

## “C. Fausto Cabrera and Zeke Caligiuri on Precarity and Critical Resistance”

*Works of Justice* (Episode 301, May 2023)

PEN America, Prison and Justice Writing Program

Podcast Transcript



### *Intro Music*

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** That's something I think I'll always give you credit for, Zeke, because before that I figured like I was, I was trying to find myself. I was studying the Bible. I was studying, you know, religion. I was studying these practices. I was trying to figure out like, how am I going to maintain my life? Is it okay to be interested in art and poetry and all that shit?

So like, for me, that was like the greatest gift, is the opening this door of this creative community. And I feel like every time me and Zeke met up, that was what the basis was.

### *Music Transition*

**Malcolm Tariq:** Welcome back to Works of Justice, a content series that explores the intersection of writing and incarceration.

I am Malcolm Tariq, Senior Editorial Manager of PEN America's Prison and Justice Writing Program, which for over 50 years has amplified the voices of writers who are creating while incarcerated. To subscribe to the monthly works of justice newsletter that accompanies this podcast, please visit [pen.org/prison-writing](https://pen.org/prison-writing). That's P-E-N dot org slash prison hyphen writing.

For the first episode of our third season, I had the honor of speaking with C. Fausto Cabrera and Zeke Caligiuri, two of the first writers whose work I encountered when I started at PEN America in early 2022. A few months after I started, Zeke was released after serving several years of his sentence, and about a year and a half later, his friend, C. Fausto, came home and joined him on the outside.

Both have published widely, including their own book projects, and are 2024 Writing Freedom Fellows with Haymarket Books and the Mellon Foundation. C. Fausto and Zeke are also two of 11 co-editors of *American Precariat: Parables of Exclusion*, an anthology of essays published by Coffee House Press in fall 2023 that explores the complexity and fluidity of class and caste systems in the United States within societal structures of exclusion, scarcity, and criminality.

In this episode, the two writers talk candidly about how they helped to secure writing and educational programs inside Minnesota prisons, and how the anthology was produced because of those efforts. In this first part, the two talk about how they developed a friendship in the wake of the Stillwater Poetry Group, which was disbanded after a shutdown of educational programs. Afterwards, the two combined talents and experiences to advocate for the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop to enter the prison.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** Alright, you wanna go first?

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** I go by Chris, usually, like, just to my inner circle. C. Fausto is more of my pen name, but, um, and, um, I figured I'd go first, Zeke, because if you want to kick us off, and start.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** Okay. All right, well, and then I'm Zeke Caligiuri. And I'm a writer, organizer, um, working in the community from South Minneapolis, right, who, um, did a big, long stretch of my life incarcerated, and it ended up sort of like being the catalyst for what I do and for the work I create.

I guess, too, like, I guess the beginning of it is that, uh, I've been out since 2022. Chris—I mean, I'm sure you'll be able to contextualize a little bit—just came home about, was it six, seven weeks ago, right? So this is all very fresh, but it's the culmination of really a lifetime of, of a working partnership, a friendship, uh, you know, like sort of like a, an establishment of roles within like a broader community over many of the years.

And so I guess when- when we met it was early 2000s. I'd say probably what about 2003 or something. I don't remember exactly when you came in to Stillwater Correctional Facility, which is not the oldest, but it's sort of the flagship institution in the state of Minnesota. It was the original prison in Minnesota, even before it was a state.

It's famous for a couple of different things, but it's famous because we had the Younger Brothers from the Big James Gang that spent a great deal of time in those buildings too and also were part of, like, the original creative community that built *The Prison Mirror*, which is this, you know, prison newspaper that existed forever.

So at the time we met, what, I was the clerk in, in higher-ed slash like testing, uh, and so, you know, I was just responsible for helping people get into like, correspondence courses or figure out where there was money to be able to go to school. There was none, right? There was no money for people to go to school.

So I was most often a guy that was helping people fill out like FAFSA forms for, you know, straight institution, straight grant money or whatever. Just try to get people filling out these, this paperwork. But it was a very early sort of lesson in understanding the scarcity of the way resources were distributed.

I think when you come to the program, right, I believe you were in, um, the art program. So I, what I knew of you was through our friend Dallas, who I always sort of acknowledge as sort of like, kind of like a, a historian in those places. He's done a big, long stretch. He predated us. He is still there. We still talk to him to this day, but he was somebody who sort of carried the fire, very much Prometheus-like thing and passed it along to folks like us to be able to help, like, expand.

It was a whole storytelling kind of history, and I always- I, you know, I point to him and that relationship as somebody who, who did that. And he knew Chris before he was incarcerated. They knew each other when they were young. And he introduced me and basically said, this is somebody I know, it's good. And what I had heard of you was there's this guy, he's in the art program, right? I don't remember exactly if you were using mostly pastels back then or whatever it was. But I do remember people being like, "He's the deal." Right?

At the same time, too, like, I'm not so enamored with who's the deal. I just, you know, if somebody I know and trust introduced me to this person, I'm willing to give that person a shot. And so, like, at that particular time, we didn't know each other particularly well. I was trying to write poems. Right? And trying to sort of figure out what it would be like, you know, to live a writing life at the time, 2003, 2004, right?

I didn't under- you know, I didn't understand necessarily what writing community was. I didn't know. These were all things I was just kind of learning organically. It was also like learning what like, a prison, uh, community can look like.

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** Yeah, I think all that comes by way of hindsight too, because I think in the real time we didn't, we weren't thinking like that, you know, I mean, we're early 20s.

I was, you know, 23, 24 coming into the joint, like you said, trying to figure out, you know, how I navigate the space and, uh, you know, we're not cliqued up, we were really coming in the joint, you know, with all the bullshit expectations and fears that anybody carries into the space yet, you know, you're coming in with, you know, you know, 20 or better years to do.

So you're looking at it like, how am I going to survive this place? But at the same time, like, do I have to fight today? Like, am I going to have to, you know, like whoop somebody today for looking at me funny or trying me? So you're young and you're trying to figure it out. I knew Dallas when I was 14. Uh, I knew him in the, um, running the streets and shit like that.

And so when he came in, he came in in like '94, '96 or something like that. No, I had to be '94. Yeah, because he was, I was 14. Uh, so coming in the joint, seeing him, he, he threw me to Zeke talking about, I should go to school, try to do college. I was already into art, you know, I was trying to find my lane. Just what am I supposed to be doing?

And so, but you come into the joint and you find that, oh, there's these creative spaces. There's an art room. There's an education, uh, department in a building, you know, building that you can go to, you know, just to, to study, to be around books, be around other, you know, you know- and I, I like to, I think we all would call ourselves nerds, you know, I'm more, but I was always a nerd. I just didn't know it. Like I, and you're projecting that toughness coming in. So, um, when I met Zeke, it was almost like a permission to develop these nuances and really step into it in a way that didn't seem like it was a, um, betrayal of, you know, who I am as a tough guy identity coming into the joint.

Like that, that's something I think I'll always give you credit for, Zeke. Because, before that I figured like I was, I was trying to find myself. I was studying the Bible. I was studying, you know, religion. I was studying these practices. I was trying to figure out like, how am I going to maintain my life? Is it okay to be interested in art and poetry and all that shit?

So, like, for me, that was, like, the greatest, you know, gift is the opening this door of this creative community. And I feel like every time me and Zeke met up, that was what the basis was. Like, it was on the yards, we would talk about these ideas. Uh, in this little, you know, time we'd have, I'd be refereeing, he'd be on the sidelines, or something like that, or I'd just be visiting yards and we'd politic.

And it always came back to like, creative community and what we individuals, you know, have going on, but also like, well, we should get together and do something about, you know, this lack of, uh, opportunity in this place.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** When we were young, I mean, I think about that particular time, I needed something that said, this is the reason not to give up on all the rest of the shit, right? I needed something that said, nah, you got some purpose.

And there was an old school kind of idea of an intellectual kind of community that lived in prisons. Now, I don't know, I couldn't speak for other prisons. I had never been in prison before. But my idea was that like Malcolm went to prison and came back empowered, right? And you think about George Jackson, or you think about Jimmy Santiago Baca. And we think about all these sorts of figures because we've, we, there is a narrative of, you know, this redemption narrative that exists that like, you know, but when you get here, you don't realize how much of that stuff has been legislated out of the everyday.

So when, when we meet, we're at a point in the early 2000s, when like, our system is changing into a system that's not going to provide in the same way. So when he's talking about, uh, maybe getting signed up for college or I'm working on these programs like, we know that this- there are very limited slots and we realize that like, uh, even the classes that are coming are coming one or two at a time.

We're watching this sort of burn down and we have to kind of figure out how to get all of our stuff out of the house before it goes away, right? Because I know I wanted to write books. I didn't know what those books were going to be at the time. You got a lot of attention for a lot of the things that you were creating at the time, but you're also like, how do we do this without it going away forever, right?

And I think that was always the great fear, and I think the artists in those places, I've said it many times, I say it even in the introduction to *American Precariat* around, um, like the fact that if you put creatives in a space, even if you don't know each other, they always find each other because there's enough of like this need for our art to survive, right?

Like early on, I didn't realize what it was, is that I needed, you know, the legacy. I needed like my work to be able to survive. I just thought I needed to survive. And I thought that that was what it was. And I had not drawn or made that, that parallel or you know, intertwined those two points yet.

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** So the original Stillwater poetry group that you referenced in the beginning was like right before me. So I came in and that was, you know, a shit show as far as in like, you guys had this thing, you had people that came in and cared, you know, took a step toward creative writing and then you lost everything and everybody's work got erased. So like you had this collection of what was it 12 or, you know, some poets like in this circle group and then the D.O.C. came by and said, "nope."

So like coming in, everybody was like, no, that you can't trust that, they're just going to take your shit. You know that I could- I felt that shit, you know, and I felt that how bruised you know people's egos were over that. Like there's a couple individuals that were like, I'm never going to write again, and they didn't, you know, not creatively.

So I came in with kind of a, uh, a naivete about like, even doing it because I didn't- I didn't care. I was like, I don't care. Like, so what if they take it? We got to figure out what we're supposed to be doing now, 'cause I'm bored. I don't want to go play fucking spades all the time. I needed decompression from drawing. So, like, you know, art was turning into work for me.

So I was looking for another creative outlet and I was like, I'm willing to do the work and I got some space to do it. So, you know, fuck it. Let's do it. If they tear it down, they tear it down. Who cares? Because it was the, you know, it was the active critical resistance.

And this is what you talk about a lot, about this, the history of these things and how, you know, when you come up against a brick wall, what do you do? I mean, do you try to- do you try to climb despite your, you know, best efforts? Do you, you know, are you just paranoid about the trapdoor that you can't see yet?

You know, so like, who are you as a person? Because you were doing it anyway for your personal, you know, right? You knew you were a writer, you were writing, period. You know, so me coming in, seeing that and being influenced by that and inspired by that and wanting to like, figure out, oh, well, this is a new avenue, let me- let me fuck with it.

Uh, you know, that inspired me to be like, oh, okay, well, let's create a space that can't be torn down. Which I don't think you, you know, I mean, honestly, I don't think we necessarily believed it at first. We just didn't.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** I think we always looked at it like, we want people to come, but we don't trust that they'll stay.

And it's not necessarily because they don't want to, it's usually because this is just the way the system is. It gives you a short revolution and they don't really want you to hold on to things, right? I think, like, it's easy to say, I'm in school and I'm taking these things serious. It was a demonstration where like I could physically like, bring something to my family who is still invested in me, was still- but was questioning like how long are we supposed to invest in this person who we have to go visit them in the- in the penitentiary every single week and try to like, show that love and like, show the, you know, the hope and the- and the idea that like, we still have something redemptive coming out of it. I think like being able to create some art- school was one thing, but like being able to like create some art to show somebody and show our people, this is the reflection of that, like it was huge for me and I don't know about you, but it feels to me like at some point too, like I- I didn't want my people thinking that I was, you know, this sort of like lost and pretty much like broken human being at this point.

I needed my people to know there was something redemptive still in me because we're pre- we're pre all the idea and the understanding of what mass incarceration is and what this incar- and what, like, penitentiaries and living in a cell means, right? We were pre all that. We were very much in a spot that if you don't demonstrate something exceptional about yourself, like you just become one of the rest of the people, right? It was something to be able to be like, I'm still here. This is still me. It's not necessarily me being homogenized into like, a prison culture.

And so what, I would say then, like we knew each other, we were allies. We weren't colleagues yet. Right? Like, I think like the moment comes is that, uh, whole sort of we had this this big education

shutdown. Uh, all the computers were wiped. Part of that is we lose these things, and they're trying to sort of start some things back up in education, but don't want to give anybody computer access, right?

Uh, it was, it was a really funny time because everything was about surveillance and control and stuff, and Professor Deborah Appelman, Professor John Schmidt, uh, Deborah Appelman wrote the book, *Words No Bars Can Hold*, a lot of this is documented in that and, you know, a lot of our work is in that too. She's really been sort of a godmother to this part of the movement.

Uh, they start classes on like, literary theory. I think the class that you and I actually interact with most closely that ends up kind of being, um, the beginning of sort of like what our relationship would be, um, as colleagues and friends comes from- it was a class called Language and Power. Because John Schmidt was a linguist, and Deborah Appelman, uh, she teaches English, uh, educational philosophy, right, like, is a, you know, powerhouse in, in, in the universe of, like, teaching other educators, there's a whole, like- and we don't know any of this stuff at all, and then we come and these people with this energy in front of you are talking to us about what our language can do in the world and what language does in the- for me, it was huge, right, that was a- and also, like, super refreshing.

A lot of this was reviving for me, just even our relationship to education. I was very bitter and upset about what they had done. A lot of us lost really good jobs and were part of these big- this big shutdown to, you know, suppress, like, things that to us were essential to our being. Um, Professor Appelman had said to me too, like, you know, if you're going to take it serious, if you're going to write, if this is what you think you're going to do, it's time to just do it and not really worry.

And for me, that was like, it changed my life completely. And also then at that point too, like, gave, you know, me and Chris sort of a kernel in, in which to like work through what we want out of this system because not- just shortly after that, right, is when they then banned her for whatever reason, the way prisons banned her and she couldn't come back in.

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** I want to say too, that that was the moment when you decided to come over to the unit too. Like, so prior to that, you had been working in a different unit. So our access to each other wasn't as uh, plentiful, it was a couple hours a week, maybe that we'd just be able to kick it. So Zeke decides to come over and focus on writing his book and you don't get a job being a unit swapper in the unit I'm in.

So that allowed us to be able to, you know, kick it in the cells together, to have these conversations, to have these bigger conversations and the grandiose idea of maybe a writing program, um, because the art program was pretty intact, because it was an actual job. So they couldn't necessarily dismantle that.

And that's where I was. And I had computer access, just personal computer access. So there were these different layers that you just figure it out and, and you have to just be slick about it. But, uh, yeah, you started filling in notebooks, like, right in the unit. And that's- that allowed us really, that was the real foundation of build- the building of the program.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** So I'm trying to, I'm trying to write this book for me, like this gave me real purpose, but I needed to be able to type. I had been filling notebooks and everything. Now, when I had been

the clerk in the higher-ed, I was a part of a group, the guys I worked with at the time—shout out Dean Kennedy—we had proposed this computer lab.

So essentially the computer lab that we needed to like, sort of facilitate and allow folks to be able to work with their work had been just basically dreamed and enacted by incarcerated people. We had to create our own networks and stuff in order to make sure these things could live and thrive in an era when nobody was trying to give anything.

You couldn't type your own personal things, right? You had to figure out ways in which like, you could get in there, it could still kind of like, fall within these lines, but they were all things created by our incarcerated population, right? Like, so even at the very beginning, before we- we've built, you know, what we end up building later on, it was because these networks, they have to live in order for these things to happen in these facilities. We're talking about a computer lab that had to be created in order for us later on to then build a strategy around how do we get into the computer lab, right? I mean, I know that might be too obfuscated for, you know, the overall story, but that's kind of what it was.

So I went over there so I could get a job so I could type more, right? I needed to be able to type, so I took like, a janitor job in the unit, and then during the day I could go type, right? That was the whole kind of plan. And then also be able to be in creative space with you, Chris, with- with the other folks in this- in this unit, right?

'Cause when I left my job, I had more access than anybody probably in the system because it was such a wide open thing, you had the whole ground. It's a hard job to give up when you can still be in it. And I remember telling people, that you remember asking, like, why are you leaving? Right? We had sports teams in our units that had won championships, and they're talking to us, like, why would you leave a championship sports team? As though, like, there wasn't anything beyond that in the universe.

And I told them I'm going to write, and I remember them asking, like, what? What are you gonna write, letters to people? I don't- they had no concept of this fact that like you would have this creative work, and so that's why it was also very important to get over there, because I knew that there was some other minds that were trying to create and do some things too. I also just wanted to be able to help accelerate some of that too, and needed that change.

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** And that speaks to the timing, too. Like the timing of it is, Malcolm, like nobody was looking to hear our stories. Like I'm part of more of a restorative justice, you know, nuance or angle of programming for prison. I would be part of these groups where people are talking about these intense emotional things and, um, like figuring their life out through these processing of these groups, but it doesn't seem like it's going anywhere, it's almost like just to shame you. So, for me coming to writing was that.

So, Zeke's already has this thing mapped out, but I'm thinking in my mind, like, what the fuck am I going to do writing poetry? I don't know anything about that or- but then there's this need to be able to figure out how to tell my story in a way that doesn't sound like I'm being a victim, doesn't sound like I'm making excuses. So, like, the gift of writing and creative writing period, like, that's universal.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** That's always a lot of times it's like we have this redemption story that people tell always. If you don't tell it in that sort of form, it's almost like it doesn't get the same kind of attention, but artistically, like it's not saying anything new, right?

Like how are we going to say something new? How are we going to really tell our stories and also not feel like a bitch and like that I'm not just sort of doing this at the behest of the, you know, of the institution.

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** For me- for me, it was like, you're doing these things in these groups and it's disappearing. And then they shame you for it. Like, so you get to a point to where they'd be like, oh, could you tell us your story? And then you tell it, and this is the 50th time I've told my story and I'm not crying, I'm not breaking down, I'm not emotionally like, inept anymore because in the beginning it was- it is hard to tell your, you know, the- you know, the- the- own up to some shit. But then like, I was seeing like, oh, this is like, I'm not doing anything with this.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** Nobody wanted to let you get free once you've been accountable. You can be the most accountable, you can do these things, and the point was, it didn't make you any more of a human being to the people that were running institutions.

So, they had stopped letting these professors in. And so, that was that point when we got together too. And you came to me, I remember you coming to me and saying, if we create something, you know, this is what it could look like. And he's talking about, um, he's talking about long-term mentorship program, he's talking about like, making sure we have classes, ongoing classes- because for me, I remember feeling like the great thing that we were cheated was an association with a real world community, a real world literary, a real world arts community, because that is where sort of like the networks and the understanding of like how- what it was going to take to be able to create, right?

Like, I mean, there is still very much the, if I create a book, I'm just hoping it's going to somehow get in the right hands and go somewhere with it. But like, like, now knowing what I know from being out here in the world, like, I understand that that's not the usual formula, right? Like, that's not just like- and it's not like, gonna just happen on its own unless like, and so, uh, back then it was like, I just need to figure out a way in which I can finish this, this book and we can finish these things and like, not have more things get in the way of our sort of creative careers starting and, you know, and accelerating at the point, like when you're kind of feeling like there's a little push too, because there's a fear. Things die. It's like we die.

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** And I- I saw it in, you know, in different dynamics too, like, since I wasn't a writer, I was looking at it from like, a power dynamic. Like, it was- I was upstairs running the art program, I was doing the budget, I was doing everything. I wrote the curriculum, I was teaching people how to draw from scratch. I was doing all these things because I created, um, an avenue once I understood the system. So like being in that space and seeing that, like, for me, it was almost like, well, fuck, we can do this ourselves. We don't need anybody.

So it was really an act of defiance and you know, like, well, fuck them. We can figure it out, I'll figure that out. And Zeke was working on his book and was focused. He didn't have time to be doing none of this shit. So I was like, I was just bored. I was ready for a new challenge. So a lot of the shit was, I was just doing that shit out of, you know, spite, like, or out of like, you know-



**Zeke Caligiuri:** –my favorite reason. My favorite reason to do stuff.

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** Right. Like, and that's- for me, that's- you know, and we talk about, you know, this positivity and reform and all that. Really? There's so much of this was created out of dark spite, you know, just dark, sick energy. Like you got me fucked up. I'm going to do something to show you how fucked up you got me. And, you know, look at where we're at now. I feel like–

**Zeke Caligiuri:** –we knew it was a system of abuse because we knew and felt it. The world did not yet, right? We're just talking about–

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** –the world did not. The world did not. And so like, you come up and you're like, you know, oh, you got me fucked up. I'm gonna do something about it, right? And it just ended up helping a lot more other people.

So, my idea was to come and- and just to build this infrastructure that they couldn't do anything about. Like, so I came up with this, you know, the pamphlet series, which Zeke basically wrote. I said, hey, we'll write some shit about writing and I'm going to put it in this brochure and I'm going to- this is going to be the Stillwater Writers Collective, we'll just start this Collective. We'll put a board together. Um, Deb was there to help. She had told me early on, “don't make it a cult of personality, don't make it to where it's just you.” So, I created a board. I invited some people to sit on the board. You know, we wrote up the mission statement. We did all that shit like, and then we just presented it to the education director. We said, look, this is what we need to do.

This is, you know, the spirit of resistance and again, like, the spite aspect, I think that doesn't get amplified enough because, you know, at a certain point, when are we just supposed to pick- pick ourselves up and stop crying about the shit that we've done? At a certain point, what- you know, what is remorse, what's the value of remorse when you're sitting in a fucking cell for 20 years? What's the value of that? Like, and then you go to these people and they're like, why aren't you crying about what you've done? Well, because you just sat me in an institution for 20 years and- and just browbeat me and never allowed- you know, you never came to check on me, you never came to see if I was doing all right. So, we did that for each other. And this was just what, you know, ended up being the avenue to do it.

Um, and that's where I think like, where we have yet to figure it out, how we deal with, you know, mistakes in this country. You know, what we have to do, this is- this is a serious- this is deeper than just us trying to figure out how to write, it's us trying to figure out how to become citizens after we've, you know, um, taken a life or been involved in, you know, the worst shit, you know. That's still- it's still like, now tiptoed around, now that I'm out and, you know–

**Zeke Caligiuri:** –because we can't- you can't expect us to restore things, restore old relationships, restore harms, unless we're able to get restored in our own right. Restored people restore communities, right? Like, I know that sounds cliché, but at the same time, like we were going to be damaged at some point, but like we had to restore ourselves. It was a belief in yourself and belief in your own humanity. One of the basic building blocks was behind the idea that if we didn't do it, who was going to do it, right?

And we just got so very lucky when Jen Bowen brings MPWW to uh, the facility. Like, “Well, you know, Jen Bowen teaches these classes”—this is the voice of our old education director. You are

running the Stillwater Writers Collective as MPWW is coming in, right. That's 2013. Basically like the MBWW is the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop, right, that's been around for 13 years. They've offered courses, programs, right, like, they took off and like, expanded really along parallel at the same time that the Stillwater Writers Collective, which Chris and I have been talking about creating.

#### *Music Transition*

**Malcolm Tariq:** At this point, the conversation turned to the Minnesota Prison Writers Workshop and the formation of the book, *American Precariat: Parables of Exclusion*.

The Minnesota Prison Writers Workshop, or MPWW, was founded by Jim Bowen in 2011 with a single creative writing class at one prison. With the support of over 25 instructors who have taught more than 250 classes to over 3000 people in every prison in Minnesota, it has become the longest running prison based literary organization in the country.

Here is C. Fausto with a brief history of how MPWW began to expand its reach at the same time that he and Zeke were organizing inside.

#### *Music Transition*

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** So Jen Bowen had an idea to bring workshops into prisons. Uh, she started in Lino before us while we were in Stillwater. She had this pilot. Uh, it was a 10, 10-11 week program. She went to Hamlin Instructors to see if there was any, uh, interest about people volunteering their time. So, they started this satellite program of just popping up and doing creative writing, uh, for two and a half hours a week for 10 weeks.

So she starts this thing and it grows. She comes to Stillwater. They give that first class away to somebody else, but we already established a scaffolding. So by the time they come back, we were able to step in and be like, okay, we'll facilitate it, we'll decide who's going to be in it, we'll- we'll take care of all that shit, don't worry. We got this.

Second class, same thing. You know, we build up. So at the same- so while they're bringing facilitators in, where they're sending in-

**Zeke Caligiuri:** We're managing- we're managing the incarcerated population that's going to be taking part. Because typically, everything else goes by a basic sign up, and that's where, like, you get all these people that will bombard these programs. Instead, what we were doing was managing, you know-

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** We were gatekeeping.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** -we were making sure that the artists were getting their opportunity to be a part of this.

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** And that's, you know, the power dynamic too. And I don't want to, you know, short that right? Like, and we did have incidents where, you know, the thirst is real. People would go there just because it was a female teacher or, you know, like, because there's- it was only space to get attention and vent. And so, it was necessary to gatekeep that, and to make sure that we curated a program and made sure, like, people were vetted and we'd have an introduction class and tell people what creative writing was all about because everybody's got a book to write. You know, everybody's writing a book, or especially in the joint, it's even worse.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** They want you to read it.

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** Yeah, and they want you to read it, they got a hundred pages for you right now. And no, I'm good, thanks. But the seed that we planted started developing and started getting stronger and MPWW was hitting all the other facilities, but Stillwater was the flagship for them too.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** People kind of came in and it was like, so that the system could sort of feed itself, right? That this- this ecosystem could grow without us having to like, stand over it, right?

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** For the most part, it was people that were willing to do the work and come in, you know, to a program that wasn't offering a college degree, wasn't offering anything, it just was offering to make you into a better writer.

And nobody- nobody really knew what that meant. I didn't know what publishing poetry meant at all. You know, they just offered, like, we're just going to teach you how to be a creative writer. So, like, sitting into these classes for me at first was administrative. Like, I was just there to finish- to fill a space.

But what I started learning about creative writing, you know, changed my life. And like, you know, all these little aspects, um, becoming a writer makes you a better human being, right? Because it, especially in spaces, you know, that where you're down and out, or you fall and, you know, you're at this rock bottom and then you start writing and you start analyzing characters, you start, you know, understanding characterization-

**Zeke Caligiuri:** -real critical thinking. It's real critical thinking, right? It's how we start to figure out how we feel and see-

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** It's active community.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** Yeah, active community, absolutely.

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** The way you're going into these portals and even challenging, you know, what you were thinking when you were younger and you can't help but start analyzing that shit when you're creating a character, creating a character's backstory and all these other, you know, subtle, um, things.

So, art and prison and redemption and all of this shit goes part and parcel, and this is what we're preaching now and pushing now. So, now you have this *American Precariat* that's the first ever implementation of inmates as gatekeepers.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** Can we preface it maybe with the editorial boards because prior to this we were- we would- we would, we had different editorial boards that were, um, producing anthologies of people's work-

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** Internal. Internal anthologies.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** -to distribute it beyond the facilities, right? So you had these sort of editors that were learning the process of editing for several years before the Coffee House project then is presented, right? Because this is all incarcerated writers, it's incarcerated editors. Now, what the idea comes- is because Jen comes right?

Like, and I think like, just for history's sake, what people need to understand is that Jen has been an award winning essayist for years, right? You know, I believe she was part of the University of Iowa program, like she's like, accomplished and ready and was at a point like where she would be writing her own books and would be, you know, manifesting her world and- and a lot of that got sacrificed so she could bring this program and give like, so much of her life to this program right. And so she comes with this idea and said, you know, I think- I think we can probably get one of these- uh, a reputable publisher.

I know- you know, some of the folks at Coffee House, there was some of the other local publishers too that had been sort of acknowledged.

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** Shout out to Chris Fischbach.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** Absolutely. Chris Fischbach was at Coffee House at that time and was like, yep, sounds like a great idea. Why couldn't we edit a volume of free world writers, right?

And if you have a reputable publisher, why couldn't we go get a bunch of reputable writers, right? We've been reaching out to these folks for how many years, trying to get them to publish us in their journals and trying to accept them- you know, accept our manuscripts, right? We want- they want- we needed them to accept us to create this validation.

We were thinking, you know what? We've got a whole bunch of different people who built careers already from inside, different varying levels of size and scope, but for the most part, right, like that had, you know, been able to have been empowered to a point where they can create some of the art they wanted to create.

Why couldn't we do this? It begins where we have, uh, a collective of, I believe it was five or six at Stillwater because Stillwater Writers Collective is sort of the OG group, but a lot of people had moved and Fairbaugh had a really, really productive collective as well. I was at Fairbaugh at the time too. Um, Chris had been- he had been sent to another facility.

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** I was exiled. Let's not go into that story. I got exiled. That's a deeper portal, but I got exiled. I was in-

**Zeke Caligiuri:** We both have been through quite a few of those sort of exiles because of influence and impact. They do what they can with you. They send him away. They've sent me a couple-

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** –punished. We’re being punished for being successful. Yeah. Let's not cut that out of the fucking story.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** Oh, that is a part of it too.

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** All this shit was, there was blowback by the prison. So we went to places that like, gang leaders went. You know, when they got- when there was gang riots and shit, like when there was a- or there was riots, like they ship people- they got places for you. But when you're the best of the- when you're the best of the best, according to their own standards, even they got places for you too, because they don't like that.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** They sent me somewhere outside of the institutions, right? Like even, you know- but that's the way it works. And Chris was gone at this particular time. So when the opportunities for this comes, these two collectives- and I'll tell you, honestly, like there was some- some navigation that Jen was doing because she understood that both groups want to be a part of this because it could be- it could be phenomenal.

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** So it was a balance. So, you know, kudos to Jen for holding that together. And luckily I wasn't a part of that. I got blessed, I popped up at the end cause I just got shipped to Fairbaugh. So I fell into the project kind of when it was already formed. So, thank you for that, by the way.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** Well, we needed you at that point. It was a necessary thing. So, ‘cause the pandemic then hits. Pre-pandemic, we come up with this concept and we’re thinking about precarity and the idea- and you think about the precarious class and what that really means. And like, it's- that's what we were sort of- the seed and the basic, uh, basic idea of it.

But as a group with a bunch of different opinions, everybody's got to learn the concept, got to learn the sort of theme. At the same time too then- like, now decide what we want all this project to be and you have 11 different people who all have 11 different versions of what they think the community should be too.

Um, and so like it had to start with the thing- like if we don't have Jen that is sort of this- sort of balancing act through all of this, right, it just doesn't happen right? So, we're doing- she's doing two different sessions, she's doing a Fairbaugh and a Stillwater session, different times, where we're sitting and now having to do like a dream list: who would you solicit if you could solicit whoever you want? And you have all these long lists of names, some are like, behind all kinds of different agented walls and whatever, but we're also trying to dream big, not be afraid of that.

And then we would go back and forth between these two and just reach out to as many folks as we could, right? There was also another sort of agreement that we didn't want it to just be fully solicited, that we wanted there to be opportunity for people to submit if they could. And so we did- we did an open call from poets and writers and then a couple other places that sort of demanded, and we got a huge like, slush pile as part of that too. And then like working through and like getting people to agree on like, what should fit into these things, especially early on when we don't have the entirety of the project put together, was grueling, and then the pandemic hits, right? ‘Cause I think it was supposed to come out around 2021, maybe the end of ‘20, the pandemic hits, nobody

can even get together and interact. All units go to their silos. Not to mention like nobody can type, nobody can go anywhere, right, for a big, long period. We don't know how long this is going to last.

And it also then kind of helped reinforce the idea of precarity, right? This theme that we are going to- that incarcerated people in 2023-when it comes out, 2024-that incarcerated people, one of the most precarious populations that exist in our country, would be editing a volume about the precarious class. And that we would be the sort of, the gatekeeper at that point for at least this particular volume of essays too right, was, I think, like, we understood how powerful it was, but everybody was still sort of like, all right, how is this going to reshape what our incarcerations look like? How is this going to reshape what the rest of our lives is going to look like?

Because we were all at this point, like, where we were like, we didn't need any more excuses to make the prisons more like, over surveilled and secured, right? We didn't need more reasons for that, because we were already trying to fight to push away from it. Like the last thing we wanted was this.

And so like, it's a lot of times very scary. You're also like, what's going to survive any of this? Is our program going to survive this, let alone this project, right? And blessings certainly to Jen because she kept it alive. Some of the other support at MPWW kept it alive throughout that. Um, but what happened sort of post that like, main push of the pandemic was the- the Stillwater portion of the group just could not- she couldn't get into Stillwater, we couldn't interact, and so we had to sort of remobilize.

And the Faribault group end up kind of taking the reins from that point. So the Stillwater people help with a lot of the baseline. They still are helping with some of like, the editing of the individual pieces. But for the most part, as far as the conceptualization of the project and like, the sort of final says and getting like that stuff- so like it would accelerate that process, we pretty much had to isolate it at Faribault, right? And so that's where, you know, it sort of starts back up again.

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** And I think what makes this project, you know, more unique too, and developed because of that shift, is that we decided to just discuss the essays. So, we put these conversations in, um, we transcribed them, uh, shout out to Ruby, who's the intern, right, that did all the great work, which, whom we love, shout out to her. She came in and transcribed these conversations that just, you know, felt, good and organic and, uh, we're limited because we couldn't include all the writers that were on the projects. I think this is what is interesting is that- to peel back the layer a little bit to see what we were thinking about these things and add another nuance to it, which was kind of debatable because some of the guys didn't want to do that, they felt like it cheapened it. Yet, I think it's what makes the project special, even more special.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** I think it allowed our voices in it. And I- and that's from one of the voices who was not part of the actual recording. It also gave a picture in between these different essays of like, the sort of conversations that were being had around the decisions that were made to put what there, why some things would be in there too. So like the story of the creation of the book is within the book as well, on top of these like, wonderful essays by a bunch of like, very renowned essayists and, and- and phenomenal writers and people that we admire, right? And that's what kind of makes it so unique. And I don't know, I think different than like most of the things that are coming out of, you know, that particular genre.

It's super important too, as writers, as creatives, intellectuals, um, that we are evolving the- the definition and the conversation around class, right? Precarity has to be a part of like- like, there are so many super outdated, uh, versions of like what our class system is and what it is and what it says. And like, class is certainly something that will never sort of go away, but we need to sort of advance what the conversation on class is. 2023, '24, it looks different. Some of the themes behind all of- behind the way other human beings are controlled or control other human beings, are different and feel different. And this is one of the sort of like, avenues in which like, you can nuance it and make more sense out of things. And also like, structurally too, like, I think human beings and socially we need to be able to move forward on the idea of class in 2024, and forever, right, and beyond.

We got pretty- pretty stagnant. And I think like, that's one thing about post pandemic that's been, uh, like, as far as like the new collective consciousness is understanding that there is more to these things than what we previously sort of understood or sort of accepted.

### *Music Transition*

**Malcolm Tariq:** Can we read a selection from the book? And we didn't decide on what before, so this will be a very organic part of it.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** Do you have an idea, Chris?

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** Well, I mean, I'm thinking your intro, or you know, foreword.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** Okay. Um, all right. So this is from the foreword that I contributed to *American Precariat*. It's just really around, uh, how I meet C. Fausto Cabrera.

*I said, during those early classes—and we were just referring to the courses we took with Dr. Appleman and Dr. John Schmidt—I formed a friendship with Chris Cabrera, C. Fausto Cabrera, a genius young artist with whom I shared similar lofty aspirations, both for our work and our lives. We spent hours conversing and arguing over the creative and intellectual visions we had.*

*I would sit with him in a cell while he sketched complex, dark images. There were always people around remarking on how impressed they were with his work. His room was a mess of books, easels, in-progress paintings, and stacks of canvases, wherever he could make them fit. Cabrera would shout these big, abstract, rhetorical questions at me, one after another, as we tried to figure out what so many more years as artists in prison would look like without fundamental change.*

*We argued whether art was enough to free us, and to what extent we might go to make our dreams reality, or if it would even make a difference in a system that had pretty much always disregarded our work and our humanity. In the end, I think we agreed that neither of us wanted to disappear without the chance for our work to be realized. Or at least the chance for it to be recognized and embraced by the people about whom we cared most.*

*Chris envisioned an ongoing writing program facilitated mostly by a collective of incarcerated writers. Ideally, it would harness resources so that it could offer writing classes and opportunities throughout a writer's incarceration.*

*I thought it was a great idea. But our experiences with administration and abandonment in the past made me suspicious of programming in these places. I wanted to publish and to have a career, even if it had to be behind these walls. I was working on a book project and was constantly worried something administrative would mess it up.*

*We both argued that a collective couldn't work unless we were ultimately reconnected to the greater free world literary community to which we had very little introduction. It was lofty thinking for guys with sparse writing credits between them, and who really had no formal writing instruction outside of the early creative writing courses.*

*Our experiences with Dr. Appleman, though, had empowered much of our thinking. Why not think big? Another writer from our community and I had just won PEN Prison Writing Awards- Prison Writing Awards. Why shouldn't we believe our work and our community had a right to be cultivated? And it was from these conversations that the Stillwater Writers Collective was born.*

*Out of an agreement that our power was as a community and a realization that if we didn't support each other, who would? We also realized it was hard to get our peers, even when they are threatened, to write when there aren't instructors to read and validate their work.*

*Historically, there just hadn't been enough support or success in our prison system to warrant that kind of confidence.*

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** And what they don't say- and what he doesn't say in that, is how much hooch was involved in this process of these- kicking it and sipping on- sipping on some terrible prison hooch and trying to scaffold a writing program.

*Music Transition*

**Malcolm Tariq:** Throughout this entire conversation, I maybe asked one to two questions. Everything else is them organically telling me this history. At the end of the conversation, I asked C. Fausto and Zeke to ask each other a question to close us out.

*Music Transition*

**Malcolm Tariq:** So either one of you can go first.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** Chris, you want to go first?

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** Yes. So, yeah, I don't- I'm just curious. I remember, you know, through our conversations, I remember talking about, like, planning and next steps. I remember you talking



about, like, what your Pulitzer is going to be. So like, where we're at as far as and I mean, I- I- I never imagined I'd be where I'm at right now.

I mean, I- maybe, you know, your vision was a little bit tighter and you've really accomplished a lot. More than I'm sure you probably thought. Yet, we used to have these conversations and you talk about these, you know, everything moving up, project-wise. I'm just curious to know what is next for you personally as far as, like, what do you think- like, what is the- I know what you have on the table. But what direction are you hoping to- what's the big leap, what's the next big project personally that's going to come out, or are you hoping to come, you know, release next? Within like three, five year plan, I'm saying.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** Okay, um, well, I have- you know, I have a collection of short stories, it's short fiction, it's around- it's different perspectives, it's centered around Stillwater, and so you get, uh, an entire important period of time, and the- the collective, environmental impacts, meaning, you know, the way memos and the way, you know, laws and policies and the way things change and the way things institutionally impact all of our lives, right?

You have a bunch of these different perspectives that are talking about these sort of collective frustrations while also trying to, like, um, figure out how to like be human, how to like, you know, value the things that are most important to them throughout this process while also sort of having to personally and communally sort of feel all of these things as they are coming.

Personally, I want to get to- to writing much more. Um, I would say in those sort of latter years of incarceration and then as I have moved into my freedom, which is really only in the last say, year and a half, I had to be a whole lot more engaged, uh, politically, communally, right? We are in a-, in a- a very much a time in Minnesota state history, I think even nationally too, where a lot of, uh, like things are moving and having- there's a broader sort of consciousness, but it's an important time because we have to take this.

I'm from South Minneapolis. I live five blocks from where they murdered George Floyd. So post George Floyd in Minneapolis, There's a lot of healing needs to be done, but there's also a lot of, like, wash over people are trying to do. Uh, so for me, I'm trying to, like, do some things that I feel like I- I'm due.

And then I also want to sort of, like, build out some of these projects. I think, like, uh, I have a poetry collection I would like to write. But I- but I also know I just- I have to get to a point of wellness. I got to get to a point where I- I feel like I'm healthy enough to be able to manifest these things.

And some of that is, I have had to- I have had to give myself politically, uh, and had to give myself to some other things to make sure during this cultural moment that it's not wasted, right? We are- there's a move last year, we had a huge year with a lot of legislative steps that were taken that will impact people's relief. I want to work on some things that make those- make the actual institutions look different on the inside and basically hold some folks to account about the way human beings are treated in those places.

Um, I think creatively, those things will run parallel to what I am working on. I think there are all things in the way like the things that you read, feed what you create. I think like these experiences

are feeding that too. So what I would say is like writing and creatively, I'm not where I would have imagined I would be.

Um, I was hoping there would have been more of these things, but because of like, what the circumstances and the way systems treat success sometimes too, a lot of that was very suppressed. And so, um, I want to get back to that point and be able to, like- I am hoping that what these experiences do, all of these things, the exiles and even the difficulties and dealing and navigating power out here, will empower other folks, but then also too, will then like inform the way my work is, poetry, nonfiction, fiction, whatever it is that I'm trying to create.

And also too, like to keep making sure that like all these folks that, um, had built careers out of these things are able to continue to work and be able to create in this. And then also so that these justice impacted folks aren't getting judged critically in the same sense when we come out into the world and want to be identified or recognized at these tables, at these conferences, in the places where, you know, things are being, um, decided and gates are being kept.

So- so now it's my turn to ask him a question, huh? I- I would say, and then it has just two basic parts too- when we initially envisioned this program, did it become what you wanted it to become?

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** Yes. I mean, I- I appreciate- I appreciate all the attention we're getting, I appreciate the project and I appreciate being in the space and being able to be this figure. I never thought about it like that. Like now that we're going back and revisiting all the things and what really happened, I never really was that, you know, calculating of the thing, I just knew that something needed to be done.

And so I- you know, a lot of it was instinctual. So, I never really had high expectations or any really hope. I just knew that, you know, we had to do something and, you know, along the way, we made decisions and acted accordingly. I didn't ever really have a grandiose idea of what was going to happen, and I didn't even really take myself serious as a writer until, uh, you know, Rush City.

So, when I got exiled, that's when all the- you know, the- the thing, you know, all the classes, everything kind of hit. And I became more of an avid reader because I had the time. I never saw myself as a writer until, you know, when I had the time I could sit down and just, you know, start thinking- and then all of- all the thoughts were processed through poems or processed through poetry or processed through, you know, these things that were gifted and it was kind of a Trojan horse for me, like, it was very sneaky, which is funny because Zeke's the one that reminds people mostly that I'm an art- like a visual artist, because he's- he's- he's offended by the fact that, like, I don't know, I think it's because he's the writer. And I think it's like- he's like- I think he's like, almost like, "hey motherfucker, you were the artist. I was the writer." I feel like that kind of like sometimes and I'm like, yeah, you're right, because I haven't really been able to do anything with the art yet. So, I'm getting into tattooing and putting my art out there, but like writing is what I have the most, you know-

**Zeke Caligiuri:** You were the foremost artist in the system. There are others that were pretty well recognized, but like, we've always recognized Chris right up there at the elite, and everybody remembered that too. And that's why I just want to make sure people understand that, that it's more an embodiment. It's a living art, right, in a sense too, right? That's what I think of it more, but, but also too, commending. You went away into this exile, you came back as, like, a world class

writer. That's incredible, right? Like, I don't understand where- like, there's no debate around that. We were at Association of Writing Programs Conference in Kansas City two weeks ago.

We're literally- first night we drive there, we are outside of an offsite event. The- the- it hasn't even started yet. And people come up to- and there was- there was these two folks who come up and they go, "hey, um, are you, are you C. Fausto Cabrera?" That literally recognized him in space, right? He's been out three weeks or something, right?

Like at this point, a month at this point, um, and they recognize him from his work, right? And I know you did not ever expect that, right? I was like-

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** First, I thought it was some prison shit. First, I was like, dude, what's that dude? First, I was like, dude, did that dude just double take me? I'm like, do I know him- do I know him from the joint or something? Or- we're in Kansas city. It's just, yeah, the oddest thing. And then- and then I was so dumbfounded- and then I didn't even introduce Zeke. Like I felt so like- this is the first time I'm out in public, period. So I'm still like, getting used to like the, how many people there are.

But then like, I don't know the right- you know, how writing etiquette is. Like you're out there, "oh, what are you working on? I'm a poet. This is what I got going on." I don't know- I don't know any of that shit. I'm fresh from the joint trying to find a wall to put my back on. You know, so like nobody's behind me.

Nobody keeps- people keep bumping into me and I'm going through this thing and you know, here- here this happens and I don't even, I'm like- I'm not- I look up at Zeke and he's just looking at me like- and then afterwards he's like, you know, you could have introduced me, right? I'm like, you're absolutely right, I'm so sorry.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** It's more of an aside, but the remarkable part about that too is that like, you never knew- none of us ever knew like, that you would have impact on other lives, right? The- I work in a space now, I'm- you know, I'm- I'm trying to help folks like actualize their release in a way. I'm also in a way, I'm trying to actualize like policy and stuff so that those places look and feel different.

I would have never told you at the beginning of any of this stuff that we would have been able to have that impact on a broader- on a broader community or that there would be some national interest in whatever. I would not. I might- my entire thing was around being able to create the art, and I didn't know how to build a world that much bigger, but part of like my relationship with Chris with- with these other wonderful human beings that I have met throughout the years through this, it has created that, right? It created a world that was bigger because that was- you know, when you think about the very basis of language and power and the idea, it was that we can make our worlds larger through the expansion of our language and, you know, the way language works in our life, right? So I would have never been able to say that.

And Chris- Chris, you come home. One of the central tenets that we were speaking to when we- when you were, you know- you know, applying to come home, right? Was that the things that you had done, the things we had done changed programming in the system, right? Like it changed the way programming could work and help people in the system.

I had never been- I- we were doing it because we cared about each other. And then in the long run, right, it ends up being something that will feed, you know, these other generations, right? Now we're having the conversations about how can we get out the other creatives that are in this spot that deserve their opportunities too, that have built their own careers that have their own sort of creation stories too.

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** And you see the nation catching up too, you see that everybody's got a prison writing program they're talking about now, but like we're talking about, you know, years that- you know, I couldn't even get people- I couldn't even get my people to send me pictures, you know, like that's-

**Zeke Caligiuri:** We have the MPWW now to run those programs now, which is amazing. Especially this one.

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** Thank you Malcolm, too. Thank you for reaching out and thank you for setting all this up and giving us this platform.

**Zeke Caligiuri:** We appreciate it. I appreciate that- what y'all are doing too. I mean certainly.

**C. Fausto Cabrera:** Absolutely.

#### *Music Transition*

**Malcolm Tariq:** This episode of Works of Justice was produced by Malcolm Tariq. Music used throughout this episode was created by B. L. Sherrill and Fury Young of Freer Records, the nation's first nonprofit record label for formerly and currently incarcerated artists. You can subscribe to and hear previous episodes of Works of Justice on any podcast platform, including Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, and Spotify.

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#### *Music Transition*