



Artist and Organizer Favianna Rodriguez Knows that Pleasure is Political

She made history as the first Latina to serve as a U.S. Magistrate Judge and a Federal District Judge for the District of New Jersey. Then, in 2020, a self-avowed anti-feminist violently targeted her family, injuring her husband and killing her son, Daniel. In this powerful episode, Judge Salas reflects on love, faith, grief, and her commitment to keeping her son's joyful memory alive.

Alicia Menendez:

Favianna Rodriguez's work as an interdisciplinary artist, cultural strategist, and social justice activist is both profoundly political and deeply personal. We could have an entire conversation about migration or climate change, or her embrace of pleasure as a queer woman of color. We will touch on all of it, but the core of this conversation is as much about the future she envisions for all of us as it is about the now she is building for herself.

Menendez: Favianna, I've heard you talk a lot about how your parents' early experience in the United States shaped a lot of your worldview and your ethos. What do you remember about those early experiences?

Favianna Rodriguez:

Yes. Well, I grew up in the '80s during the era of the war on drugs in Oakland, and both of my parents are immigrants from Peru. My father was Afro Peruvian. So what I remember is just being in a country... I was born in the United States, but being in a country that really didn't reflect me, not in the English world and not in the Spanish world. Growing up in a mixed-race family, my family was really nontraditional. So my mother didn't have a college degree, and yet she was an entrepreneur opening multiple businesses. And my father was very much a caretaker and is the person who taught me how to read and write in Spanish, how to express myself. So what I remember is that they did their best effort to keep me safe at a time when so many communities of color were suffering because of the war on drugs. Oakland was one of the homicide capitals in the country.

Rodriguez: And I was a kid who was really upset about having to live in those conditions because I couldn't really go outside. There was a lot of gangs. And so art became a place for me to go in my imagination. My parents worked very hard. They both had multiple jobs. And so it was kind of amazing now that I think about it, that I was safe and sheltered and had a lot of activities. And yet they were also tremendously busy and couldn't always be there emotionally. They were there to help us survive. And as a result, art became a safe place, but it also became a place for me to have a refuge for my feelings. And it continue like that today, actually.

Menendez: All of this also helps explain how you begin organizing at 15.

Rodriguez: Yes. And that is because in the schools that I went to, the teachers would always try to put me in English as a second language or in classes that were just simply not at my level. And my mother would have to go and just challenge the principals and say, "No, I want my

daughter to be in English honors. She passes the test. She belongs in these programs." And so I witnessed how she was able to speak out. And as a result, I was one of two or three kids of color in advanced calculus, honors English, and all the honors classes. I mean, I had definitely more than 4.2 GPA. And it taught me that my voice was very, and actually I'm very much a leader because my mom was a leader. And so the farm worker struggle was very strong and there was no such thing as a Latino club at my school. And yet at least a third of the students were Latinx and we had cops on campus. And it was also the year in which Prop 187 had been introduced in California, which-

Menendez: Will you just remind for people who might not know or remember what Prop 187 is? Can you describe it?

Rodriguez: Yes. The governor of California saw the census data and saw that Latinos were on their way to becoming a huge part of the California population and really launched the contemporary anti-immigrant movement as we know it today, which used language like illegals or used framing that said that immigrants were coming to take your job. Well, I was a teenager then, and that was also happening along with California really just going crazy over prisons and passing all these mass incarceration laws at the same time that we had just been recovering from the drug war. And so by now I was a teenager. My parents all had helped the rest of my family migrate here. And I saw how hard my family worked. I mean, as I said earlier, I missed my parents. I missed their presence because they were working so hard. And I would watch TV. And of course, the culture that was being set was a culture in which Latinx people were being targeted through an anti-immigrant lens. And that's when I began to organize because I saw those kinds of impacts trickle down to the schools. And so I helped walk out my high school. I joined a youth organizing group. I'm in the Bay Area. The Bay Area is home to the Panthers. It's home to Harvey Milk. It's where the free speech movement... I mean, I feel like we are just political by the air we breathe here. And I walked out my school along with many other schools. We took over mass transit, hundreds of us, and we marched to the local youth detention center. And we were saying, "Schools not jails. Stop Prop 187. Stop trying to incarcerate us." And it was where I really found my voice and my power.

Menendez: That more than 4.2 GPA lands you at UC Berkeley. And it is where when I think about your trajectory, I think of your deciding to drop out of Berkeley as a real inflection point. I want you to take me back to making that critical decision to leave Berkeley.

Rodriguez: So I was also an activist at Berkeley. We were fighting for ethnic studies. And by then I had felt that activism was my path forward. And the reason is frankly because I had so much unprocessed rage from my childhood about what I saw, the violence that I witnessed. My next door neighbor was killed as a teenager in front of where we lived. And I think I was really lucky to find activism and to have parents that stressed education and extracurricular activities, because otherwise I could understand why youth in my community did drugs, why people got pregnant very young, and that's because the system was failing them, and also often just a lot of times, parents were not able to provide the support sometimes that kids who were going through trauma needed. So I loved being an activist because it's the space where I could feel power and I could also fight back and say, "No, I don't tolerate this and I'm going to say something about it."

Rodriguez: So at Berkeley was the first time that I ever left home, and I was in a Chicana co-op. And I just really found myself. And then the dot com revolution with is happening, right? It was

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1999, modems, and I was in the Bay Area where we were being surrounded by tech booms just across the bridge in San Francisco. And there was a few nerdy Chicanos in my co-op who would always be in the computer room. And I would go down there and they taught me how to code. And so what I saw coming was a new tool to have a voice that was now going to be digital, right, where I could build a presence and not only would my community see me, my school, I mean, the world would see me. And when I taught myself how to use my artistic tools in this new way, I really didn't look back because I felt like I was part of a new revolution. It was really a tech revolution. And in my school, I wasn't going to learn that.

Rodriguez: At the same time, I experienced something, which is, it was the first time I got pregnant. And in hindsight, I realized that here I was super, overachieving kid, going extracurricular activities, getting scholarships from Girls Inc, from the local bus line, from the local city council, just being all-around excellent and being an activist. But I did not have relationships model to me. I didn't have conversations with my parents around what kind of relationships to look for or how to protect myself.

Rodriguez: And that got me in college because here I was in a whole nother world. And I thought I was in love with somebody, and I got pregnant, and he disappeared. The person who got me pregnant just disappeared. I didn't see him. And I had just gotten a scholarship, a Getty multicultural scholarship to participate in my very first art internship. And so I went to LA. I remember being like, "Whoa, something has taken over my body." And knowing that I simply wasn't ready, and that actually, I couldn't tell anyone. So in Los Angeles, I found a Planned Parenthood and I was able to have an abortion. I was very thankful to be able to do that. But at that point, I really realized that I had a voice, I had outlets, but I hadn't really thought about myself in terms of what I wanted to do because I had gotten a full ride to UC Berkeley, and the other thing is my parents, they were supportive of my art, but they were like, "You got to be a lawyer. You got to be a doctor." They didn't go to college.

Rodriguez: And so part of the reason why I was such a successful kid is really because they were demanding. I had math tutors. I had Saturday math and science camp, summer math and science camp. Right? Because that was how they kept me busy to not be in the streets. But they didn't like that I was an artist even, and they said, "You could do that on the side." And so after I had an abortion and I knew how to code, I felt that it was time for me to really focus on me and follow the dreams that I wanted. And that's why I dropped out. And I built a web company, which grew so fast because of course, everyone wanted a woman of color to design their website. And from there I launched my studio in 2003.

Menendez: How did you learn how to put a price on your work and on your value?

Rodriguez: Well, that was a lesson to learn. And I think one of the biggest things that I teach others and myself is that we are in an extractive economy. We live in a world in a global economy that has exploited our ancestors, that has stolen land, stolen labor. And if you are a person of color, your perceptions of how valuable your labor is is distorted. And not only that, your ancestors were ransacked, your ancestors were stolen from, and the ideas that many of us grew up with is that we just have to work hard. We have to turn over our bodies, our productivities. We have to give up time with our families because survival and economic prosperity is the most important thing. And now, our generation, my generation and probably your generation, has realized the cost of that, which is we are dealing with all

kinds of mental health issues. We are pushing ourselves to the point that our bodies are suffering.

Rodriguez: And I reject that in the same way that I fight the climate crisis. I reject any kind of extractivism that is trying to extract from the planet or from us as people in service of what? To enrich the wealthy? It's just not worth it. And so I strive for new ways of being, new systems. And this is a lot of ways why for me being an artist is so appropriate because I create what's not there. I create the future that's not there. And I'm a sculptor. I sculpt my reality. And I also am really trying to move away from this idea of girl boss or a work ethic that is simply not healthy. I'm trying to be sit with my feelings. I'm trying to heal myself and also my past generations. And I know people are like, "Wow, what don't you do?" But now I'm very much in the world of psychedelics, in the world of healing, because I see all the connections there.

Menendez: You are very purposeful about your articulation of the things you care about, among which you list fems, sex, sluts, queers, love, migration, racial justice, and the planet. I think you just gave me a window into how you see some of those systems and ethos as intertwining. So talk to me specifically about the sex part.

Rodriguez: Yes. Well, our view of relationships is a colonial view. It's a settler view in which we have this idea that our bodies belong to someone or that someone has some kind of ownership over our bodies. And there's this model of a nuclear family, which has its roots in a system of property, of ownership. If we look at gender injustice around the world, a lot of it is around the shaming, the stigmatizing of our bodies and the things that our bodies do, and our sexual relationships. And so for me, as we are trying to free ourselves from ideologies that have harmed us and that have hurt us, one of the biggest ideologies is how we feel about our bodies. And growing up in a culture, an immigrant culture, I very much felt the impacts of Catholicism around the shame of what was between my legs, not wanting to talk about it.

Rodriguez: And my mom would always... When I had my period, she would make me hide anything that had blood, right? Because it was just like, "Nobody wants to see that." And so my relationship with my body wasn't healthy. And it's why I had an abortion, actually. It's because I didn't know how to advocate for myself. I didn't know how to have agency. And so I believe that we need to be in a culture where all people should have agency and tools to talk about their bodies and to talk about what they want, what kind of touch they want. And it's because we're lacking narratives and stories that show us how to do consent and show us even how to ask ourselves, "What does my body want? What brings it joy? And how do I facilitate my own joy?" A lot of what I talk about is masturbation as a strategy to learn how to love myself and learn how to ask for what I want.

Rodriguez: And I believe that as we are at a time when abortion is so front-and-center, in reality, what abortion is, is a conversation about how we build families and how we do relationships. And sex is a part of how we do relationships. It actually defines a lot of it, our expression of our sexuality, and that in an age of me too, we know that sexual assault, sexual harassment has been embedded into the culture. And so we can't move towards the opposite of that. The opposite of assault is a culture in which all sexualities, healthy, uplifted, given agency, people get the education that they deserve and they need to be healthy in their bodies. We're not going to achieve that until we move it out of the shadows and move it out of the stigma zone and talk about it and empower people. And so that's

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why I'm a sex positive activist. And I see it... To me, everything is related. And that is that our system has, in order to extract labor, in order to extract natural resources from our mother earth, in order to be the kind of capitalism, male-driven capitalism, hetero, white supremacist capitalism, it has had to embed certain kinds of stories and myths into our imaginations. And as we undo that, we can also get into better relations with each other, with the natural world, and instead embody collaboration, cooperation, and regenerative economies.

Menendez: As a queer woman, as someone who identifies as a pleasure activist, how do you build pleasure into your own life?

Rodriguez: I love that question. I don't have children and I don't have children because I am still healing from womb trauma in my family. And I realize that. Now, I understand why I didn't want to have kids. And there was so much unspoken trauma, including my mother had to give up her firstborn because she was a newly-arrived immigrant, and the nurses at the hospital she was at, which were Catholic nurses, really encouraged her to give up my brother for adoption. And my mother kept a secret for over 30 years. As I explore that, I explore the history of womb trauma in both sides of my family. I realized that I need to heal that. But I'm 43 now and I'm realizing that I very much want a family. And so I'm going to create that. I'm going to create a chosen family. And I'm taking steps to do that, to build deep relationships, because again, in our society, especially what COVID revealed, hey, you know what? This nuclear family model isn't healthy. I mean, how do we expect parents, especially single parents to do so much when our social safety net is crap? But also emotionally, I mean, I believe in being in community and villages to help raise strong, wonderful children. And so I want that for myself and it's what I'm doing. And so I am healing in a way that's really thinking about now my emotional needs. I feel like I've been able to achieve a lot, build a lot of institutions. And now I really want to do the inner work. And that happens through pleasure activism. It happens through deep healing. There's a reason why there's a psychedelic revolution. And that's because there are real medicines out there from our ancestors, right? These are indigenous medicines from our home countries which are being used for people to open their minds. And I am very much a part of that wave.

Rodriguez: And now I'm going into film and television now. And at the heart of it is that we need new stories. We need to tell different kinds of stories because we need to inspire people to address the crises. And how do we show that future? How do we inspire people? How do we role model it? Most people are not necessarily trying to be entrepreneurs. They reflect and mirror what they see. And so if they don't see it, they're not thinking about it, just like Black Panther. We would've never imagined Wakanda until Ryan Coogler put it in front of us. And that's why art is important. That's why the work of artists is important is because we need to inspire people by showing them, because then we change the zeitgeist.

Menendez: Favianna, we could do 20 episodes together. You have been so incredibly generous. Thank you so much. You've given me so much to think about.

Rodriguez: Thank you, Alicia.

Menendez: Thank you as always thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer and mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. It makes our day. Email us at

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CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "Artist and Organizer Favianna Rodriguez Knows that Pleasure is Political." *Latina to Latina*, LWC Studios. February 28, 2022. LatinaToLatina.com.

Produced by:

