



Episode 7 Transcript: Making Friends with Aminatou Sow

- Ai-jen Poo: Welcome to Sunstorm, where we get real about what's happening in the world and what we are doing about it, because we are the light in the storm.
- Alicia Garza: Hey, this is Alicia. Today we have something a little different for you. A while ago Ai-Jen and I hosted a live Sunstorm recording at the Sundance Film Festival in beautiful Park City, Utah. The amazing Aminatou Sow joined us on stage. You might have heard her voice before. She's the co-host of Call Your Girlfriend, an amazing podcast with Ann Friedman. She's the co-founder of Tech LadyMafia, and she's an incredibly smart and insightful person who has so many inspiring things to say. We had the best time ever talking to her, and we hope you enjoy every minute of it. Here's Aminatou.
- Alicia Garza: Are you ready for our special guests? You better.
- Aminatou Sow: This is so embarrassing.
- Alicia Garza: No, we loved you so much and we're just going to shine all over you. Shine, shine, shine.
- Aminatou Sow: I feel very loved and supported, so thank you.
- Alicia Garza: As you should because we love you. I told you we're going to be your weighted blanket.
- Alicia Garza: So let's jump in. Shall we?
- Aminatou Sow: Let's do it.
- Alicia Garza: I'm going to start with talking about one of my pet peeves, which is about how we talk about self care. I love a massage. I love a good hot tub. I love all those things. But you know what I like even more than all those things? Winning.
- Aminatou Sow: Yeah.
- Alicia Garza: And one of the things I think that drives me kind of nuts about how we talk about self care is that sometimes we say self care is a thing we have to do. We have to go away to take care of ourselves and then come back and we're going to be fully whole. I just don't believe that's how it goes. I think that we are



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constantly under a whole lot of pressure around a whole lot of things and that one of the best ways to take care of ourselves is yes, get your neck rubbed and do all the things, get your chiropractic adjustments. But also, can we change the world for our people? Cause I think we'd all feel a lot better.

Aminatou Sow: I agree with you about that. I think my number one pet peeve is actually people who don't read books. That is my pet peeve and the self care thing 100% fits into that because everyone talks about self care, but no one can tell you where self care comes from. It's actually a very important political feminist idea that you should probably read about Audre Lorde and know what that means. I think that it's just one of the ways that illiteracy really, - it's people who don't read and also capitalism really disrupts ideas that are revolutionary. Yeah, you're right, it's like you're not supposed to isolate yourself and then you come back into society, who is that working for?

Ai-jen Poo: Right, no one can do that really.

Aminatou Sow: Right. Also, it doesn't have to cost money, which was another thing. I think that it also cannot be divorced from what you think the goal of your life is. I think that for a lot of us, the goal of our life is freedom. It's freedom for ourselves and for other people. When I think about taking care of myself, and sometimes it's small ways and sometimes it's big ways, it really is because this is the only resource I have. It's this body. It's this mind, this is what I have, and if I'm not a good steward of this resource, then I will not be my best for my community.

Alicia Garza: I'm so here for this.

Aminatou Sow: Sure let's get our nails done if that's what it takes for you to feel good about yourself, but also how the fuck are you going to show up for all of the things that you need to show up for? Because everything is so hard right now. It's hard, but we have the capacity for it. So let's do what you need to do but show up.

Alicia Garza: That's true. Well, I've been known to get my nails done on a conference call and the reason I'm doing that is because I want to win. So speaking of winning, I know that you have been in this work for a long time. You've been shaping our culture, our society, our movements for a hot minute. From your perspective, what has been your biggest win, and how has winning helped you take care of yourself?



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- Aminatou Sow: A lot of the wins that I'm really focused on right now are wins within my own community. Thinking about the person that I was ten years ago and where I want it to be and the fact that I'm doing all of those things now and I'm doing them with the help of my friends and the help of people who invested in me. Because there was such a pervasive sense, I think in your twenties, maybe it was just me, but there's kind of no one to help you. Who's going to mentor me? Who's going to give me things. Who's going to hold my hand. How am I going to get to these things that I want? I think that really early on I was lucky to be in a community of people who figured out that no one will come save you, but we could probably save ourselves together?
- Aminatou Sow: Instead of looking up or looking down, we started looking around and you know, it was like, who are my peers and who do I want to build this life with? So, I think a lot about the work that I do with Ann Friedman is a big win because she's been such an amazing collaborator, also is an amazing friend to me. I remember all the conversations that we had a decade ago and now we're doing all those things. I am shook to find out what we're going to be do in another decade together. I think that everybody probably has someone like that, that is someone that you were really like, okay, we're going to get to somewhere together. So you know, look at you two.
- Ai-jen Poo: Yeah, exactly. I was just thinking about that, but say a little more about that because you know when we think about what it takes to win, I mean you talk about it's been years, right, with Ann and a lot of hard times and it sounds glamorous when you're at the finish line and you're winning and you're feeling like you're winning and it took a lot to get there.
- Aminatou Sow: There is such a way of not understanding that this entire conversation actually happens internally. It's not about glam, it's not about what you think traditional markers of success can be for other people, but for me it really is about what are the goals that I set out for myself, and where am I at and my goal is never, I want to be on a panel at a conference where they're-
- Alicia Garza: You better tell the whole truth.
- Aminatou Sow: You know what I mean? But I think about that is a truth that is worth talking about. I don't say that because I'm ungrateful about the opportunities I got. I say it because I think that this is one way that people get really disappointed.



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That feeling of, Oh I always wanted this. Why doesn't it feel good? Well, because actually that was not the thing that you should have wanted. Right? It was something else.

Aminatou Sow: And to your point about work taking a really long time, that has been actually very heartening for me. It's a thing that is carrying me through this political moment that we have, is that everything that is worth doing takes so much time. To my point about reading, this is why reading is so important-

Alicia Garza: Fundamental at that.

Aminatou Sow: Fundamentally. I've been reading so much about women's suffrage, both the white women's suffrage and our suffrage. That shit took 100 years. None of the white ladies were... I think there was one woman who was alive from Seneca Falls, who got to see white women get the right to vote. When I think about that, it's very sobering because it's like, okay I want to win, but I also know that this win might not happen in my lifetime and it doesn't mean that I don't have to fight for it.

Aminatou Sow: Part of being a really good ancestor is also just that. It's saying, Oh I am going to fight like hell for the life that I want, but really if it doesn't happen for me, I want it to happen for someone who comes after me because they deserve that too. The only reason that I am alive and I get to live this life is because other women put their lives on the line for me. It shouldn't be lost on us. It's not to say that whatever this moment is that we're living in, it's easier or it's whatever, but the world has always been ending. Things are always hard. I grew up in West Africa under three dictatorships. So actually Trump is very business as usual for me. I'm like, oh yeah.

Aminatou Sow: This feels like Nigeria in 1992. You can do it, but I think that there is something about pulling yourself a little bit outside of how you feel right now and contextualizing it, both in a global perspective and in a historical perspective and understanding that actually it's not abnormal. It's when we are having these very big wins about abortion or Civil Rights. Those tiny moments, that is abnormal because that is not what the world wants for us. I think that it's why it's so important to celebrate the wins, but also remember that peace and prosperity is hanging by a thread that's all-



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- Ai-jen Poo: How do you celebrate the wins? Because I think that's so important. Whether big or small. Just noting that we are making progress, we can move forward. Right? How do you celebrate it?
- Aminatou Sow: I think that we have to shout about them. We have to remind each other about them when times are hard. I think that it's showing your joy really is a political act because some of the days are dark. I think also, even the fact that people that you don't respect can say Black Lives Matter is insane to me that that is a... But you know what I mean?
- Alicia Garza: Yes, I do. I know what you mean.
- Aminatou Sow: Sometimes I'll be watching the sports channels and then someone will say, "Black Lives Matter." What? This is happening on ESPN? When it seeps into mainstream culture, it seems it was so easy. Actually it wasn't, it was never easy. I know that you knew this, but I think that it is so worth reminding yourself of that. But that's also why you do the work. So that it will seamlessly just come out of someone's mouth whose never picked up a book before. This idiot knows. Now onto the next thing.
- Alicia Garza: Speaking of being onto the next thing, I wear this excellent, iridescent button on one of my favorite bomber jackets that says "Shine Theory." Can you talk a little bit about what that is so that everybody else knows why I'm wearing this button. Because people ask me all the time and I'm like, you don't listen to Call Your Girlfriend do you?
- Aminatou Sow: You're probably shilling some brand. Shine theory is the organizing principle with my friendship with Ann Friedman, and really my friendship with so many people when we were babies in D.C. trying to figure out what we were going to do with our lives, we would tell each other all the time like "I don't shine and if you don't shine." It was just a reminder in that moment of my wins are your wins. I want you to do good. Your losses are my losses. I am here for you. It really is also just born out of voices pushing back that, in pop culture at least, you hear a lot that women are competitive. When women are competitive, it's called the word bitchy, but when men are competitive they're very driven.
- Ai-jen Poo: They're leaders.



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- Aminatou Sow: They're whatever. Which, I find very fascinating. We could talk about patriarchy for days.
- Alicia Garza: Listen, that's a whole episode.
- Aminatou Sow: The thing about this is that it's a message that you get very young. I always, from a young age, knew that it was bullshit, and when I started looking around in my life I was like actually, the people who support me all the time are the women in my life. It doesn't mean that they're not- sometimes we want the exact same thing. Literally, I work at the same job as them. There is one promotion and one of us will get it, and I saw that scenario happen so many times where the other person would be so supportive. I didn't get the job. Another woman got the job and she, years later, would put me up for that same promotion. Not everything in life has to be zero sum, but there is a way to really pick your people and say "we are going to come up together." You have to build a cohort because you just can't be alone.
- Ai-jen Poo: Can we, round of applause for this? Beautiful. I feel like this should be the organizing logic of our future. The first time I heard Shine Theory was when we arrived in Washington, D.C. on an orange and pink bus with Supermajority. Supermajority is a new women's organization that Alicia and I started together last year. We're in the process of building the largest woman to woman voter mobilization program in the history of this country in time for the elections. We were on a 19 city organizing tour around the country and we arrived in D.C. to meet with the freshmen women members of Congress who had just been elected. They basically introduced themselves as the Shine Theory generation of Congress. That was the first time I heard about Shine Theory. It was their way of talking about how they believe in a different kind of political culture and they're making it real. They're leading differently. It was so powerful. Thank you because this is the sister right here who gave us the words, the language to do that.
- Alicia Garza: Yeah. Don't be trying to credit it to somebody else now y'all know. Give the sister her shine now. You know what I'm saying? So, that's what it means also. Right? Shine theory is also like give people their propers.
- Aminatou Sow: It's like give people their credit. It doesn't take anything away from you to acknowledge someone else. It doesn't take anything from you to help people



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with your resources. It also doesn't mean that you have to do it for everyone. It means that you need to find a group of people that you are accountable to.

Ai-jen Poo: That's right.

Aminatou Sow: Because the wave of this idea gets distorted a lot, is that anyone who stops you in a hotel lobby, you have to drop everything for and actually, if I don't have a way of staying accountable to you and to the work that you do, I actually don't owe you anything. Part of having stakes is that you are mutually accountable to each other and you are doing work to shift the perspective of so many things that you are a part of.

Alicia Garza: That is like so deeply important. I want to get it tattooed across my forehead and everybody else's. Let's dive into Shine Theory as it relates to relationships between women. You talked about this a little bit where you said that when women are competitive, right, that we're called bitchy or if women want to go for the same thing, then suddenly we're trying to like take each other out, but that men kind of get proper for doing that. There's a whole theory around that. It's called patriarchy. Let's move on.

Ai-jen Poo: Never heard of it.

Alicia Garza: The reality is what you're describing, which I'm so grateful for, is really how women have been able to be the light in the storm by really saying to each other, it's all of us or none of us, right? Like we can't get ahead if somebody else's getting left behind. So can we talk about why, in this political moment, it might be a little bit important for us to invest in Shine Theory?

Aminatou Sow: I think one of the reasons that I talk about this a lot is because, I cannot relate, but I have heard the message that like a lot of people, some of them women, are very embarrassed or ashamed to say that they're ambitious because that word has such a negative connotation. I'm sorry, I'm a very ambitious person. I'm not ashamed of saying it. I think that if you do anything the work that we do, you are also an ambitious person. Yeah, sure, you're working for freedom; ambition. There you go. And this is a little bit of tough love, but when things are hard like this, it's not a time for shy people. Are you going to step up to the plate and I'm not trying to get into a fight about introvert, extrovert because that's not what that means. I'm actually a very introverted person.



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- Aminatou Sow: It truly is like, are you going to step up. The world is on fire and what are you going to do? I think that the solidarity behind Shine Theory is one reminding you that you don't have to do anything alone. But it also, I think, is a corrective to this idea that just because we're all women we have to get along. If you know anything about movements, nobody fucking gets along.
- Alicia Garza: Hello.
- Aminatou Sow: But that's by design. It is normal that we don't get along. If we all got along, all of our ideas would be bad and we would never get anything done because then you are just in a group thing. You are supposed to be in a very messy kind of enterprise of people when you do the work that we do. There are very many ways and not to get along with someone and everything does not have to be disagreement. So I really reject to this feeling of like everything has to be all roses and hunky Dory or whatever. No, the world's on fire. I don't have time to be nice to you.
- Aminatou Sow: Also, some things are not personal, but I really think that if you start thinking of the people in your life really as a cohort or as people that you are building power with together, because none of this is new and it's like a few fancy private schools are about this. Here's one powerful person, put all your children together and we're just going to hoard the power. The idea of Shine Theory is the same, except that we don't hoard at the power, but we are going to bring all of it in and we're going to redistribute the power.
- Alicia Garza: You know what, I'm so here for this.
- Aminatou Sow: So, we're not reinventing the wheel here. Rich people have great ideas. Take them and run with them. I think that I need something that gets me out of bed every day and I need something that will give me even the tiniest amount of hope and just knowing that when I get out of bed I can trust that the people that I am organizing with and the people that I am in conversation with, they are also just doing their tiny part and that there is an explicit buy in from all of us that we are not trying to take each other down and in fact we're all trying to elevate each other's voices. That gets me out of bed every single day.
- Alicia Garza: Hey!



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- Ai-jen Poo: Beautiful.
- Alicia Garza: Give it up for that.
- Ai-jen Poo: You inspire us so much.
- Ai-jen Poo: One of the reasons why we really wanted to have you on was just how much the frameworks and the mental models that you've developed with Ann around how women should lead and do lead right differently. We're not trying to achieve equality in a culture and system. We don't want to be equal in the context completely designed by men. We want to redo how we do things. What a beautiful framework to help us do that. We're also just super inspired by your friendship with Ann and the fact that you're just really going in on this question of friendship because, I mean for women I think it's a huge reason, how I get out of the bed every day is this friendship and so many others.
- Alicia Garza: Ditto.
- Ai-jen Poo: When I think about what I need to shine through the storms, absolutely friendship comes up, but it's not all always hunky Dory and it's as deep and complicated as humans are. I know you all have thought a lot about it. Can you share a little bit, with us, about anything you feel like our listeners should start to think about. If we're talking about shining through the storms, increasing amounts of chaos, what's the role of friendship, and how do we think about friendship in new ways that help us do that?
- Aminatou Sow: I mean, friendship is a site of politics for everyone. Whether your friend looks exactly like you or they are different from you or whatever, that work is political work. It is to love someone that is not your blood relation and as someone that you are not trying to build this traditional idea of a heterosexual family with. That is politics. I think that, for me, when I feel the best in all of my friendships is when I both feel I am giving a lot and I am being challenged a lot at the same time because every idea of how I am supposed to love someone is challenged in that moment. All of my selfishness is laid bare. All of my fears and my hopes, and you really kind of do it on a prayer.
- Aminatou Sow: Our institutions do not support friendship. Like you can meet somebody tomorrow, and go to Las Vegas and marry them and the government will give



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you a tax break. You can be friends with someone for 25 years and if you're at the hospital they might not be able to come visit you. I think that we have been thinking about this a lot because we do a show that is explicitly about friendship. We are a publicly known friend pair but also-

Alicia Garza: And you wrote a book.

Aminatou Sow: We wrote a book then it's out in July. Can't wait to tell it to you about it.

Alicia Garza: What's called?

Aminatou Sow: It's called Big Friendship. I think that we, and I'm sure that you two have the same thing, it's like you are this friend group that people know publicly, but there is also the private story of your friendship that is something that it's not up for consumption. It's something that you protect very fiercely.

Alicia Garza: Yes we do.

Aminatou Sow: It has its own complications because we are all human beings. I think that a lot of the work that Ann and I do is really about telling people that our friendship is actually not special at all. The reason that people relate to it so much is because they have this friendship somewhere else, and we really just want to start a conversation about what it means to be accountable to someone in this way. Because again, it's really not supported by our institutions. It's not really supported by society. It is an investment in someone else, and how do you think through that and how do you do that and we think that by having a public conversation about it, we can really bring to light a lot of issues that people are muddling through.

Ai-jen Poo: Why haven't we had a more of a public conversation about it?

Aminatou Sow: Because people expect that friendship is easy. I think for women especially, there are all these messages about for work it's very much like, Oh you got to put your time in and for a partner it's, you've got to put yourself out there. But women are supposed to be very good at friendship. You just know how to make friends, which is not even true for a lot of people. A lot of people struggle in making friends when they're younger. A lot of people struggle when they're adults and there is just this idea that it's easy all the time and so when things get



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hard you also take it very- it takes us outside proportion because you were always messaged that it was supposed to be easy, but guess what? If you say that someone is your friend and we use the term chosen family a lot, if someone is your family, the key word there is family. Family is complicated as fuck.

Alicia Garza: Tell the whole truth.

Aminatou Sow: Great, this is what we're doing. You're trying to model how to do this thing, but a lot of it is honestly patriarchy. It is destabilizing to patriarchy when people choose to have strong platonic bonds because capitalism cannot play a role there. The state doesn't really have a place to regulate, and we don't talk about it out loud enough to know. The thing that we've been really blessed by is that by writing this book, we are learning so much about other people's friendships and we're like, great. Everyone is negotiating their boundaries differently. What if we all talked it because all of the struggles that we have are the same struggles that other people have. So it would be nice to know.

Alicia Garza: On this note, y'all get this book. Big Friendship?

Aminatou Sow: Big Friendship.

Alicia Garza: Okay. Can we give it up for Aminatou.

Alicia Garza: So we could be doing this all the rest of the day. Thank you so much for coming out [crosstalk 00:24:12] to Sunstorm at Sundance. I am Alicia Garza.

Ai-jen Poo: And I'm Ai-Jen Poo.

Alicia Garza: We really loved having you all here tonight. If you want to hear more of this kind of conversation, go ahead and download Sunstorm anywhere you can get podcasts.

Ai-jen Poo: It's free.99.

Alicia Garza: Free.99 on Apple, Spotify, Google, all the things, and you can also of course follow us at Sunstorm pod or at aijenp and chasinggarza. It's been real. Bye, Thank you.



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- Alicia Garza: Sunstorm is a project of the National Domestic Workers Alliance in collaboration with Participant. Sunstorm is executive produced by Alicia Garza, Ai-Jen Poo, Kristina Mevs-Apgar, and Jess Morales Rocketto. Sunstorm is produced by Amy S. Choi and Rebecca Lehrer of The Mash-Up Americans. Producers are Jocelyn Gonzales, Shelby Sandlin, Mary Phillips-Sandy, and Mia Warren. Original music composed by Jen Kwok and Jody Shelton.
- Ai-jen Poo: Do you have any associations with rats given that we're in the year of the rat now?
- Aminatou Sow: Happy Lunar New Year. I'm also a New Yorker, so I am surrounded by rats. I'm like, I don't need this. Okay.