



Episode 8 Transcript: Being 100% Yourself with Dawn-Lyen Gardner

- Alicia Garza: Welcome to Sunstorm, where we get real about what's happening in the world and what we're doing about it, because we are the light in the storm.
- Ai-jen Poo: Hi, this is Ai-jen. Today, we have something a little different for you. A little while ago, Alicia and I hosted a live recording of Sunstorm at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. The incredible Dawn-Lyen Gardner joined us on stage. Dawn is a committed activist and has been canvassing with us in Georgia and involved in so many organizations like Women for Women International, Harness, Inspire Justice, Reform L.A. Jails, Time's Up, and so many more. She's also the star of a little show called Queen Sugar.
- Ai-jen Poo: We had the best time talking to her and we're so excited to be able to share this conversation with all of you. This conversation was recorded at the Nimoy Studio, at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, which believes in the promise of art and ideas to illuminate our lives and build a more just world. Thank you so much to Claudia Bestor and the whole team at the Hammer, here's Dawn.
- Ai-jen Poo: How are you doing?
- Dawn-Lyen: I'm so good.
- Ai-jen Poo: I'm so happy you're here.
- Dawn-Lyen: I'm so happy I'm here too.
- Alicia Garza: I'm so happy you're here. Okay-
- Dawn-Lyen: I'm sort of fan-girling out, you guys.
- Alicia Garza: No, no.
- Dawn-Lyen: I know, I know. It's weird, but I am, because first of all, you are Sheroes. Like, that's just true. I play one.
- Ai-jen Poo: No.



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- Dawn-Lyen: You are the real thing.
- Alicia Garza: I'm not going to let you get away with that, but we're going to move into it. But I'm going to let you finish, like Kanye.
- Dawn-Lyen: Uh huh. (affirmative)
- Dawn-Lyen: But second of all, I was thinking about, and I was like, "Oh my gosh, Ai-jen and Alicia, I'm sort of their baby. If they had a baby I'd be it."
- Alicia Garza: I thought about that in the dressing room!
- Ai-jen Poo: I know! I was like, "Is that why we like each other so much?" [crosstalk 00:02:07] So, I'm very happy to be your mom and mom.
- Dawn-Lyen: Look at spirit working. Check this out. This is a real thing.
- Alicia Garza: So, Queen Sugar, that's my show. Like, really, when I watched this, I feel like my mom. She'd put her hand in the air and say, "That's my show!" Right? That's how I feel about Queen Sugar. Shout out to Ava.
- Dawn-Lyen: Absolutely.
- Alicia Garza: And all the amazing actors on the show, all the people who contribute to making it what it is. And you are one of those people.
- Alicia Garza: So, you play Charlie in this show. And can I tell a quick story?
- Dawn-Lyen: Yeah.
- Alicia Garza: So, we mentioned that we door knocked together in Atlanta, Georgia for Stacey Abrams, who is still the Governor of Georgia. Just want to make sure we're all on the same page.



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- Alicia Garza: And, what was so special was walking up to doors with you and Omar Dorsey, who plays Hollywood on the show, and people's responses. They were like, my mom. They opened the door.
- Alicia Garza: "Yes! What's up, Charlie? How you doing, Hollywood?" And really draw it out too. "Hollywood!"
- Dawn-Lyen: Oh, he got more attention.
- Alicia Garza: It was like a thing. It was a whole thing.
- Alicia Garza: So, this tells you how popular the show is and there's a reason for that, right? It's a beautiful show about the intricacies and complexities of black life in the South. It's running through with all of these beautiful themes around land and racism, the legacy of racism and the very present of racism.
- Alicia Garza: So, tell me what Charlie Bordelon means to you.
- Dawn-Lyen: She was a challenge for me. I was so excited to play her and it wasn't because of what I think, what is shiny and sexy about her, right? Her power and her bad-assery. All of that is so right on the surface. It's accessible and it's enticing as an actor. So, that was the sort of on the surface, but for me, underneath that was this crisis. Underneath all the perfection, or at least all the presentation, there was actually something that was fractured. And until her life crumbled, she would never see it and she would never get to it.
- Alicia Garza: Well, that's kind of deep. That's kind of like America.
- Dawn-Lyen: Yeah. Yeah. And now, she's this giant opportunity to know myself.
- Alicia Garza: So, Charlie, when you first meet her in the show, she is an entertainment attorney.
- Dawn-Lyen: She's a professional manager. Sports manager.



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- Alicia Garza: Yeah.
- Dawn-Lyen: Her man is a famous basketball player who gets caught up in a scandal. He's accused of sexual assault.
- Alicia Garza: Yes. So, what actually he does, which is not talked about enough in our culture, he facilitates [crosstalk 00:05:31] a sexual assault.
- Dawn-Lyen: He facilitates a sexual assault and doesn't intervene.
- Alicia Garza: He more than doesn't intervene. He literally helps it happen. He completely provides the space for it to happen.
- Dawn-Lyen: So, Charlie shows up in this community where she comes from, her family comes from. And she is like a fish out of water, and now, she is still the bad-ass that she was when she showed up, but she also gets active. Yeah?
- Alicia Garza: Yeah.
- Dawn-Lyen: Part of Charlie's journey in a lot of ways, is like it's the learning about herself, but it's what she does with that. Right?
- Alicia Garza: That's right.
- Dawn-Lyen: That really helps to shape that story.
- Alicia Garza: That's it. What do you think Charlie's story has to tell us and America about who we are now and who we can become?
- Dawn-Lyen: So much of it is about her revealing, especially for the people in power who they really are to themselves. Part of what she's asking us to do is to face our history and face the legacy of white supremacy and patriarchy. Like, if I were to name it, that's what she's really doing and it's interesting because she doesn't, it's not named in the show. Very seldom is she like, "This is some white supremacist, racist bullshit." Like, very seldom does she actually call it that.



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Dawn-Lyen: I mean, I don't think she has and I'm glad for that.

Alicia Garza: It's more powerful.

Dawn-Lyen: Once you hear words that had been used academically, that had been used to name necessarily, but they've now named it and they'd been in conversation. They can lose the emotionality and the sort of visceral primal energy and I think her suffering at times, especially when it comes to her family and what's happening in terms of the power dynamics in her community. It comes from a visceral knowing of her worth. And so, I think part of what she is, is unapologetically powerful. And she is a call. It is like a call to step into and fully inhabit that part of yourself. That's what I think she's doing is calling us to ourselves.

Dawn-Lyen: Anybody else hearing that call?

Alicia Garza: It's a call to come into ourselves. I heard that, come through.

Ai-jen Poo: So, you're an artist and you clearly create your art with your lens as an activist, as well. And you've talked a lot about the power of storytelling to change the world and clearly, you inhabit Charlie in a way, that has that intention to it. Was there a story that transformed you or that you draw from when you think about your power as a storyteller?

Dawn-Lyen: I remember there was this play that no one's going to know called Sorrows and Rejoicings and that's an Athol Fugard play. And Athol Fugard is a South African playwright. And there was a character that I saw on stage, she was mixed race. And I remember her monologue hitting my body and feeling like for the first time, I feel understood about how freakish I feel. And it was finally being said and I was already in a Julliard then. If I were to mark one moment, I think that was it, where I understood fundamentally without even being able to language it, what happened for me. And now, I feel like I can language it and I feel like I've been searching for people who have also taken apart in every way, including scientifically. Like John Powell and in the Haas Institute.



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- Dawn-Lyen: And just even some of the studies out there around the parts the brain that light up when details in story happen. Then those parts of the brain literally tell the person, "Oh, I'm seeing a human. | And that previous to that moment, they weren't lighting up. And that kind of like, evidence for how story is transformative.
- Ai-jen Poo: Yeah, and I mean, I think about your activism and some of the work that you've done to shine a light and to humanize different issues. What are you working on right now that you feel really passionate about?
- Dawn-Lyen: You know, I've been sort of in this conversation around incarceration in Los Angeles, in particular in Los Angeles, and it has really brought me to a confronting of myself. Yeah. Because the interplay between immigration and incarceration and the history of it, it feels like I'm answering questions that I've had since I was born. About why the cultural communities in Los Angeles are the way they are. There's an interrogation of ourselves, an interrogation of who we are and who we think we are.
- Dawn-Lyen: And those two things are not necessarily the same. And that's what I'm finding in that issue.
- Ai-jen Poo: Is there a sun in that storm that you're finding?
- Dawn-Lyen: The sun is in a claiming and reclaiming of history, and it is a bringing to light of how we got here. And for me, it's been a waking up of how much I've internalized, how much I've normalized incarceration and its impact in my life and my family, my communities. It was so, I remember, like two years ago, when someone asked a question like, basically, "Who here has incarceration impacted?" And I didn't raise my hand because I was like, |Well you know, it's not in my immediate family. Like, in my immediate-immediate family."
- Dawn-Lyen: And I thought about the people in my family. I thought about how much of my energy goes to the fallout of incarceration just in my own family. And I was like, "Oh, why is my hand not up?" It's because I've really normalized that and I feel like there's a freeing of self that's happening as we confront what this has done to all of us.



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- Alicia Garza: So, if we did have a baby, that would be you. Can we just talk about this for a minute? I read a story about you coming into your own identity. And so often when we talk about identity, we do it in these really piecemeal, weird ways, right? Like, "I'm one-eighth this, I'm seven-quarters this." Right? And that comes from colonialism.
- Dawn-Lyen: 100%.
- Alicia Garza: I mean, I said it. Okay. Which is just like a big fancy way of saying quantifying ourselves because it's a way to distribute power or not distribute it. But we're actually 100% of ourselves all the time, right? So, talk to me a little bit, how do you navigate being 100% black and 100% Chinese?
- Dawn-Lyen: Yeah, so, it was actually my fiance, who's also here tonight. But he has witnessed my evolution and my own, I don't know if grappling's the right word, but my own nurturing of an identity. And he's also been with all of my family on both sides. And he's seen culture play itself out as culture does. And so at some point, he said to me, "Dawn, because being, saying I'm half this and half that, I'm half Chinese and half black." It was accurate in a way, in terms of, yeah, my mom was Chinese, my dad's black. But it never felt whole. It always felt fracturing. It just never felt good. But there was no other way to say it. And at one point he said to me, "Dawn, you are a 100% black and a 100% Chinese."
- Alicia Garza: Come through.
- Dawn-Lyen: That's just true. And here's what I have to say about it. I am very, very clear. The world experiences me as a black woman.
- Dawn-Lyen: I'm very clear the world does not see me as an Asian woman, at least not at first. And so I'm clear that I don't know the world through an Asian person's eyes in terms of how the world sees me. So, I can't speak to that lens. And that's just true. And I've been incredibly lucky and blessed that all the models in my life of black woman were all women that I'm like, yeah, I'm very good with this. Very good with this situation. And culturally I am 100% both. I really am.



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- Dawn-Lyen: And, it has been difficult for me to trust that people will hear that quote from that article and not interpret that as, "Oh, I'm not just black." Right. Because there's a history of that. Right? And for me, I've heard that most of my life and recognizing that, that's anti-blackness, internalized, I understand that.
- Dawn-Lyen: The reality is that's the story of this country now, right? Is that, more and more of us in this country are 100% a lot of things. And that's not really how this country was supposed to be set up. But look what happened. And now we're about to take over.
- Alicia Garza: But, what do you think that that story and that experience can teach us about the world that we're trying to build?
- Dawn-Lyen: For me, what it can teach us is that, in order to move forward to a world society where people can live free abundant lives, we have to include all of ourselves. And it is on us to do that first. I still struggle with fears of being rejected by the communities that I identify with. I think that if there's one thing to do, it's to heal, especially as people of color. It's the most radical thing we can do.
- Dawn-Lyen: You better come home with these tips and tricks.
- Alicia Garza: Come through with these tips and tricks.
- Dawn-Lyen: I mean, this is how we'd be powerful in a time of incredible chaos and crisis.
- Ai-jen Poo: Absolutely. Speaking of belonging to different communities, you are also, you're a part of a community of activism, right? You're also a part of a community of artists here in Hollywood storytellers, and I'm curious as somebody who's part of both of those communities, what you wish your activist community understood about Hollywood and what you wish your Hollywood community understood about activism.
- Dawn-Lyen: There's two things. There can be like this sort of transactional experience between activists and celebrities slash actors slash Hollywood folk, and I think sometimes it's underestimated how deeply, celebrities or Hollywood folk, how deeply they want to engage. It's more than I as an actor would have guessed.



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And I can say that because I felt so alone in it. And it wasn't until I started talking about it that people said to me, I don't think you're alone in that. I think there are a lot more people who feel that way than you think there are. And they were right. I know that we can be crazy. The Hollywood folk can be crazy.

Alicia Garza: It's a real thing.

Dawn-Lyen: It's real. But even beyond that, they wouldn't step up unless there was something pulling, something saying, I want to be engaged. Not just for this one little thing and we're going to have an exchange, but I want to understand deeply. And I think I wish that the Hollywood community understood just how much of your heart and soul and spirit and tell this whole truth.

Alicia Garza: I mean, it makes me want to cry because seeing people on the front lines who are, first of all just courageous enough to imagine a different world, right? Second of all, working and feeling and hurting and loving and fighting and giving everything to bring that into being. I wish that they understood that because I think that so many people give that to their work and would be able to relate with that and respect it differently, hold it differently, not be as concerned with all the risk averse concerns that often Hollywood folk are concerned with.

Dawn-Lyen: You know what...

Alicia Garza: Yes. Give it up!

Alicia Garza: I want to close our conversation out before we get to your questions. By shifting from this moment that feels so bonkers. Sometimes I feel like I'm trying to fill a hole with a teaspoon. You know what I'm saying? And then other times I'm like, "Yo, we're on a roll." So, I want to shift to all the gratitude that I have and that we have and that is out there, right?

Alicia Garza: For the incredible momentum that we are building, whether we see it everyday or not. So in that vein, what do you feel most grateful for?

Dawn-Lyen: I'm grateful for all the storm and all the sun that is emerging in the midst of it. That we literally didn't know how to see before.



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- Alicia Garza: Come through.
- Ai-jen Poo: And it's a really powerful reminder, I think that we have to do everything in our power to stop the bleeding of this moment and to win and take back our country. And the way we do it, really matters. And we have to do it and recommit everyday to never going back. Right?
- Dawn-Lyen: Amen.
- Ai-jen Poo: Oh, and also winning is a form of self care. This is one of our slogans at Sunstorm. We do have to do all the things. We have to support each other. We have to build community, we have to have time with our families. We have to get sleep, right. We have to take care of ourselves in all the ways, whatever that means. And winning is self care.
- Alicia Garza: Okay. So, we have time for a lightning round with all the deepest questions possible. So, let me start off with the biggest one. I want to defeat Trump. How can I be most effective as an activist in 2020. Quick thoughts, Dawn, quick.
- Dawn-Lyen: Do your self work. Come on. Okay. Ai-jen?
- Ai-jen Poo: Sign up to turn out others to vote, right? We at super majority, we're doing trainings to train volunteers who want to be a part of turning out the largest woman-to-woman voter mobilization, right program in the history of this country [crosstalk 00:22:41].
- Ai-jen Poo: So, sign up at Supermajority.com.
- Alicia Garza: Boom. I'm going to say, find your lane, get in it and get in a good. Not everybody's got to carry a sign or a bull horn. Maybe your thing is drinking wine and reading the constitution to see what it's really talking about, but whatever your lane is, there is not an option to do nothing. Get in that lane, get comfy in there and perform. We got stuff to do.



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- Alicia Garza: Okay. Moving on. Next one. This is great. What is one personal practice that you do, that you believe advances the world that we want to see. Dawn?
- Dawn-Lyen: I meditate.
- Alicia Garza: Boom. Ai-jen?
- Ai-jen Poo: I, every so often make a list of five women who I think don't get enough shine and I put, next to each of their names. Like, what's one little thing or a big thing I could do to give them some shine, and I just go through the list and do those things.
- Alicia Garza: Come through. [crosstalk 00:23:46] You see why I love her? It's like a real thing.
- Alicia Garza: Mine is deep belly laughs at least once a week. Last one equally big, in similar ways to how former representative Katie Hill was victimized by a vengeful ex, especially as we learn to grapple with social media's influence on society and politics, especially when the president is a racist. What do you think we need, or need to do to combat a future where women who run for office may very well have evidence of their sexuality used against them to punish them?
- Dawn-Lyen: I can answer that. We need to fight like hell for women to be able to run for office and not be punished because of things that we're doing consensually. men never get punished for their sexuality. We have a president who has bragged not only about violating women, but has also said, "I can get away with it. I could shoot somebody on Fifth Avenue and walk away."
- Dawn-Lyen: So, I think we need to gangster women who are running to take power in the same way that dudes gangster us to keep dudes in power who do terrible things. That's what I think. And you?
- Dawn-Lyen: Agreed.
- Alicia Garza: Okay, good, girl good. I, as a storyteller, think that stories, spaces, media need to take it on and we need to unpack. We need to name these dynamics and own



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them, own them, own that we've created them. Own that, I should say patriarchy created them really, but own that we are all in relationship to them. It is the role of art, the role of story to provide a space to transform that energy of shock and rage into action.

Ai-jen Poo: I agree. [crosstalk 00:26:14] There's some really deeply held beliefs and feelings, conscious and unconscious, that are deep in our culture that we have to unearth and undo and I agree that storytellers have a huge role to play. And storytellers together with movements, where we propel people into action, is like a powerful antidote to this force.

Ai-jen Poo: The other thing I will say is that I'm not saying that women make mistakes, I mean we all make mistakes. We live in an unforgiving world. And the thing that privilege, buys you is room for error. And what we can do, is we can create a buffer around people.

Alicia Garza: That's right.

Ai-jen Poo: To make up for that difference.

Alicia Garza: That's right.

Ai-jen Poo: To allow the space for people to be human.

Alicia Garza: Come on.

Alicia Garza: Join me in saying thank you, thank you, thank you to Dawn-Lyen Gardner for an incredible, I mean I got smoke coming out of my ears. I need a support group for this conversation. We need to talk, we need a discussion guide. It's all the things. You really are the light and the storm. Thank you for being here.

Ai-jen Poo: Thank you so much for coming out tonight. Get home safe, everybody.

Ai-jen Poo: Sunstorm is a project of the National Domestic Workers Alliance. Sunstorm is executive produced by Alicia Garza, Ai-jen Poo, Kristina Mevs-Apgar, and Jess



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Morales Rocketto. Sunstorm is produced by Amy S. Choi and Rebecca Lehrer of The Mash-Up Americans. Our production team is Jocelyn Gonzales, Shelby Sandlin, Mary Phillips-Sandy, and Mia Warren. Original music composed by Jen Kwok and Jody Shelton.

Dawn-Lyen: I love comedy. But I don't think I'm very good at it, as an actor. I don't know. I don't think. I don't know. Maybe...

Ai-jen Poo: 2020 goals. Hashtag 2020 goals.

Dawn-Lyen: Yeah, I have one joke. Yes, we need this. We need this joke.

Alicia Garza: One joke!