

COUNTRY QUEERS in collaboration with OUT IN THE OPEN SEASON 2 EPISODE 9 : DOROTHY ALLISON

DESCRIPTION:

Dorothy Allison is a 73 year old, white, feminist, working class story teller, who was raised in South Carolina and Florida and now makes her home in California. She is the author of many books including novels, short story collections, and a memoir. In this interview, recorded by RAE: in August 2018, Dorothy talks about memories of growing up "a poor kid in love with language," learning to write, how she got from FL to CA via DC and NYC, class, feminism, and the magic of writing.

For this episode we're asking folks who are able to support Lauren Garretson-Atkinson's gofundme. Lauren is an Affrilachian creative hailing from the mountains of West Virginia. She received her BA in Africana Studies & Creative Writing from Hampshire College, and her MFA in Fiction from Virginia Tech. Non-traditional in most ways, Lauren enjoys pushing boundaries and genres in her writing, working with speculative-fiction, magical realism and historical fiction. She is raising money to support her in finding the time and space to finish the afrofuturist Appalachian novel she's been working on for years. You can support Lauren here:

<https://gofund.me/23c5fa12>

CREDITS: Created and produced by RAE: with support from HB Lozito from [Out in the Open](#). Editorial advisory dream team: [Hermelinda Cortés](#), [Lewis Raven Wallace](#), and [Sharon P. Holland](#). Music by Tommy Anderson.

[Sound of cicadas and crickets]

[Listener Intro]: "Hi. I'm Grace in midcoast Maine, and you are listening to Country Queers, the podcast."

[fade in upbeat acoustic guitar song by Tommy Anderson]

RAE: [Host]: Hey y'all, I'm RAE: and this episode features my 2018 interview with Dorothy Allison. Dorothy is a 73 year old, white, feminist, working class story teller, who

was raised in South Carolina and Florida and now makes her home on Southern Pomo and Kashaya lands in Sonoma County, California. She is the author of many books including novels, short story collections, and a memoir. Some of my favorites include: *Bastard out of Carolina*, *CaveDweller*, *Trash* and *Two Or Three Things I Know for Sure*.

I don't know how to say this without sounding dramatic, but Dorothy Allison's writing has truly been life changing for so many folks, myself included. I read her novel *Cavedweller* when I was in highschool - not as assigned reading in school. The book is too gay for that, even though the queerness in it is subtle. But in my freetime because I've always been a voracious reader of novels. This is surely largely thanks to the influence of my hippie parents, all of whom are big readers, and who raised us in the middle of fucking nowhere without TV, and mostly pre-internet. So books became a main source of entertainment for us.

But I didn't really come to understand *who* Dorothy Allison was until years later when I was at college in western Massachusetts. I hadn't known I was queer before college, because I'd never seen an out queer person in West Virginia, and definitely had never met an out queer person my age.

Fast forward to second year of college and I was in love. This was *years* before I'd have a cell phone, Facebook didn't even exist yet, so we left each other a lot of handwritten notes in one another's rooms. I remember coming home from class one day to find a poem written out in colored pencil on a piece of black construction, with a photo cut out of a magazine collaged on. It was a poem by Dorothy Allison called "Dumpling Child" from her book *The Women Who Hate Me*. It's a poem about food, and also sex. It's hot.

I didn't really think of myself as a southerner before I went to college in Massachusetts. And I remember loving that poem, but also feeling like "maybe I'm not southern enough - whatever that means - to identify with this writing." My non-Southern-raised hippie parents never made dumplings. Could I love this poem if I'd only had dumplings at friends' houses? I was born and raised in the South, but by parents who weren't. I was always a little bit "not from here" in public schools in rural WV - even though we moved there when I was two, from Georgia where I was born. Even though there's nowhere else that feels like home.

But I also had never lived outside the South before. And in addition to the intellectual lessons in my college courses, I also learned alot about my own queerness and about how - no matter how you define being "from here" - I had spent my entire public school education deeply immersed in the rural South, and that was a very very different region than the place I found myself living in for college.

I clung to Dorothy Allison's writing in that place, where my peers from coastal cities and the northeast made such classist anti-Southern comments I couldn't fathom people could say something so mean to anybody about their home without even seeming to realize it! I found old Hazel Dickens records in the library and would listen to them on repeat in the study room, singing along to "West Virginia, My Home" and aching for the mountains.

That same partner, that same year, once convinced me to eat eggplant, which I swore I didn't like, by reading me this sexy scene out of Dorothy Allison's book *Trash*. The story is called "A Lesbian Appetite" and it's a wandering journey through memories of past lovers and the food they ate together. But the scene that's relevant here features two women in a kitchen. One of them is making eggplant. Her lover salts the eggplant by rubbing slices of the vegetable all across her body, wiping the sweat off her skin. They end up undressing and fucking on the kitchen floor instead of cooking.

In retrospect, it seems like I had to leave the south, and listen to the work of other folks who'd left too and were writing about their homesickness from afar, to realize that I am from the South.

It's no surprise to longtime followers of this project, that while I truly have deep love for rural queers everywhere - there is a special place in my heart for southern queers. You just can't find anything better than a hell raising southern Country Queer, if you ask me.

[fade in upbeat acoustic guitar song by Tommy Anderson]

It's been four years since this interview took place and I'm still sort of in shock that it happened. I was going to be in California for a community radio conference, with travel paid by my job, and I reached out to Dorothy on instagram. I wrote her this gushy fan note about how much her writing has meant to me, I mentioned that I'd be in California, and I asked if she might be up for an interview.

She wrote back. Gave me the landline number to her house. I remember calling, my heart pounding, and her butch partner Alix answered, then there she was - Dorothy in real life, on the phone. I rented a car and drove from my brother's house near Tahoe to Dorothy's house in Guerneville.

Dorothy meets me at her front door and leads me through the house, past Alix, and their living room full of old photos and VHS tapes. Out to the patio in the backyard surrounded by redwood trees. She gives me a tour of their yard, the plum trees, the redwoods. She's wearing a visor with sunflowers on it and a black t-shirt, walking with support from a cane. We sit down on the patio chairs and start talking. There's a house being built next door, so the sound of hammers and saws and faintly voices floats in. I

am so nervous and starstruck that anything I've learned about non-verbal active listening flies out the window, and I can barely form a question. But soon, I feel comfortable with her, familiar, sitting on the porch talking about writing and the South.

One quick note, Dorothy talks about being an incest survivor and other kinds of abuse at points along this conversation, to please take care of yourself while listening.

Here's a bit of our conversation:

[fade out music]

[INTERVIEW}

RAE:

So you have written a lot about your childhood, and—

DOROTHY:

Yeah, God save us. Mostly told the truth, but wrote a few fictions.

RAE:

And beautifully and powerfully, of course, and...

DOROTHY:

Thank you.

RAE:

But I wonder just for this recording, especially since you live real far from where you grew up. You live in a really, culturally, politically, very different place from where you grew up in a lot of ways. I'm curious about like... ..what is my question here? I guess just sort of... um...

DOROTHY:

How'd I get here?

RAE:

How'd you get here? Yeah! And do you think that growing up in like, not in cities led you back to that life? Or not?

DOROTHY:

I don't know. I was born in Greenville, South Carolina. The first daughter of a 15 year old unwed mother. My mother was a waitress. And then the man that she married - my sister's father - died in a car accident. I put that in Bastard. And then she married my stepfather. And he was a route salesman for I think was originally the RC Cola Company. He worked for a couple of different cola companies. And he was a... he was a piece of work. The Disreputable failed son of an upscale middle class family. His dad owned a Sunshine Bakery franchise. And he took up with my mother, and I think that was like the last straw for that family and they disowned him. Because my mother was a waitress, and dropped out of school in sixth grade, like most of - I'm the first member of my family to graduate from high school. It's a huge family. Let's just be clear. We're talking about fuck a lot of cousins that didn't do it. And I think when I was 13, they packed up in the middle of the night, and we ran off to Florida, cause they were just so deep in debt, there was no way they could get out. Or at least they didn't think they could get out. And he had been arrested. For I think he would be breaking into soda machines. Because he had the keys. [laughter] I don't know it made sense to me! But, we wound up in central Florida. And my life shifted completely

We'd do these IQ tests. And it was like, "wow, you're smart!" And that was different because in South Carolina, when I scored that highest score, they were afraid of me. It was clear to me they were not - they were afraid of me. And they - they despised us. You know that despise the children of waitresses, you knew you were hated. And you were supposed to be grateful for anything. I wasn't grateful. I was barely a Baptist. [Rae laughs]

But in Florida the schools were like, "You're smart." So they put you in the advanced classes. I would have never been allowed into an advanced class in South Carolina. I'm clear on how it works. But I just kept plodding along planning to go to college. And then I won a National Merit Scholarship and the JC Scol-I won every fucking scholarship I could get cause we had no money. We were always just barely surviving and always having the power turned off.

I wanted to go to Columbia. And I won a scholarship to Columbia. But it wasn't enough. The issue was this: we had no money. I had no coat. I couldn't move north because I didn't own a coat. And I couldn't go very far cause I couldn't go back and forth. There was not enough money. So I wound up going to school in St. Petersburg, Florida at the Florida Presbyterian, which was a good solid, experimental school and gave me a really solid education.

And there I figured out "Oh, Lord! I'm not quite right." [laughter]

RAE:

You remember that?

DOROTHY:

Oh, yeah.

RAE:

Was there a moment-

DOROTHY:

Well, there were several moments!

RAE:

- or was it like a slow build?

DOROTHY:

Well! It was a different world. I dated this boy who had a motorcycle. And I knew when I was dating him that he was cover. Because I kept falling in love with girls. And it was scary. I knew what happened. I knew that I was already at risk and it was only going to get worse if I was a lesbian. So I'm like, "Okay, you are not going to be lesbian, you're going to like, get an education and become a history teacher." Because you know, I wanted to be a history teacher.

But then the women's movement happened. And it was like, "Wait a minute, maybe I don't have to spend the rest of my life pretending to be something I'm not. Maybe there's nothing wrong with falling in love with girls." And so... I graduated from college and went and became a sandwich girl in Central Florida, because I couldn't get enough money to go to graduate school. So I applied and got a job with the Social Security Administration. And they sent me to Tallahassee, Florida. I lasted in an apartment for two months. And then I moved into a giant house with a dozen other lesbians and we became, you know, a radical lesbian collective and started marching in the streets and...[whisper] *oh god it was wonderful!* Never got any sleep. Never had any money. Fucked a lot! Fucked around a lot. And, you know, ran the Women's Center on the campus and helped to help to design a radical anthropology program. Helped to design a health care clinic. It was like, I don't think I slept for two years, but I did a lot. And we did a lot in that collective. And some of the institutions we established still exist. But it's

interesting how things, you know, your life gets erased, or you yourself in your life get erased? ~~That was interesting. Oh well. But...~~

RAE:

You mean in terms of those -

DOROTHY:

In terms of the record of who did what and what kind of activism?

RAE:

Yeah. There's certain, yeah, certain personalities, it seems that get remembered.

DOROTHY:

Well, and also, frankly, there was a strong prejudice against queers. And so - even though mostly it was the dykes, who were running these peer counseling and the health center and the Women's Center, and somehow there was always a straight girl who got put up front, and she got credit for all the work we were doing. And you know, it wasn't necessarily evil because...you know I worked for the Social Security Administration and I would have lost my job if anybody had outed me. And I did eventually lose my job because I started, I developed a bleeding ulcer from telling people that we couldn't help them. Let me just say, this is not - it's a great way to become a writer. It's terrible for your health to do that kind of work. But we were, we were radical lesbian activists. We were doing shit all the time. It was a very heady active time, the early women's movement. And then this guy, one night, showed up, and fired a shotgun into our front door. It kind of discouraged us. [laugther]

RAE:

Yeah, I'd say!

DOROTHY:

So we moved to Washington, DC. But it was a huge jump to move from Tallahassee, which in many ways was a small town even though was the capital of Florida. to Washington, DC, which was an urban center. I had to buy a coat. I got it a thrift store. We - our collective move from Tallahassee to DC, and we rented a house together, there were three of us and...We had all been lovers, but we were no longer lovers. But we were a radical lesbian collective and just doing pretty much what we had done in Tallahassee, but doing it in DC, which is a larger stage, and more complicated, much more complicated. And I started writing bad stories, till I could learn how to make some decent ones. And teaching. And then one of the members of the collective fell in love with this girl who was a hustler. And she emptied our bank account.

RAE:

Oh shit!

DOROTHY:

And I was like, you know, okay, um. Okay. These things happen, but I was so pissed at Flo for bringing that girl home and letting that happen. And "Okay, I'm done" And I moved to New York to Brooklyn.

RAE:

What year was that?

DOROTHY:

Oh God!

RAE:

I can not ask years. [laughs] Decade? What decade was that?

DOROTHY:

81. Or maybe 80? I can't remember 79, 80, 81. In that area. Yeah, lived in Brooklyn. Rented an apartment with my friend, Morgan. And began to really explore my attraction to dangerous butch girls. Which could occasionally get you in serious trouble. I had a weakness for violence, had grown up on it. I thought it was normal. That stuff is complicated too. Morgan did not approve [laughter]. And then one day she threw a can of paint at me, and I said "That's it. I'm out here." So then I became a singleton. So it was an interesting life.

And I became - I became an editor. I had been working as a volunteer with magazines in DC. Well, I first worked with Amazing Grace in Tallahassee. And then I went to work with Quest in DC. And I worked with a bunch of little newspapers and magazines. And when I got to Brooklyn, got invited to join the staff of Conditions, which was a femme lesbian feminist journal. And that was really extraordinary. That changed my life again. In part because the staff of Conditions was half Black, and I had not, I had not had that kind of environment before. I had worked with some Black women, but was always that they were the vast minority. And Conditions was not about a minority. This was about "we are all going to work together and we're all going to do the same thing." And made some really great friends and lost a couple of people over time.

It was um...interesting times. A lot of drugs. A lot of stuff. And slowly began to write and got better. And began to publish and got better. It's hard to explain to people how

writers grow. You write a lot, you write badly. You write a little better. Eventually you write a little better and better, and eventually you get a sense of what you want to do. I was writing short stories when I started writing *Bastard*. I knew what I wanted to do. I just wasn't good enough. It took me a while to get good enough. Yeah.

But I moved to San Francisco to get out in New York. Frankly because um - because aside from a weakness for mean ass bitches who'd kick the shit out of me before they fucked me, I also had a weakness for amphetamines. And...I had to quit that. Had to. Near killed myself. So I moved to San Francisco and got clean - my version of clean. Liquor was never my problem. But uh, something to keep me awake for days on end, so I could work more? That was my weakness, and I pretty much spent it. And, and also, I had to face the fact that I couldn't keep - I couldn't keep dating women who'd put me in the hospital.

So when I moved to San Francisco, I got very rational and I went and found a therapist, this gay male therapist and worked with him for a while. And I met with him two or three times, and I was living on unemployment and selling articles to the Village Voice. I was writing for them fairly frequently, and didn't really have any money. And he met with me a couple of times, and he said, "Look, I could milk you for a couple of years. You got lots of stuff." He said, "But you know, really, you need to go do meetings. You need to go to an incest survivors group, and you need to do 90 meetings in 90 days. You need to do the standard movie, read these three books. And don't be spending your money with me. You're too smart for this." And I'm like, "I think there's something wrong with that last sentence." But he was right. I had never... even though I had written stories about it, I had never um...owned being an incest survivor. I had never...talked about all the ways that it shaped what I did and didn't do. And I didn't really pay much attention to how self destructive my particular sexual bent had become. You know, I mean, you can date bitches without winding up in the hospital.

RAE:

It's true,

DOROTHY:

I had to learn that. [laughter] And I was attracted to danger, it's this, you know, I'm, I was raised to be a fear based person, I had to break myself of it. So I did 90 meetings in 90 days and [sigh] got thrown out of an incest survivors group. Because I was so - I don't know - people sitting hugging their stuffed animals was a little much for me. Because I, you know, very much identified as a dyke. And I didn't want to be that wounded in public. And I had to get over that. But it's true that I did better with the alcoholics than

with the incest survivors group. But it took me a long time to sort a lot of that out. And I learned to write steering through it.

But I wasn't um, I wasn't that good at urban life. Because I'm largely a hermit. I don't like the noise. And I don't like the density in city life. Part of moving up here—aside from the fact that I came home from book tour for *Bastard* so exhausted and so sick—was that I needed to get out of... I needed to get away from the temptation to be going to do things all the time. And I needed to write another book and I was terrified. So moving up, here helped a lot.

RAE:

Terrified about writing the book?

DOROTHY:

Oh, yeah! Second book? Oh, yeah. And also, there was just....There's like two different things happening. One, the queer community, the gay and lesbian community, which really wants you to be out there on the frontlines, and very much a public presence and doing all kinds of stuff for the gay community. And then there are all the other gay and lesbian writers who are like, "What's so good about you? How come you're making a living and I'm not?" And that's painful, because you know there ain't no justice in that! I know great writers who've never made any money. And I know really fine and dedicated activists who have barely survived. So it's not *just*. It's not about justice. I was raised working class, I believe in luck. To a large extent, I work really hard, but I've lucked out.

But writing, writing is magic. And it works sometimes, and other times it doesn't and you're fucked. You just got to somehow survive the process. And try to enjoy it if you can. I like writing. I don't like publishing. I don't like the.....I don't like becoming an icon. It's uncomfortable? Um. And I'm not convinced that I know more than other people. But the system that we have in place, of lauding some people and disdaining other people assumes that some people know more. And I'm not convinced that's the case. Some of us just got more endurance....Sometimes.

We moved up here, cause I had to get the fuck out of San Francisco or I was gonna die. I have a tendency to push myself to collapse anyway. And I was doing it with such profound intensity that I would probably have managed to do myself more damage than I did. So we moved up here - one to raise our son. I don't know how the fuck that happened. I married a woman who wanted a baby. And I'm like, "I can always leave." [laughter] Didn't realize that I would fall in love with the baby. I knew I was in love with her. When you find a dangerous looking acting, but intensely...loving butch, it's kind of amazing. You know, it's like, "hold me down honey, but not too hard." [laughter] And I

had never known that you could say not too hard. And Alix was a extraordinary...extraordinary. It's been a good, solid, long term relationship. I sometimes - I find it really awkward to realize we've been together for 31 years. We used to date girls together...Kinky [laughter] But that got to be too exhausting. And they would fall in love with one or the other of us. And that was just too complicated. So we don't do that anymore. Flirt but don't follow through.

And then life takes you up and there is always something that needs doing. I mean, I know Trump is worse than almost anything we've had to deal with in the last 60 years of my life. But there is always some crazy fucker. Before Trump there was Jerry Falwell. There's always some crazy fucker. Like two or three weeks after the New York Times review of Bastard there were letters to the book review that said "Why are you putting a lesbian on the cover of the book review?"

It's the same old same old. We're still not - and even now we're still not acceptable. They still want to get rid of us. And or force us to assume a pretense of not being who we are. I think that's the issue, of course. They don't care if we fuck each other. We're just supposed to be ashamed of ourselves and do it in private. And I'm not ashamed of myself.

Rural, semi-rural. How does that change things? Quiet. Quiet. You can have a big dog. Big dogs are good for you.

RAE:

Do you ever miss the South?

DOROTHY:

I do. I've gone back to teach quite frequently. I have places I won't go. I went back to teach in South Carolina and then the South Carolina legislature voted to make it illegal for gay people to adopt. I said "Well that's it. We're not going back." I have relatively little power but what I have, I use. So fuck you.

I try to be part of a community. And it's much easier on the web. it's not the same though, to talk online, or to twit or to... Yeah, it's just not the same as sitting across the kitchen table and drinking iced tea and getting somebody to tell you the story of their life. Which is one of my favorite things in the world to do.

RAE:

Yeah.

DOROTHY:

Yeah.

RAE:

Me too.

DOROTHY:

Well it must be if you're doing this project.

RAE:

Yeah. yeah. What do you - what are things that you miss about the South?

DOROTHY:

Biscuits. People who know how to make a decent biscuit. [Rae laughing] People who know how to season a pan of beans. I mean, you go to all these quote unquote southern restaurants in New York City and San Francisco, or in fucking Sonoma County and they are just pathetic. Pathetic! They're - they're uncomfortable with pork. Well, let me just say you can't make beans without pork that taste worth a damn. And all these vegetarians make my teeth hurt.....Sorry.

RAE:

No don't be [laughing]

DOROTHY:

You can be a vegetarian but you do not have to be doctrinaire about it. There are limitations. Oh God.

No, I miss the South, and I miss the smell. I've gone and done residencies at various colleges in the South. In Georgia and North Carolina and Mississippi. And it's always interesting, it's a little tricky because you are their token queer. And you're acceptable, because you're mildly famous. And they're not sure how dangerous you are until you show them. That's always interesting. But I'm very, very clear that to a large extent, it's about tokenization. You know, I might be acceptable, but if I shaved my head, I wouldn't be. I know these things. And I know that - I keep track of the disdain that people express for other queer writers. And I don't work with them. It's real simple.

I can't teach as much and I can't travel as much. My health won't let me anymore. Which I should also- that's a thing I should say: you run yourself into the ground as

steadily as I have for most of my life, and you will pay for it. You know, I had a complete metabolic collapse a few years ago, and I couldn't digest food and...Christ I lost 50 pounds in five months and couldn't walk. And had to redesign my life. [laughs] I had to learn to sleep. Now I - it gets tiresome, it gets old, but hey, better to be going to the physical therapy and swimming and trying to eat a little less pork and a little more fresh vegetables [both laughing] But the big difference is to sleep.

Learning to write, writing itself is so um....it requires so much focus and intensity, the way I write. I mean I used to- I'd be working and I'd have to get up and walk back and forth and swing my arms in the air just to burn off some of the emotional energy that gets triggered with writing. And that will, long term, have some impact. My doctor tells me that to a large extent I've fucked up my metabolism by running it into the ground and treating my body like a racehorse that would be able to keep running

RAE:

Do you feel like writing has also, is it also like, has it been good?

DOROTHY:

Absolutely.

RAE:

Like healthy, healing? I don't know...

DOROTHY:

Absolutely. I don't know about this healing thing. I'm a little suspicious of-

RAE:

[laughing] You don't like that word?

DOROTHY:

Well, I'm just, I don't know that writing is healing. But I do think that the work of being able to write - and that means being able to think about your life and the lives of people you love - that work.... changes everything. And it is a great curative for self hatred. It really does allow you to short circuit some of that. But I was raised to hate myself. Most women in the South are. And I had to figure out that that was not necessary. You know, that I could live a different kind of life.

You think that because you're a lesbian, because you marry a woman, that you are short circuiting that whole system. But no, it's still there. And you still have all that ingrained self sacrifice. Jesus Christ, I was raised in the *Baptist Church!* There is no

worse environment for a sane female human being. Because you are raised to sacrifice yourself completely. You are raised to be in service to other people. And there is um...even to believe yourself valid, to believe yourself worthy of being loved to believe yourself sufficient in and of yourself - doesn't go along with being raised in the Baptist Church. And of course, I was a damn fool, fell in love with a Mormon. They're even worse! God save me! I don't know how I managed to find worse, but I did. They're worse. Yeah.

No um....and I don't believe in this California self love nonsense either. I believe in Ursula LeGuin. I want to be a grown up. I want to be a responsible citizen. I want to be an upfront and matter of fact member of my community. And I want to make, make it clear what I have survived and what it cost to survive it. I got a fuck a lot of cousins who died. Mostly killed themselves in stupid, stupid ways. You know not just liquor and drugs, but fast cars and violent lovers and... despair. Despair. Poverty is the inculcator of despair. No, I don't, I don't intend to ever participate or support a system that makes that the norm. And it is. It is. I got two sisters I've watched barely survive. And neither of them graduated from high school. We went back to the old standard. There are exactly, out of my thousands of cousins, there are six of us who graduated from high school and went to college. Five graduated from college. One was the Pathologist for the state of Alabama. One's a real estate agent in New Jersey. Little queer boy, he's very private. But no, we were - we are the grease that makes the engines of America run. We're the working class. And me, I'm just a run away. But we do interesting work us queer runaways.

And now, let me just say how grateful I am that there are so many young queer writers. Queer in the large sense lesbians and transgender activists and people who disdain the whole concept of gender, but who are great writers writing fascinating stuff. I love Roxane Gay. I adore Carmen Maria. I just, I think that they're - the new baby writers, Michelle Tea - she's not a baby anymore, I think she might be a grown up. I actually think they're all probably grown ups at this point. But that they are, that they have, it's like a next generation coming along and doing great work - makes me intensely happy. Also means I don't have to go to Detroit anymore. You know, cause they can go. They're younger. They can manage it. But also that they are profoundly feminist and queer. I'm an old school feminist. Pitiful but that's how it is.

[fade in upbeat acoustic guitar song by Tommy Anderson]

[EPISODE BREAK]

HB LOZITO: [Host]:

Hey friends, I'm HB Lozito with Out in the Open. Because we know the impact of colonization on people, land, and resources, we're encouraging our white listeners with access to wealth to engage in an ongoing process of reparations. So, during each episode break, we're asking our white listeners who have extra funds to donate to projects founded and led by queer and trans Black and Indigenous folks and people of color.

Today, we're asking you to support the GoFundMe of an incredible Southern writer named Lauren Garretson-Atkinson. Lauren is an Affrilachian creative hailing from the mountains of West Virginia. She received her BA in Africana Studies & Creative Writing from Hampshire College, and her MFA in Fiction from Virginia Tech. Non-traditional in most ways, Lauren enjoys pushing boundaries and genres in her writing, working with speculative-fiction, magical realism and historical fiction.

Lauren is raising money to support her in finding the time and space to finish the afrofuturist Appalachian novel she's been working on for years.

The link to the gofundme is in our episode notes, and also over on our websites at countryqueers.com and weareoutintheopen.org.

Now, back to Rae's 2018 interview with DOROTHY:

[END]

[fade under upbeat acoustic guitar song by Tommy Anderson]

RAE:

Um, I have two sorts of things. One is just sort of, because you've been through so many stages of

DOROTHY:

Incarnations.

RAE:

Well, and also like, so much queer history, so much movement history, so much feminist history? I don't know. I just wonder if um....like, what you think about this, where some of some of the like queer movementy, organizing stuff is, or some like, our conversations around feminist things in the world today? Like, do you feel like we've lost some important things? Or do you think it's really interesting what's happening?

DOROTHY:

Well, we lose track of the fact that there is always resistance. Patriarchy, all that language is so dead. But it's also true. The boys don't want to give ground. More than that, the self serving churches don't want to give ground. That's the other gift of being raised in the Baptist Church: I'm clear about how that shit works. And clear that most of the deacons are used car salesmen and they're not to be trusted. And I met way too many preachers who are evil sons of bitches. So I distrust all of that. And I'm aware of the fact that they are constantly fighting, to on some level, reestablish parameters of gender, that are profoundly oppressive to women. Profoundly, we are just....we are the grease that makes the society work. And large of it is because almost all of our labor is unpaid. So in terms of confronting that: no, we're not doing enough. And we're not doing it right. Although I'm not sure what right would be. Because the, the huge range of ways that we have attempted to organize and change this culture...I had begun think we were making progress and look where we are now! Whoooo! Surprise, surprise sons of bitches. Surprise, surprise.

I'm writing a book. And it's entirely different than anything I've ever written before. And it is a look back at the early 70s and the early women's movement. And one of the gifts I'm giving myself is permission to use a lot of my own life and write about it. That means that also I have been writing about it and thinking about it. And thinking about what it was like to be a poor kid in love with language. Because you know, this is the trick. The reason you become a writer is that you love books and you love story. And you love language. I love language. Everything from gospel music to Jory Graham's poetry, I love language. And it's what made me work so hard at being a good writer rather than just - it's always seemed to me that there were just too many people willing to settle for the effort, but not really pushing it, and pushing in what they could do. And it to me that was parallel with the whole... the work of being a feminist activist was also about on some level, examining how your life worked, and how other women's lives worked and how, how we could *change* it.

Because God.... I cannot look at my mother and my sisters without enormous grief, for how much they were robbed, and how ground down they became. Poor women in this society, we are the [sigh] Everything runs on our backs. And we are constantly robbed.

Watching my mother in the last years of her life dying of cancer. And she was a waitress and a cook. She died at 56. She had to drop out of the sixth grade when she got pregnant *with me*. She married a violent abuser. She always thought that everything that happened was her fault. She died believing absolutely that she was going to Hell. And nothing I said seem to reach her, she was just in this place of terror and despair. That's most women's lives.

We live in an unjust society. More and more. It seems to me that we don't hold the rich accountable. And what's happening in this country is that there is more and more a class of people who are so rich that they really do disdain the vast majority of us. Donald Trump is one nightmarish individual, but there is a - it's a whole class of people who really do feel that for them to live well it is justifiable that most live in misery.

There's a wonderful story by Ursula LeGuin that I've taught for *years*. It's called "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas." And it is about - it is the description of this amazing, perfect, wonderful place called Omelas. And it is everyone there is happy and healthy and there is no loss. There is no despair. They have celebrations in the streets. Singing and dancing. But.....the whole of the existence of Omelas is justified in part by the fact that as adolescents mature, each and every young person is taken down, down into the deepest basement in the biggest building in Omelas. And a door is opened on a closet. And in that closet is a child who has been kept there. In the dark. Very little food. Living in their own shit. Never spoken to. Never touched. Who only screams. Every citizen of Omelas has to look at this child, and know that the glory and wonder of their city is dependent on there always being a child in that closet.....That's how I feel about America. We allow that. And Ursula LeGuin is brilliant, because what she writes is this description in which for the whole first half of the story, you're in love with this place, this Omelas, you want to go there. And then she tells you about the closet. And the end of the story is the title, "the ones who walk away." That there are some who cannot accept that for them to be happy, someone must be in misery.

Our society accepts that for some to be vastly rich, many others must live in misery. Go read Barbara Ehrenreich. Read about the lives of waitresses for Christ's sake - I got through college as a waitress and a maid. Horror. Sheer horror. And barely survival. And we construct a society in which that's the norm. I can't ever accept that. I can't believe in that. What I loved about the early women's movement was that I felt united in a nation of women who could not accept that, and who were struggling to change it. And when the gay lesbian movement melded into that and I had this sense of a really intense.....it was like we all came together and said, "No. Not in my name. I do not require that anyone suffer for me to be happy." And that is a very profound distinction. But we have failed it as a culture. Oh, God, are we really failing it now!

Even though, I had begun to imagine that we were working toward a more just society. And look where we are! Look where we wound up. Same old, same old It's just - I think the other thing that has happened to me in the last two decades is that I have been invited into enclaves in which I have seen how the rich live. It's.....there is no justification for gold faucets, when there are children starving. There is - there is no measure by which it is reasonable for some to have literally untold wealth, while there are people walking the streets because they have nowhere to sleep. This is not the world I want to live in, or the society I want to support. At least up here in these small towns? You go downtown, you will see the people in trouble. They'll be on the street. You will - you don't hide away from them in your enclave with high walls. You will be among them. You will go to the grocery store and you will see them counting their pennies to see if they can afford a bag of rice.

No. I don't - I don't want to live in a world that walls off. [sigh] So I am a socialist! And I am - but more than that there is no justifying the level of.....I got invited to one of Jeff Bezos's gatherings. And, they sent a private plane to get me.

RAE:

Woah.

DOROTHY:

I know! And my girlfriend is like "Okay, this is it. I don't ever want to fly coach again." And I'm like "No baby. We're not ever going to fly in this thing again." That there are people who have that access to resources that they.....I was trying to tell myself, that there, that there are the rich who give back. There are the rich who participate in the society with some sense of justice. Then you look at Ivanka Trump [laughter] Or Jeff Bezos. And that someone would have not just riches but vast riches. But meanwhile pays the people that work in his jobs so little. It's horrifying! Can you handle a dog?

RAE:

Yeah, yeah. yeah

DOROTHY:

Just keep hold of your...

RAE:

My recorder?

DOROTHY:

Yeah.

RAE:

All right.

DOROTHY:

I can't believe it or accept it. It's a bit much.....Come on baby!

RAE:

Hey, there. You are beautiful! Look at those eyes. Hey! You want to sniff on the recorder?

DOROTHY:

He wants to sniff you!

RAE:

I smell like Lola, my brother's dog. Hey!

DOROTHY:

No, no, no. That's enough love. That's enough love.

RAE:

You are a beauty!

DOROTHY:

He's a rescue. He's a husky German Shepherd mix you can tell by the

RAE:

Yeah.

DOROTHY:

Yeah.

RAE:

Do you think you're a lap dog?

DOROTHY:

He wants to be.

RAE:

Yeah!

DOROTHY:

He was briefly a puppy. [laughter]

RAE:

You remember it so well don't you? The laps?

DOROTHY:

When we first got him, he was still small enough that I would sit in the big chair in the living room and he would climb into my lap.

RAE:

You are just a beauty.

DOROTHY:

But just a sweet dog. Very sweet.

RAE:

Well's there anything else you want to say before I turn this recorder off?

DOROTHY:

Well....where is it you're living now?

RAE:

I live in east Kentucky, southeast Kentucky.

DOROTHY:

Oh my! Nice country, but, oh, my.

RAE:

It's a whole different place than out here.

DOROTHY:

Yeah. And kind of hard to get to sometimes. It's very hard - it's all these hills getting up there. And then there's always these hills coming down on the road.

RAE:

It's true. it's true. Coal trucks...

DOROTHY:

You can get there, but you can't get back. But gorgeous and scary. And you know, my friend Chris offet's from there. And the way he talks about it and the way he writes about it. It's uh it. It reminds me of how my uncles talked about South Carolina. You know, incredibly poor, incredibly dangerous, incredibly beautiful. And a landscape you fall in love with that you don't know how to live in.

RAE:

Yeah. And that's been ripped apart for a long, long time,

DOROTHY:

A long, long time.

RAE:

Water poisoned all that. I grew up in West Virginia - over southeastern West Virginia, which is more like - wow it's so different without this headphone in - It's more like farmland and tourism and open valleys. Still Still got some rough spots outside but there's outside the main really bougie tourist town. But um, but the coalfields are like a different level down where I am and Kentucky. Yeah, it's a different level. Yeah. But even over there in West Virginia, I worked in the public schools and, you know, for an organization that supported kids in crisis, and so, you know, I'd say 85% of them had parents who were - had ODED, were incarcerated for drugs, or were trying to stay clean, but the closest place they could go was a two hour drive. Yeah, you know, it's just, and then the coalfields. It's like, even less jobs because there's not the tourism. So it's a whole scene over there, but it's gorgeous.

DOROTHY:

it's hard to explain the gorgeous like, South Carolina is gorgeous. It's gorgeous. But we grew up in a mill town. There was no work except in the mills. And unless you were - my family, my mother - was hated the mills never let us work there. She threw the biggest fit when we were - I guess like sixth grade. They took our entire class to tour the JC Penney mill. And my mother didn't know that this was happening and told her that it happened. And then she was hysterical

RAE:

That they'd taken you in there?

DOROTHY:

Yeah. And She says, "You are never none of you are ever working" because she had done it. And she knew how bad it was. And yeah, Jesus. But the level of - there's a level

of poverty, you can never dig yourself out because it's designed to keep you poor. Yeah. And the stuff in the air'll fuck you up, it's as bad as the coal mines. Yeah. Yeah. It's just hard to even to explain to people.

RAE:

It is, it is. It's so different. There's like the county that I'm living in, they're trying to, they're trying to build a federal prison as a new economic development in the coalfields on a former mountain top removal site. So it's like this land that's already just been like, shredded and doesn't have water. And now they're trying to-

DOROTHY:

And it's polluted,

RAE:

and it's polluted. And then this is like our new industry after coal, right for people. That's like, a horribly unhealthy job for people. Like, my friend Ada is like, "nobody dreams about becoming a prison guard. That's not like what you dream of growing up to be but people'll take jobs, you know?"

DOROTHY:

Any jobs they can get Yeah.. I remember.

RAE:

Yeah. It's a different.

DOROTHY:

Most of my cousins became roofers, because there were roofers in the family and they could get in. But mostly what they did was that they went up to New Jersey, and pretended to be roofers They would hire him to put a new roof on, they've pour tar on your roof, collect their money and drive away. And then come the heat and it melts off.

RAE:

Oh my god [laughter]

DOROTHY:

And it was always, I mean, I was deeply ashamed that that was what they did to make a living. But I also understood that their choices were terrible, right? There wasn't a whole lot of options.

RAE:

Do you just like to gaze into eyes, lovingly?

DOROTHY:

He does actually, and he'll lick on you. He says "yes! You smell good!"

RAE:

[laughs] Well, thank you so much for doing this. I know I took a chunk of your afternoon but...

DOROTHY:

Well, it's been lovely talking to you!

RAE:

You too! So good to meet you!

DOROTHY:

And good luck with your whole project.

RAE:

Thank you. Thank you.

[fade in upbeat acoustic guitar song by Tommy Anderson]

RAE GARRINGER & HB LOZITO [Host Outro]:

HB: Hey there, I'm HB Lozito from Out in the Open

RAE: And I'm Rae. This episode was produced by me with support from HB. Thank you so much to Dorothy for sharing your story with me back in 2018 and for all the lifesaving writing you have given us. Music in this episode is by Tommy Anderson, Sam Gleaves, and Rebecca Branson Jones.

HB: This is the final episode for Season 2 - our collaboratively produced adventure. There were so many people who made this season happen.

Thank you to all of our community producers: Ku'i'olani Cotchay, Miguel Mendías, Tommy Anderson, KD Randle, Zach Henningsen, and Tovi DeGroot. Thank you also to everyone who shared your story with us in this season: Ku'i'olani Cotchay, Miguel

Mendías, KD Randle, Reverend Sandras Anderson, Adria Stenbridge, Sam Gleaves, Sharonna Golden, Dana Kaplan, and DOROTHY:.

RAE: We also want to thank Hideo Tokui and William Isom for sharing your expertise with all of us during this project, Hideo for all of your sound design magic that really made this season shine. Thank you Vick Quezada, Country Queers's social media artist, OITO staff member Eva Westheimer, and Stefani Priskos for your transcription support this season!

Also Thank you,

HB: SO MUCH,

RAE: to our brilliant editorial advisory dream team: Hermelinda Cortés, Lewis Raven Wallace, and Sharon P. Holland for EVERYTHING!!!!!!! We couldn't have done this without you! And thanks to Leslie Salvador Vallejo for your editorial input while mentoring with Lewis.

We are so grateful to the musicians who shared their music with us for this season: Nayeema, Tommy Anderson, Sam Gleaves, Rebecca Branson Jones, Dana Kaplan, Slutpill, Tears for the Dying, Amythyst Kiah, Podington Bear and One Man Book.

HB: We want to thank the groups who made this season possible through financial support: the Southern Power Fund, the Queer Mobilization Fund at the Southern Vision Alliance, Country Queers Patreon Supporters, Out in the Open donors and Wild Geese Foundation,

RAE: If you liked what you heard, please subscribe, rate, and review the Country Queers podcast. You can find all of our episodes and more about the project at www.countryqueers.com. While you're there please consider signing up to be a sustaining supporter of Country Queers on our Patreon page.

HB: You can also find this episode over on our website at www.weareoutintheopen.org. While you're there, check out our other work building power of rural LGBTQ+ folks and find ways to connect.

RAE: Things will be quiet here on the feed for awhile, while we dream and scheme about what's next, and take some much needed rest. We're sending lots of love to all the rural and smalltown queer and trans folks out there. Take good care.

Until next time...

HB: stay queer out there, friends!

[Song ends. Fade in cicadas and crickets]

HB & RAE [Host bloopers]:

RAE: How do you wanna do this part? Do you want to both say it?

HB: Yeah, I think we say it, both together.

RAE: Ok, 1, 2, 3...Until-

HB: Until next time

Ok, let's try again

[Very off on timing / both laughing]

HB: Can you do like a point? Don't they do that on TV?

RAE: Oh I don't work in TV! I work in radio!

[both laughing]

RAE: I don't think I can do this without cracking up.

[both laughing]

Ok. Let's try it.....

Can you do the countdown?

[both laughing hard]

HB: Ok, Ok, ready? Until next time

RAE: Until next

[Very off on timing / both laughing]

Wow!

[END]