



## Episode 9 Transcript: Are We OK with Kamau Bell

- 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, I'm Ai-jen Poo.
- Alicia Garza: And I'm Alicia Garza, and today on Sunstorm, it's a real moment. We have our first dude on the show. Joining us today is the hilarious, the unstoppable, the brilliant W. Kamau Bell. Thank you so much for coming out.
- W. Kamau Bell: It's a lot of pressure, but I'm happy to be here. I feel bad like I'm going to ruin it for the other dudes, but I also feel like maybe I should ruin it for the other dudes. I mean...
- Ai-jen Poo: Definitely.
- Alicia Garza: You might be the first and the last.
- W. Kamau Bell: In a good way, ruin it. Not in a...
- Alicia Garza: So, shoot your shot.
- Ai-jen Poo: I know I met you, Kamau, through Alicia. And how did you two meet?
- W. Kamau Bell: I was supposed to perform in a benefit. I had just moved back into town and I was still getting my sea legs back. And it was like, "Can you do this thing?" And I was like, "Oh yeah." And I remember showing up feeling like... This was after my show had been canceled and I didn't know if I'd ever work again. And Melissa was either pregnant with our second kid or had had our second kid. And I just showed up in this room in downtown Oakland and just feeling like... And they were like, "Do comedy." And I'm like, "I don't feel very funny."
- W. Kamau Bell: And I remember I had a Doc McStuffins stuffed animal in my back pocket, because I'd forgotten that it was back there, because that's what being a parent is. And some people thought it was a comment on something, which it wasn't. It was just a comment on being a parent. And I think we met there, and it wasn't until later that I realized... Because I was out of my mind at that point, I was like,



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"Wait, that's who that was?" And we didn't talk very much but I remember being... I remember later putting it all together, I was so out of it.

Alicia Garza: It was one of the best days of my life, because what that has meant is that I've gotten to build with you over the last few years and it's been dope. First of all, you are giving me ab muscles, which we all appreciate you for. Yes. What I get to do with you is laugh hysterically about all the ridiculousness of life and I love that. But I also get to take action with you and change the world with you. And that also makes me very happy.

Alicia Garza: We have done a bunch of things together, including supporting people to run for office who kick butt and take names. And one of the things I really appreciate about you is that every time there's something righteous to show up for, you're right there, and I get to be right there with you. We get to do a lot of stuff where we get to explain what racism is and isn't, why it's bad and what you can do to deal with it.

W. Kamau Bell: I mean, thank you for saying all of that. I just feel, basically, I'm a kid who wanted to be a standup comedian but came from a house where my mom was always talking about the movement. And so, I felt like at some point I got pulled into... Well, this is where I come from, but I still feel like a kid who was watching SNL wanting to be a comedian.

W. Kamau Bell: So, oftentimes, I feel out of my depth or feel like just wanting to make sure that I don't assume that because I'm on whatever TV, that I should be the loudest voice in the room. I often feel like in these spaces that I should just really make sure that I'm not taking up too much space and also that I don't think I'm smarter than I am because I have a TV show.

Ai-jen Poo: You already got your plate full with this show. I want to dive into the show a little bit. We did a bunch of research and learning about your childhood and your life. And it feels like that's what your show is about, is learning about who we are as a country. And I'm just curious, what are some highlights of what you've learned or is that how you even think about it?

W. Kamau Bell: From a standpoint of a black male, only child comedian, because I feel like those are the things that really define me, I am investigating America with whatever I



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have and how I do this. For me, this is all based on Sesame Street, looking at the world and learning about it and try to break it into bite-sized pieces, so that the people who are watching this show can have better dinner party conversation or better conversations at work about these things.

- W. Kamau Bell: The one episode I think about that really highlights that is the episode we did about the Sikh community in Yuba City, California. One of the members of the Sikh Coalition asked me on Twitter if we would do an episode about them. So, from the very beginning, we worked closely with them and worked to make sure that little things like my pronunciation was as good as it could be, but also what are the things they feel they haven't been able to show on TV, because they said it was the first time anybody had done an hour-long documentary about them on American television.
- W. Kamau Bell: So, I let them get under the hood a lot. And what it did is, now they use it as a teaching tool, as a way to communicate about their community to people who don't know. And so for me, that's what we should be doing every week.
- Alicia Garza: I watched that episode and the reason I was really drawn to it actually, is because in watching it I realized two things. One, I really did not know anything about Sikh people. And two, I got a really deep sense of the ways in which folk build community. But I also was just deeply aware that the Sikh community is really positioned as outsiders in our society, especially in a post-911 context.
- Alicia Garza: You have talked a lot about always feeling like an outsider as a kid, and I think we can all relate to that a little bit. It's part of what I love about your show, right? You make people more human. And so, I just wonder... Talk to me about how this drive around always having felt like an outsider as a kid, does that shape your work at all? And if it does, tell me a little bit about how.
- W. Kamau Bell: I know that from people who walk across me in the street, whether they know me from TV or not, I know my defining characteristic is big black guy, basically all one word. But for me, it's only child. And so, as an only child, I grew up with my mom. My mom moved around a lot, so I was always coming into new schools, new neighborhoods, new places to live, having to very quickly figure out how do I fit in here.



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- W. Kamau Bell: And also a little bit, I wasn't the kid who wanted to be the center of attention. How can I not be seen? So, I'm trying to figure out how to blend in, but also how to stay safe, and who's the bully and who's the funny, who are the cool kids, who are the nice kids. And I was always walking into situations trying to assess things quickly.
- W. Kamau Bell: Also, they would read the roll and say, Walter, because that's my name on the roll. And I'd have to decide do I want to say Kamau or is that named weird here? I don't know. So, I was always in a position of doing mental gymnastics of how to move through the world.
- W. Kamau Bell: And then, I go visit my dad in Alabama every summer and it's a complete different life from living in Boston or Indianapolis or Chicago with my mom. So, I was always in a situation where I would hear, "You're not from around here." And eventually, I'd go to Boston and they'd say, "You sound like you're from the South." And then, I go to Alabama and they'd say, "You sound like you're from the North." And so, I was very aware that I'm being told I don't fit in anywhere.
- W. Kamau Bell: And at first, that's lonely, and then you discover music and art and then friends and things who are like, "Actually, it's a cooler thing to be an outsider. You can embrace your individuality more" And it's not easy, but it feels better ultimately.
- W. Kamau Bell: But then, going into standup comedy, it's about here are thoughts that I have in my head that I feel like nobody else has or nobody else is expressing. So, the whole role of a comedian is to figure out how to say things that nobody else has said or say things that everybody thinking but they're afraid to say, and also get laughter in that process, because that's the way that you would know people understand you. The laughter is them going, "I understand." It doesn't mean they agree with you, but they understand you. So, I think that whole process of being a comedian is very much connected to my outsider status.
- Ai-jen Poo: I mean, it also reminds me of your show in terms of just how you're guiding people through an experience of really complicated issues that you yourself are also learning. It's all unfolding. What have you learned about how to help people gain understanding and compassion and a sense of connection really quickly?



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- W. Kamau Bell: I think one of the things that the show gets criticism for that I struggle with sometimes, I realized that's actually what I'm trying to do, is learning how to be quiet and learning how to not speak all the time. Because I think a lot of times in these situations when you're presented with knowledge that is somehow foreign to you or maybe even feels threatening, that our instant reaction in society is to argue back against it or talk over it or wait to talk.
- W. Kamau Bell: And I think, again, this is about moving to the Bay Area, I would be in all these rooms in the Bay Area where all these conversations were happening. It's like, I don't know anything about none of this stuff people are saying, I'm just going to be quiet and listen. And then, I would go to another room and go, "Here's what just learned."
- W. Kamau Bell: And so, for me the show, even though it's hosted by a comedian who's supposed to be funny and make jokes, it's really all about listening. And the more you listen, the more people will talk. And the more they talk, the more they'll say things that they weren't expecting to say, and then you'll both learn something.
- Alicia Garza: That makes sense. I mean, I think that you're actually really brilliant at creating the kinds of spaces where people get to be deeply human. And for those folk who may not be connected in real life, it actually just makes you more open to that. You've talked a lot about how you learned at an early age that there's not one America, but there's two. And now you know that actually there's more than two. There's many different Americas.
- Alicia Garza: And I think the work that you do and the work that you've done has really created a path for us to figure out how do we bring all of those Americans together. Can you talk to me a little bit about that? How did you get to know that there were two Americas? What do you mean by that? And then, how has your thinking evolved over time? And then, of course, the third part of the question is, what do you think we need to do to bring all of the different Americas into one? Is it even possible?
- W. Kamau Bell: I think it's possible, but I think I may not get there with you.
- Ai-jen Poo: We may not reach the promised land together?



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- W. Kamau Bell: I may not get there with you.
- Alicia Garza: Damn it!
- W. Kamau Bell: But I think it's possible to talk about how I learned there was two Americas. I think as a kid, there was two because I would be in the so-called North with my mom, where that's Indianapolis, Boston or Chicago. And then, I'd spend every summer in Mobile, Alabama, which is the deep South.
- Alicia Garza: Deep, deep.
- W. Kamau Bell: The profound deep South. And Indianapolis, Boston and Chicago are basically urban environments, and Mobile is 300,000 people. So, I learned very quickly that the way that people in Mobile, Alabama live and the way they talk and interact is very different than the way that people in Boston and Chicago and Indianapolis do. And also, the way I had to act and be with people was different. Like my mom would always tell a story that one time she picked me up at the airport when I came back from Mobile. And we got in the car and I said to her, "[Cloe the doe 00:00:11:04]." And she said, "What?"
- Alicia Garza: Oh my god! My mom used to say that.
- Ai-jen Poo: Oh my god! Do your sound, represent.
- W. Kamau Bell: She said, "What did you say?" I said, "Close the door." So, I don't think I did it on purpose. I had just been in the cloe the doe land, and now I was in the close the door land. So, like I said, people could tell no matter where I was that I wasn't from there, even though both of these places were my home.
- W. Kamau Bell: And then, as a comedian, you just take \$50 to go play anywhere that'll pay you \$50, and you end up in all sorts of places that you never would, that people don't go because there's no reason to be there. So, people think Nevada is Las Vegas. I know Nevada is Battle Mountain Nevada, Ely Nevada, Lovelock Nevada. And as a comedian, I've been around a lot of different places and just learned that somebody who lives in Lovelock, Nevada is experiencing a very different America than somebody who lives in Oakland, California.



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- W. Kamau Bell: And then, [inaudible 00:12:04] now we're going to talk about different parts of Oakland. And now we're going to talk about people who grew up in Oakland in the seventies and eighties versus people who grow up in Oakland now. So, there's a shifting idea of what America is, but the thing that I find to be mostly true is that people think where they live, especially if they don't travel a lot, which most people don't, is the best version of America or the most defining version of America.
- W. Kamau Bell: And so, when they hear somebody in the deep South doing something, they don't have a context for that and they go, "They're doing America wrong. That's not the way America is supposed to be." And the thing I've learned is, there's certain things we should be able to agree on as far as human rights and people being able to have access to the things they need. But other than that, it's just cultural differences that we need to get off of thinking that the way we do it is better than the way other people do it.
- Alicia Garza: I'll actually come back to your mom. It sounds like she was a total boss. The theme of this whole show is about how women shine through the storms of our lives in this chaotic time in our country's history. And it sounds like she was shining through a lot of chaos too in her life. How did she shine?
- W. Kamau Bell: Part of my outsider status certainly comes from my mom, because whereas I was an only child, she had an older brother and then younger siblings who were twins. So, she was a middle kid and felt like she got squeezed the way a lot of middle kids feel like they're not getting all the attention. And she also just was always very intellectually curious. But growing up in Indianapolis, she was born in 1937, the role that she was being pushed into playing as far as...
- W. Kamau Bell: She didn't get married until she was 24 or 25, and people called her an old maid at the time. And she basically only got married because she felt like she was supposed to. And then real quickly realized, nope, that was a mistake. And her whole life has been about fighting against the gender roles that were assigned to a black woman born in Indianapolis in 1937. But she's bought homes, moved to go to new jobs. Every job she went to, it was always like, "You're the first black woman to ever have this job."



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- W. Kamau Bell: And so, I think she had to deal with that, which is like, well, you have the job but you don't have the power that most people have in this job. So, my image of my mom is always, I'm going to do it the way I want to. I'm not going to take no for an answer. I'm not going to take yes for an answer, and I'm not going to let you tell me what to do just because you're paying me. She's always been determined to do things her own way. And then that came down to me.
- W. Kamau Bell: And so, we moved from Boston to Chicago and she decided she wanted to start self publishing books of black quotations. This was in 1984 when there weren't books of black quotations. Now there are a lot, because of the work she did. She started an industry and was selling books out of her car.
- W. Kamau Bell: And whenever I tell the story it's like, it is pretty easy to self publish a book now. It's basically button on Amazon. But then, she had to drive out to the suburbs, to the typesetter, then drive out to the other suburb for the graphic designer. And then, she had to pay for these books in advance. And she's driving to black bookstores and black book festivals, and contacting every black bookstore around the country to sell these books. And that's how she put me through high school. And that's how she put food on the table. And it wasn't easy, but she was determined at that point not to work for anybody else.
- Alicia Garza: That is so bad ass. I love her.
- W. Kamau Bell: Yeah, she's a complete badass. And we moved her out to Oakland a couple of years ago. And so right now, my focus for my mom is just, "Just relax." It's just like, "If I'm going to work this hard, you're not going to work. And so, come see your grandkids whenever you want to." She still does things. She volunteer for the League of Women Voters. I mean, she's still very active, but she's... I really think I'm not the NBA draft pick who can buy you a whole house, but I can get you a one bedroom apartment.
- W. Kamau Bell: So, I'm not who I am without my mom's example of how to do it your own way. And also, really step bravely into the abyss if that's the best decision. You don't have to hold onto a job you don't want, you don't have to be around people who you think you need to be around for ulterior motives. Just if you need to go, just go.



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- Ai-jen Poo: I love that.
- Alicia Garza: I heart that. Your mom sounds like somebody who's been making a way out of no way for a minute. So, I got some questions. I think a lot about this actually, which is, comedy can go either way. And I have been in comedy shows where folks are making jokes about things that I'm like, "This is just not actually funny." And I get the point. Maybe I'm being too sensitive, but probably I'm just being aware of the way the world works.
- Alicia Garza: And you know as well as I do that there've been some dust-ups lately around comedians who use their platform actually, for things that can be pretty problematic. So, I guess my question for you is, what do you think comedy as a platform can do to be the light in the storm?
- W. Kamau Bell: I think the thing people don't realize is that comedy on some level is like a rhetorical device, where it's just a way to express yourself. I think people often think, and this is what I was alluding to earlier, that comedy is expressing the truth. And so, I think people think that... There's the expression, it's funny because it's true. And it's like, no, no, no, it's funny because the comedian knows how to write a joke.
- W. Kamau Bell: So, I think a lot of times people get caught up in, "I laughed. That must mean that's my new political viewpoint." And it's like, no, it just means that you thought it was funny and a lot of you can think things are funny that you wouldn't vote for.
- W. Kamau Bell: We used to understand that on a basic level. I remember years ago watching a Chris Rock special with my parents, and they would out loud at some stuff and then get quiet for other stuff, and then laugh out loud at some stuff and then go, "He's crazy." You know what I mean? There was jokes they just weren't with, but they understood the sum total was, we like generally what Chris rock does.
- W. Kamau Bell: I think now there's a little bit of, I like that joke, I don't like that joke. I'm going to have to tell that comedian that I don't like that one joke. I'm going to have to reach out to him online and tell him that one joke. And I'm saying that's fine to do. Please feel free to express that. And I've heard that and I've apologized for jokes that I've done. There are times where I feel like I've crossed the line, but I



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think a lot of comedians don't want to apologize. They think it reveals weakness. And so, now there's this...

Alicia Garza:

Is it a standoff?

W. Kamau Bell:

A standoff sometimes, but I think sometimes a needless standoff, because I think there are comedians out there for everybody, and the ones you don't like, you can just let them go. Because I am a fan of comedy that I don't like. You know what I'm saying? There are comedians who I wouldn't want to have to live with that dude in his house. I wouldn't want to.

Ai-jen Poo:

Oh my god! If that's the screen...

W. Kamau Bell:

Yeah, I wouldn't want him to fill out my voter ballot. Maybe I wouldn't even want to have a cup of coffee with him, but something about the things he says makes me laugh, and that's fine. And this is probably the most guiltiest of pleasure, things you laugh at that you shouldn't laugh at.

W. Kamau Bell:

Now, the history of comedy is heteronormative. It's very gender binary. It's very white male-dominated. And then, other black males come in, and then some other males from other racial groups come in, men from other racial groups come in. But it's also a thing that takes place that the history of it is in dark nightclubs at night usually in basements. It usually was something that was happening while people were drunk or/and otherwise taking other substances. Comedy clubs didn't start out as things that happened at 10:30 in the morning on Sunday. You know what I'm saying?

W. Kamau Bell:

So, I think there's a culture around that, that the nighttime, late at night drunken culture feeds a type of comedy, and people thought that's what standup comedy was. Well, now, in the modern era since the mid-nineties, there are lots of comedians who don't feel comfortable in that culture and they come through other ways to do it. Thankfully, there are comics out there for everybody. You just have to do the work to find them.

W. Kamau Bell:

And also, I think sometimes there's the thing about choosing to go... This is a comic whose jokes I don't like, so I'm going to keep it moving, or this is a comic whose joke I don't like and I need to do something about it. So, I think that's a



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question that people have to ask themselves sometimes, because I don't want my audience to think everything I do is equally good or equally righteous. I do want the freedom that artists to say stuff that's like, "I know I shouldn't say this, but now having said that, there are certainly things I'm not going to do that for, because they just don't make me feel good to say them out loud." You know what I mean?

Alicia Garza: There's so many things about comedy though that are really helpful. Just thinking about how you get an immediate sense of where people are emotionally through audience responses. There's such helpful data there about what people feel, and there's not a rational screen that kicks in. It's just an immediate emotional response that I feel is useful.

Alicia Garza: And the more I've learned about improv over the years too, the more I feel like it's just... So many of the principles behind improv are really just about being really present with whoever you're with. And I feel like that's life skills. We even did a whole improv for caregivers training because we found that so many of the tools and skills associated with improv were actually really useful for caregivers. But I'm curious, what do you think we can learn from comedy about how to navigate the storms of our lives today?

W. Kamau Bell: I did improv at Second City in Chicago. It was my first way to get into doing comedy. And I think the rule of improv, which is yes, and is a great rule for life. I think a lot of times we generally walk around with no, but... I think that that sometimes is just a way to stop things from happening.

W. Kamau Bell: And I think if you see me on United Shades, the rule of yes [inaudible 00:21:55] is how I'm having those conversations go so long. Because I'm saying, "Yes, you said that. I hear you. And also this." So, it's a way to build community and build alliance. And I think because of the way the social media is set up, so much of it is about scoring points on wicked burns and which is all no, but... And I think, and you know this, you both know this, that the way to build community is to hear people and build on what they say and then bring in what you think about that.

Ai-jen Poo: I have one more question which is, you are the first and maybe the last dude to come on this Sunstorm pod.



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- W. Kamau Bell: I hope it's the last, like drop the mic last, not last like yikes.
- Ai-jen Poo: I mean it's... I don't know. I mean, I'm hoping...
- Alicia Garza: We're still on the fence about it.
- Ai-jen Poo: It's like Obama, right? He was our first black president and I'm not clear that we'll ever have another one. But it's possible.
- W. Kamau Bell: Yeah, let's just be real.
- Ai-jen Poo: Everything is possible. But in case we don't get that chance, I feel like we should just do right now what I really wanted Obama to do in his second term, which was right until the wheels fall off, because we don't know if we're going to get here again. So, if we're going to ride until the wheels fall off, Kamau, I just want to hear from you as a dude who has three daughters, what kind of world do you want your daughters to be able to grow up in, and what do you do every day to make that world happen?
- W. Kamau Bell: My daughters are already aware that America has never elected a woman for president. And in fact, America has now turned down two women for president. And I can see the frustration in my five-year old, my eight-year old about that. And I can't really explain it to them in a way that makes sense other than saying sexism, misogyny, the patriarchy, but none... And you can explain that, but it doesn't make sense because those things ultimately don't make sense.
- Ai-jen Poo: That's right.
- W. Kamau Bell: And so, for me, I feel very invested in the idea that I as a father have to do better letting them know and letting them see in the world that I don't think it makes sense either. I think I know it doesn't make sense and I know it's wrong, but then it becomes about I need to show them that their dad clearly also doesn't think it makes sense. That it's not just something that I'm like, "Yeah, it doesn't make sense. Anyway, pancakes? You want another pancake?" It's a call to action for me. I think men have to really do a more out loud and public job of proclaiming how sick the patriarchy is and how sick misogyny is.



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- Ai-jen Poo: Amen.
- W. Kamau Bell: And I think there's many ways we can do that. So, I feel a tremendous responsibility for my daughter. And I don't mean this... I mean, it's so hard to say this because you also... I am [inaudible 00:24:33] being the guy who's like, "I never knew what a woman was until I had daughters." I'm not saying that.
- W. Kamau Bell: I'm saying the conversations that I had in my house with my daughter and the things that she has said, that my five-year old said, and how confusing it is alerts me to the fact this is a ridiculous situation we're in. And because this is already in the wheelhouse of what I do, I need to do a better job of showing up for it in a public way.
- Alicia Garza: The other thing I'm really taking away from this conversation is that... I mean, I love the idea that you just roll up on people and ask them questions so that you can laugh. And it just is a reminder that laughter and joy is always available to us.
- Ai-jen Poo: That's true.
- Alicia Garza: That no matter how bad the elections are or how horrible sexism, racism, and everything is shaping our world, that laughter and joy are always there for us to tap into and to give.
- Ai-jen Poo: That's how it should be. W. Kamau Bell. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. And people can find you @ W. Kamau Bell on all the socials.
- W. Kamau Bell: All the socials.
- Alicia Garza: And to all of you lovely listeners, write to us, tweet us, tell us about how you are making your way through the storm. Follow us @ Sunstorm Pod on social media and tweet us @Ai-jen Poo and @Alicia Garza. #Sunstorm. We can't wait to hear from you. Ciao.
- Ai-jen Poo: Ciao.



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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-Apger 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.

W. Kamau Bell: I also could very easily at this point say, show yourself from Frozen 2, just because that's what we're looking to a lot in my house.

Alicia Garza: Excellent choice. Frozen 2.

W. Kamau Bell: You cannot see Frozen 2, but there's some bangers on the Frozen 2 soundtrack.