some interesting things. I'm wondering how you came to want to work in journalism. For me, it was because journalism was a huge part of changing the world in the sixties. If it wasn't for broadcast journalists in the sixties, people in the North would never have seen what was going on. People in the West would never have seen what was going on in the Jim Crow South and North. So, since journalism has such a tenuous connection to reality these days, how you came to want to participate?

Charlotte: In ninth grade uh, I was put into the journalism class. At first, it was, "Oh, this is a writing class. Cool. I'll take it." Quickly, it grew on me, and I enjoyed writing articles. Even though the newspaper at my school, it would be better if we had a bigger crowd of people reading it, I began to take pride in the articles I was writing. When someone did mention, "Hey, I read that article," it was good to know that I was sharing something with my community, even if it was something small like our field being renovated.

Jewelle: That is a great feeling because you can see how your words touch other people, really make a difference in the world. Good for you.

Charlotte: Thank you. I enjoyed our conversation, more than enjoyed. What you shared with me really resonated and connected to me, not only because I'm interested in similar things like journalism or writing or the arts, but also just navigating life. This was a really valuable conversation.

Jewelle: Your enthusiasm and your focus really give me a kind of spark. You know, that's the reason I do anything, is to listen to someone like you, so thank you. That was fun.

Interview Concludes.

YouSpeak Radio 2024 Audio Transcript



[MUSIC]

YouSpeak Outro:

Jasper: This is...

Jasper, Milo, Kelly, Madeline, Charlotte, Ameer: YouSpeak Radio!

Jasper: We are Jasper Chen,

Milo: Milo Drake,

Madeline: Madeleine Lee,

Kelly: Kelly Hsu,

Charlotte: Charlotte Ly,

Ameer: Ameer Flores.

Jasper: With generous support from the Dwight Stuart Youth Fund, an intergenerational project by One Institute and The Outwords Archive on Tongva land.