

Dem Bois Podcast Ep. 112
Breaking Free from Conventional Femininity
with denim {d} chang

Shawn Aaron: 00:01

2026 marks 10 years of Dem Bois Inc. That's 10 years of community care, 10 years of leadership rooted in love, and 10 years of turning visibility into possibility. And so, to honor this milestone, we've launched our 10 for 10 campaign. You're like, Shawn, 10 for 10, what's that? So, we are inviting you, our listeners, our supporters, our allies, and other folks in the community to give \$10 a month to help sustain the care, leadership, and visibility that trans men of color deserve. And so, 10 years is a very long time, right? That's a decade. Can you imagine raising a child from birth and then looking at them at their 10th birthday party and being like, wow, you've watched so much of their growth within that 10 years, right? That's the same for us. And so, Dem Bois Inc. over the 10 years, we have done a lot. And so, we have provided gender affirming surgery grants to trans men of color to obtain gender affirming surgeries. We started this podcast.

We are now in season four of the podcast in 2026. We created our "Visibility = Possibility" merch. We partner with Emilio and Zyon, both trans men of color to design what visibility equals possibility means to them. And it's reflected in our merch. We also partner with the black trans man Mo La Flo to create our theme song. And that's the music that you hear every time you tune into Dem Bois Podcast. We've done merch, we've done partnering. We have delivered care packages to trans men of color in need of personal hygiene items within our community. We have done a lot in 10 years. And so, imagine what the next 10 years would look like.

Donating \$10 a month says I believe in this work. I believe in the future of trans men of color, and I believe in what comes next. And so, if this call resonates with you, join us today. And we've even made it easy. You don't even got to go anywhere. Whatever platform you're listening to this episode, go ahead and open up the show notes and from there, you will be able to click the link to start your contribution to our 10 for 10 campaign. Your monthly support helps ensure Dem Bois can continue showing up for our community with intention care and impact. So, thank you for listening and thank you for believing in our mission. Okay. And I'm going to get out of here so you can listen to this episode. Take care.

[02:33- 02:51 Musical Outro]

My next guest I had the privilege to sit down with is a beautiful human. I wanted to just read their bio in full. My next guest is a somatic trauma resolution practitioner and erotic power enthusiast. In his work, he bridges body-based intelligence, the ancestral wisdom of his Taoist lineage, and his love for relationship anarchy to support our healing work in feeling more vulnerability, intimacy and belonging. He is the creator of Somatics for the People, an emerging school for liberatory embodiment and identifies as a transmasculine nonbinary immigrant and survivor on the autism spectrum, and a love and sex addict in recovery. When not avoiding his writing practice, he's in muay Thai or at the drums. This episode was so beautiful. I'm not going to even tell you what we talked about. You're just going to have to listen. Hope you enjoy.

[03:54 - 04:14 Musical Intro]

Dem Bois, Dem Bois, amplifying trans men of color voices, yeah, we here making noise. Making noise. Visibility equals possibility. You know, we Dem Bois yeah, Dem Bois yeah, amplifying trans men of color voices yeah...

04:14

Welcome to Dem Bois Podcast. I'm your host, Shawn Aaron he/him/his. My next guest is a somatic trauma resolution practitioner and erotic power enthusiast. He is the creator of Somatics for the People, an emerging school for liberatory embodiment. Welcome to the show.

denim chang: 04:34

Thank you, Shawn. I'm so happy to be here.

Shawn Aaron: 04:38

Yes, I'm so happy to have you here. So, you want to go ahead and introduce yourself or folks, name and pronoun for folks to know who you are.

denim chang: 04:44

Absolutely. So, I go by denim or {d}. denim is my chosen name, {d} is my Chinese name. So, either one works with me. I like to say whichever rolls off the tongue for you. My pronouns are he/him, or they/them.

Shawn Aaron: 04:59

Beautiful. And so where are you located in?

denim chang: 05:01

Currently, I live in the beautiful city of Chicago.

Shawn Aaron: 05:05

Beautiful city of Chicago. So, while we're recording this, we are in the cold. So, I don't know if I would call that beautiful. I'm not a cold person.

denim chang: 05:16

Fair enough. I won't argue with that. It is cold, but I will say the snow does make it quite beautiful to me. Having grown up in Malaysia where all year, it's either really hot or really rainy. So, when it's snow like this or, you know, in the fall when the leaves change, there's something about seeing the way the environment shifts feels really, really soothing to my system. So yeah. But it is cold. I won't fight you on that.

Shawn Aaron: 05:43

Yeah, Soothing to your system. So, if that works and if it calms your nervous system, then, hey, but for me, I would be in panic mode. I do not like to be cold. This little bald head don't want to be cold.

denim chang: 05:56

That's fair. My first winter here, I did panic. I saw the snow for the first time and I was like, what do I do with this?

Shawn Aaron: 06:05

Right, exactly. I mean, it's cute to look at on TV, but I don't know if I want to be trampling around in it. I don't even own a jacket. This hoodie that's all I have, so I would just freeze to death for one. That just, yeah.

denim chang: 06:18

Yeah. I know we don't want that, so come visit, but maybe not live here. Visit in the late spring, early fall, it's nice.

Shawn Aaron: 06:27

Where I live, we don't really get to see the changes of the season. I know that's something beautiful to watch, right? Where you actually get four seasons. It's fall; the leaves change colors. I don't get to see that. So, I would love to kind of do that and then I'll be out, peace before the snow falls.

denim chang: 06:44

Yeah, and the body does acclimate, but yeah, some days it's just don't go outside. Just stay inside. Wear your socks, drink your hot cocoa, you'll be good.

Shawn Aaron: 06:55

And I'm also a person who goes to bed with a heater on 80 and. I have a heated mattress pad, portable heater, everything going when I go to sleep. So, I love to be warm. So, if we could get somewhere where it's nice and tropical, that'd be perfect for me.

denim chang: 07:12

Yeah, that makes sense.

Shawn Aaron: 07:13

Yeah. So, I love to ask my guest this question because you also introduced it where you like denim is my chosen name. Right. And so, how did the name choose you?

denim chang: 07:22

You know, it's funny because I was shopping around for a name for a little bit and every name I tried on just didn't quite feel right. Like, Daryl was in the mix, you know, there was just some names that I was playing around with, and I would test it out too. I'd ask my friend, like, what do think about this name? And their reaction would be like; you don't look like a Daryl. And it was actually my ex. Shout out to Kai who's also a T-boy, who was playing Sims on his PlayStation one day and he named the character denim. And I said, that's my name. And he goes, really? I'm like, yeah. And he told me how he came up with the name. He's like, I was just feeling around for a name and then denim came and I'm like, that's it, that's the name. And he's like, okay, let's try it. And it just kind of stuck and he would call me from the other side of the home and be like, yo denim and I'd feel like hmm you know so it just fit yeah so shout out to my ex.

Shawn Aaron: 08:27

Yes, I love that. How affirming is that, right? That someone that you're romantically involved with has kind of a hand in your naming process, right? And kind of like helping you to fill it out. Will you answer when somebody call you denim from across the room, right? I think that's beautiful. That's so beautiful. I've never heard anyone say they've been named after a character in a video game. So that's something. That's beautiful. It really is.

I do want to ask you though, I want to ask you this, and I've talked about this before, how being a guest on the show, folks fill out our guest form. And so, within the guest

form, when you put your name, you've said that you want your name to be lowercase. And so, I wanted to ask you, what is the meaning behind that?

denim chang: 09:13

Yeah, absolutely. So of course, I first encountered a lowercase name by bell hooks when I was in school, she has an interview about why she chose to decapitalize her name. And I took inspiration from that. But personally, for me, I like to decapitalize my name as a way of divesting from colonial ideas of what a name should be. Like the idea of capitalizing a name, which, you know, I've had nuanced conversations about this with various people and some folks like, no, I want to capitalize my name because my name has meaning. There's a formality to my name. There's a sacredness to my name. And I totally hear that. And for me, even in Chinese, when we write, we use characters and in the pinyin, which is like the Romanized form of our language, we use lowercase. There's no capitalizing in the Chinese language. And so, I think it just felt right. Every time I see my name spelled uppercase, it didn't feel right either. So maybe there's a little bit of a styling to it. But for me, I think it's both personal to my culture and also as a way of me being, you know, a little bit like, I don't want to do it the way you're telling me to do it. I don't want to write in your grammar, I want to write in mine, you know? So, yeah.

Shawn Aaron: 10:42

I love that. Do you get any pushback? I mean, you know, and even when you text someone that's always wants to correct you autocorrect, right? Do you get any pushback of government documents or if you're applying for something or putting your name there and folks are like no, you need to capitalize this right because in school we're taught a noun. A noun. person, place, thing. and your person and it's supposed to be capitalized. Like do you get any pushback from that.

denim chang: 11:06

Not like relationally, not from people. In general, most people have, if I tell them to, will use the lowercase. Some folks just notice that in my writing and so then they'll use the lowercase form. But yes, in some like software and forums, it automatically capitalizes it. I'll write my name lowercase, but then if it's a government form, they'll return it with an uppercase. I don't feel the need to argue with people sometimes. And so, I wouldn't say that people push back, but I do sometimes have to like have a little bit of flexibility around how my name is spelled. Yeah.

Shawn Aaron: 11:48

How do you work on internalizing that, right? Because it's just the same as a pronoun almost, right. If folks, the way they return back to you, what your pronoun may say on

your driver's license and they're like, no, that's not correct, right? So, how do you deal with that internalization of like, no, this is how I want my name to be spelled.

denim chang: 12:11

Yeah, I think for me, I like to consider the value that I put in, the person who they represent to me, or if it's a community that I want to, like, really know me, then I'm going to say, hey, this is how I spell my name. Hey, this is the pronouns I want you to use. But if it's like, you know, somebody at the DMV or, you know, a person that I'm exchanging, you know, interaction with and they use the wrong pronoun. To me, I rather experience that interaction for what it was than to try to argue with somebody because I want to save my energy for the relationships that matter to me. And I know not everyone feels this way. I like to be a little bit more selective. I have a Mars and Taurus, so I like to choose my battles.

Shawn Aaron: 13:08

I love that actually. I love that. And it is saving your energy. You're not trying to fight everybody that gets everything wrong about you. Right. And I love that because it's like every relationship is not on the same level. And so why would you go and fight for somebody that you just met at the DMV that they don't know you, you'll never probably see that person ever again. Right. And so why waste that energy of explaining yourself on one they are not going to get it and two, they're not paid to care. They like next, A32, we on A32, you gone, right? They couldn't care less. I love that you're like prioritizing your energy and where you want to spend it on correcting folks. I love that.

denim chang: 13:51

Yeah. Yeah.

Shawn Aaron: 13:54

And so also like your gender journey, where did that start for you? Like, when did you get a sense of who you were as a person, or wherever you want to start from up to where you are now?

denim chang: 14:05

Yeah, thank you for asking that. I always even love hearing the stories that you've shared, or your guests have shared on your podcast. So, I think one of the earliest memories that I've had was being a kid growing up in Malaysia and not wanting to dress feminine like the way that my mom really wanted me to. She enforced a lot of conventional femininity onto me. And I recall growing up feeling a lot of shame, a lot

of uncertainty, not really knowing even how to language it because I didn't see other trans people in Malaysia. And one time I remember seeing a masc lesbian. One of my older cousins was dating a masc lesbian. And I just remember being like, you can do that? Like, that's possible? We can look like that.

And that moment stuck with me because even though I went on to ultimately like kind of conform to femininity and then had like a non-binary phase in college where I presented very non-binary but didn't even use that language to describe myself. I was called the tomboy by my friends, still transness wasn't even really a thing. We did have trans women in Malaysia, but like in many cultures, especially in most countries in Asia, it was a marginalized identity, right? So it wasn't, again, talked about, it wasn't always accepted. And so, I think for me, nothing really clicked for me. And it wasn't until I moved to Chicago, actually, that I realized I'm like transgender, because I got to not only see that in the community here, I got to be close friends, I got to date other T-boys, I got to see their gender journey, I got to listen to how top surgery made a difference in their life, how testosterone allows for them to feel more liberated. And I think that gave me permission to really embrace that part of myself.

I didn't start my internal transition until like two and a half years ago. So, I'm still learning how to feel confident in my body. I feel like a teenager learning how to like find his sexuality, his confidence, the way he wants to like talk, the way he is you know, in romance. And I'm still trying to like figure it out. It hasn't been easy because as I'm sure you know, there's a lot that comes with masculinity, both what I perceive masculinity to be and have internalized or the kind of masculine person that I want to be. And it's still unfolding. So, I would say my journey is still unfolding.

Shawn Aaron: 17:09

And you know, in whatever way we choose it, right? And so even, you know, some folks don't choose to medically transition per se, not testosterone or whatever. But even for me, I've been on testosterone myself for what? 13 years, I think this is the 13th year and I'm still learning and growing. So, it never stops. It's not like, okay, I figured it out. I'm done growing. No, like literally as you age there comes a different identity, right? And so, it's like for everything. So, you're like forever trying to learn yourself.

Joël Simeu: 17:43

Hey, this is Joël Simeu, Production Assistant for Dem Bois Podcast. Looking to connect with others in the community you'll love our brand-new space Dem Bois Community Voices on Facebook. We created this private moderated group specifically for trans men of color to share experiences, discuss episodes, and support each other on this

journey. Ready to join us? Just click the link in our show notes to become part of this growing community.

Shawn Aaron: 18:15

You mentioned conventional femininity. Mom tried to enforce conventional femininity. And so that made me question, what is conventional femininity? And not only that, but does what you consider conventional femininity differ in Malaysia than it does here?

denim chang: 18:34

I would think so. At least where I grew up, know, conventional femininity to me is one, a way of dressing and Malaysia being a Muslim country is very gendered. So, a lot of our experiences are shaped by our gender, not to say that it's any much different anywhere else, but it was a way of dressing, it was a way of sitting, it was a way of carrying myself, a way of speaking. It was the classes.

I was put in ballet classes, because I was too rough for a girl. And I think along with a way of presenting myself, there was also expectations that were placed onto me. And being an eldest child as well, it came with a lot of pressure to have to be a good example of what a girl or a woman should be for my younger sister. And the whole time I just kind of rejected that and I think in doing so rejected myself and my experience of femininity I feel really complex around it because after you know some time I think I sort of succumbed to it, succumb to the pressure because again at that time there wasn't any other option and I think femininity for me became something very harmful to myself because one, came from a lot of self-loathing, right? Not wanting to be a woman but forced to be one. But it also shaped my sexuality. I am a childhood survivor of abuse. And I think that my gender played a big role in how that experience shaped how I then grew up into becoming a woman. I was very hypersexual as a femme. You know, I was controlling. I was rude. I wasn't kind. I had coldness in my heart, hate in my heart. A lot of shame impacted the ways that I related to myself and to other people.

Yeah, I think I use the word conventional femininity because it's what women are expected to be that I internalize or how I perceive women are expected to be. yeah, I really struggled with that. So, a big part of my healing and why I do the work that I do now has a lot to do with how gender has shaped how I relate to myself and therefore to other people.

Shawn Aaron: 21:25

I definitely want to come back to that, but I want to ask you this. How were you able to make that shift into healing? So, from being kind of toxic in a way is kind of what

you explained, right? Of being angry and just this person is I want to say, out of control in a way, not out of control, but like in control, but out of control at the same time, right? Especially as you grow up, you don't understand the anger. You don't understand it. Now you have the language for it because you can look back and say, hey, I'm a different person. why don't you do that shift from who you are now, the healing part.

denim chang: 21:59

Yeah. So, I would say it's funny because I don't know if you've seen on Instagram. As of today, there's like this trend of like 2016 was 10 years ago, post yourself in 2016. And it's funny because there was around that time where I think things really started like it was like just before the big shift. And I was married to a man. We were codependent. We didn't have anyone other than each other. I was also an immigrant. And, you know, I realized that my then husband was my only source of safety. And not only that, a lot of my self-worth was wrapped up around the identity of being a wife, of being a good immigrant, of being someone that could, again, as a woman, play the role that society has given to me.

And it was around like 2018, 2019 when I was undocumented, so I couldn't work at the time. And I ended up finding yoga teacher training and I started to practice meditation. And the practice of yoga itself helped me connect with my body in a way that I hadn't before. And in doing so, I started to notice more patterns in my emotions because meditation allowed me to quiet my mind enough to sense what's happening within and I felt the rock that was in my heart, right? The years and years of resentment and pain that had sat in my heart. And I would say it was around that time that I really started to desire something different for myself. The language of codependency helped me understand my relationship with my ex-husband and I committed myself to healing. And so, some of the pathways were somatics, movement, like yoga. I eventually, you know, moved into energy work as well. That is part of my practice now as a healing practitioner.

I'm very grateful. At the time I lived in California, so I had a lot of access to holistic healing. And yeah, it, I think listening to how my body was responding to whatever material or my environment was allowed me to make a choice, right? Because I think as soon as I became aware of something, that's a choice point. I can decide if I want to maintain that way of being or if I want to make a shift. And even if that shift requires me choosing over and over and over and over again. However, many times I have to return to this choice point. And I think it's those little shifts over time that allowed me to really grow and transform over the years.

Shawn Aaron: 25:01

And then that growth, was that how you separated from your husband, your ex-husband?

denim chang: 25:06

Yeah, I would say so. I think one of the last conversations we had was in 2020. So, after George Floyd was murdered, I had what I understand is my political awakening. And we had a really intense conversation. He's white, and we had a really intense conversation about race. And at that time, I started to embrace more of my non-binary identity. And he just couldn't understand any of it. And one of the last conversations we had was it feels like we're growing, but we're growing apart. And we couldn't find a place where we could meet in a way that felt generative for both of our spirits and our hearts. I needed to be able to have a partner that is willing to grow with me. And I'll never forget, he says, I'm happy the way that I am. Yeah, I was shocked because I'm like, okay, you're happy the way you are. Heard, got it. I'm not here to slander my ex, but everyone needs therapy, especially my ex-husband.

Shawn Aaron: 26:21

Right. Yeah, that's just going back to what we're saying about there's always room to grow.

denim chang: 26:26

Yes.

Shawn Aaron: 26:27

So as long as you're alive, you can always grow. And I'm a lifelong learner. And so, if you just say, I'm okay with how I am, that means you don't want to grow. You don't want to see different perspectives. I'm not trying to slander him, like, that just means you're in a place and I'm grateful for you that you were able to say, well, that's the key. I'm out. You know, that...

denim chang: 26:46

Yes.

Shawn Aaron: 26:47

...kind of puts the nail in the coffin in way of like, oh I'm so glad I'm not in this because you obviously not the right fit, right? And so, I'm glad that you came that awakening moment and you're not still in that, you know, in that place.

denim chang: 27:00

Yeah. Yeah.

Shawn Aaron: 27:01

And so how now does your mother... Is your mother still with us?

denim chang: 27:05

No, she passed in 2015. Yeah. All good. And you know, it's interesting because in her passing, especially in the earlier years. So, in the work that I do, I also am a psychic medium. And so, I do work with ancestors, and I have heard my mom speak to me many times in her passing. And so, even though we had a really difficult relationship when she was alive, I think that a lot of repair has happened for me personally because I've had encounters, spiritual encounters with my mom that has allowed me to receive recognition from her. She's asked me for forgiveness, and I've been able to experience forgiveness in my heart for my mom.

So yeah, in a way her passing was really difficult because I miss her. I think about her. I actually had a dream about her a couple of days ago. And there's still work to be done. But yeah, she's no longer with us, but I've been able to experience some healing.

Shawn Aaron: 28:22

I love that, and to just share with folks that there is still healing afterwards. Folks who that resonates with, right? Not everyone will resonate with that, but I do. And so, I definitely know about that healing process that happens when folks are no longer here. But even back in episode 106, I talked about that, a moment in my process of kind of like if I had closure in a certain situation and it had to do with an ex who was no longer here. And so even though I know it's sometimes it's difficult, right? It's still difficult to move in the moments of healing when you know no one's here and you can't tell them you're sorry physically, right? But to know that you can process that in another way of connection with them when they're not physically here. And that still helps with your healing process when you are still here. And so, I love that for sharing that.

denim chang: 29:16

Yeah, absolutely.

Pink Lady: 29:20

Hey you all, Pink Lady here. I am the producer for Dem Bois Podcast, and I am so excited to tell you about my production company, Pink Lady Productions. We collaborate with creatives like you who are driven to share your message by launching

your podcast from A to Z and coaching you through the process. To learn more about our services, check out our website@pinkladyprod.com. That's P-I-N-K-L-A-D-Y-P-R-O-D.com.

Shawn Aaron: 29:54

You are a somatic trauma resolutioner. Excuse me, somatic trauma resolution practitioner.

denim chang: 30:03

Yeah, it's a mouthful.

Shawn Aaron: 30:05

Right. Especially with somebody like me with a lisp. You're an erotic power enthusiast. So how is that directly tied to masking and sexuality?

denim chang: 30:20

You know, ask me again like two years from now. You know, I'm still...

Shawn Aaron: 30:27

Okay. So, you plan on coming back in two years. Okay. Got it.

denim chang: 30:29

Maybe. If you'll have me, I would love that. I'm still discovering that. So, somatic work, somatic trauma resolution is a very, for me, specific kind of work where I bring in with my clients resourcing from nature, from spirit. So, including like ancestors or whatever your spiritual orientation might be to create conditions for the body to heal on its own. The idea is that, you know, our body knows how to heal, it has an inherent capacity for that, given the right conditions, right? So, understanding that we live in perpetual conditions of violence and harm, what does that mean to create micro conditions? What does that mean for us? And so can we create micro conditions where we feel safe enough, the conditions are right enough for the nervous system to do its own thing, to be able to say, there's this pain here, but now that I feel safe enough, I feel held enough by my spiritual resources or by nature, what wants to happen next?

How does the body want to move in order to express or manifest that emotion, that feeling that has kept us in a certain shape or a certain kind of behavior that may perpetuate more hurt and harm to ourselves and others. And then what are the underlying needs beneath that? And so, that is like the work that I do one-on-one and

through the school, Somatics for the People. And the sexuality work, the masculinity work, you know, I love Chicago because we have a T-Boy strip club over here. Shout out to the T-Boy Tuesday. It's pretty great. If you ever visit, we will go.

Shawn Aaron: 32:20

Actually, now I want to visit, fuck the snow, I'm coming.

denim chang: 32:22

We'll keep you warm. We'll make sure you're bundled up. We'll have socks and many layers. But you know, having the opportunity to not only perform but to witness other T-boys in their masculinity and their sexuality, it's such a range, right? There's no one way to be a masculine person who enjoys his sexuality. Of course there are like, you know, more like expected forms of sexuality or maybe more like gendered conventional masculinity. And I think being trans for me inherently challenges that. And I don't like when people expect me to behave a certain kind of way because of my, you know, masculinity.

So, ask me again, because I'm still trying to figure that out. I'm still learning how my body wants to move, how my body wants to express itself. Because to me, sexuality is not just how I behave in bed, right? It's my confidence. It's the way my essence wants to take shape in this body. It's the way I relate to people. It's the way that people feel connected with me and to me. So, still a work in progress, yeah.

Shawn Aaron: 33:48

Yeah, you know, this is a very good conversation actually, because you mentioned folks have this idea of how we're supposed to behave and how we're supposed to act. Right. And I feel that pressure.

denim chang: 34:03

Right.

Shawn Aaron: 34:04

Right. And it's like, what if I don't want to do that? You know, but then because the pressure is so tough, you've been kind of socialized, right? In certain ways, even as being AFAB, you kind of socialize like, you're supposed to do in an AFAB body. But I knew that that wasn't for me. I didn't want to do any of those things feminine presenting, but as a masculine person, well, maybe I do want to try some of those things, right? And I'm not just talking about sexual. I'm just, I'm talking about you, but it's kind of like, how do you feel comfortable with breaking that norm and just, I know you say you working on it. So, let's work on this.

denim chang: 34:39

Yes, let's do it.

Shawn Aaron: 34:41

So how do you kind of own it, and own your body, own your movement, own just all of that without feeling the pressures of what everybody else expects you to be in the masculine world.

denim chang: 34:53

Yeah, you know, so lately, lately like today, like this week, you know, I've been really thinking about what would it look and feel like to feel strong, to feel like when I not only look in the mirror, but when I am in my body. Like one thing I noticed is that I have this... You know, a lot of people can relate to this, like this way of covering myself because, you know, I have a chest and it's like, I'm noticing my spine hurts, my back hurts, my SI joint hurts, right? And so much of this is the way that my body has tried to protect myself from being gendered because of my body parts. And I think that part of my confidence, my way of embracing who I am is like, what if I could practice having more of a vertical in Qigong, which is a Taoist practice of martial arts and energy.

We have this idea called the vertical alignment and it is about like the sword within you. And my sword has been bent. I've been moving around like this. By the time I'm 50, I'm going to be like those grandmas. And I want to practice what this shape and how this shape. How would I move in the world if I allowed myself to be upright rather than hiding myself or having a kind of gait that wants to be like a tough guy? And actually, I'm a soft boy. I like being more connected to a softer side of masculinity. And I think, I don't know if that answers your question, but that's what I have for now, you know?

Shawn Aaron: 36:42

It's not about answering my question. It's about how you feel with just presenting it, what you have to say. How you receive what I ask and how it comes out is how it comes out, right? Not necessarily answer my question, but definitely, I feel that. I began transitioning in my early thirties and so it resonates with me. With always hunching over, always trying to squeeze myself and minimize my chest prior to top surgery. But I feel like even now I still kind of do that. And there's a particular meme when you mentioned that I thought about it. It was a college basketball game and no, I didn't watch the game. I don't know what happened before the meme was created. But anyway, there was a player, he was taller than his other teammate, but he was

running down court with his head down. This teammate came up behind him, put his hand on his chest and his other hand put his head up.

And it was kind of like, have some confidence, put your head up. So, I don't know if maybe he made a shot, missed a shot, whatever, but his head was down, he was like, no, put your head up. And that resonates with me because I tend to always look down at my shoes. I know what my shoes is like. And it's hard to kind of get that confidence. No, fuck that. I'm going look up. I don't want my neck hurting when I'm 70 because I've been looking down all the time. But it's like that confidence within, right? And so now I'm like I love to hear that you said it's a sword.

denim chang: 38:13

Yeah, Sword within.

Shawn Aaron: 38:15

Sword within. So, you think if you slouch over, the sword is going to slice through you. Is that right?

denim chang: 38:20

Right.

Shawn Aaron: 38:21

You keep the sword straight, right? Yeah, that's just something. It takes work. It definitely does.

denim chang: 38:29

Sure. And I think it definitely takes work because even just sitting up right now, I feel my back muscles like working in a way they're like, bro, we're used to having the other part of the body do the work. So, why are making us work now? You know, I'm like, no, we're getting there. But kind of like to bring it full circle a little like, I think because for me, sitting upright, walking, moving upright in this way, there's like a vulnerability in the chest. There's like a way of being seen. Sure, I have a physical, you know, fat on my chest. And I think because my heart had so much shame, my heart space, right? Like the area of my heart had so much weight to it, burden to it that it was, it felt life threatening to have my heart be so open in this way.

There wasn't enough, I think, protection for my heart. There wasn't enough recognition of my own heart and the shame that was there to even allow myself to want to be upright. It felt safer to hold and to hunch and to hide, to collapse on myself because of the amount of pain that I held here. So much of my transition

work was about healing my heart and about allowing myself to be in love with myself and who I am. And we're still working on that, right. But I think that there is a relationship there to the hunching and to the heart energy and how shame lived in my body.

Shawn Aaron: 40:11

Such a good point. Such a beautiful point. And so, with somatic work, it's the same as nervous system work. Am I correct?

denim chang: 40:19

Yeah, it's included. It's not the only thing but absolutely included. Yeah.

Shawn Aaron: 40:23

And I know I always talk about therapy, and I attend therapy every week. And so, my therapist is actually a somatic therapist as well. And so, it definitely helps with working through that trauma and realizing how your body responds in waves and how to learn how to, because I know once when I first started therapy a couple of years ago, my thing was I didn't know what happy felt like.

I saw it on TV. I have moments of happiness, but internally my body didn't know how to feel happy. And so, it's kind of some of the same things you're talking about. I'm like, I didn't feel like I deserve to be happy. I didn't feel that in my heart. I had a lot of trauma that I needed to work through a lot of verbal abuse and physical abuse. I didn't know how to be happy. And so, it was about learning how to hold on, how to make your body respond in a certain way. Am I correct?

denim chang: 41:15

I think so. Yeah, it's definitely about being curious about the body and how, like you said, it's responding and yeah, not having access to a feeling and learning how to be, learning how to allow that feeling to take shape within the body. Yeah.

Shawn Aaron: 41:40

Yeah. And so, do you have any kind of advice for folks or what folks say? You know what? I don't have access to somatic therapy. I don't have access to any type of help. Is there anything that you can offer folks that are listening to kind of like guide them in a way?

denim chang: 41:57

Yeah, I would say the I think the first thing you could consider there many ways to access somatics. But one thing is to consider your environment and what are what is the smallest way you can shift your environment? So, for example, say you're stuck in a spiral at home, you're looping and you're on your phone and you feel stuck in that. Consider going outside for a walk, go to a park, go somewhere new, and consider turning off your phone or even leaving it at home if you feel safe enough to do that. That shift in your environment can already create a shift internally. And there are certain things that we can't necessarily change in our environment, right? Not at least without effort or risk like our home or our job.

So again, what is the smallest doable way that you can shift your environment? I love going to the lake. Back when I lived in California, I was at Pacific Ocean once a week to be held by the ocean. And think about ways that your shift in environment can help you feel a sense of connection to something greater than you, like the ocean or the lake or a big tree that knows more than you, has seen more than you, has so much more capacity to hold you and all that you are holding, that can already be a somatic experience. It doesn't have to always be about going into the body and feeling what's in the body, especially when we have been traumatized, especially when there's so much to work through. A shift in the environment just to allow for something different to happen, I think can be a really great way to start.

Shawn Aaron: 43:42

Thank you for sharing that for folks. You are the creator of Somatics for the People.

denim chang: 43:53

Yeah.

Shawn Aaron: 43:54

You want to tell folks a little bit more about what that is?

denim chang: 43:58

Absolutely. The school, it's still emerging, like I said. I use that word on purpose, because we're still learning as we go. We're adaptive. We want to understand the needs of our people rather than telling them this is what you need. And so, because of that, that's a process of learning and inviting people in, creating a space where we can have conversations to shape what the school needs to be. When I first got the vision of the schools in 2021 and I saw a forest, it was lush and big, but there was a clearing and there was a little invitation for me to build something there. And I saw that it was connected to other networks and other groups and communities with

people doing really great work as well. But that this was something that I was meant to steward with other people.

And so, we finally launched at the end of 2024, '25... What year is it? 2024. It's 2026, I know that. At the end of like fall 2024 and yeah, we're in progress, we're in process. still, we're in like a growth edge right now around what does it mean to be a school for queer and trans people of color? How do we define that? Whose experiences do we want to prioritize or center? And in doing so, what is the impact of that? How do we care for one another when our capacity can be so limited because of survival, because of needing to take care of ourselves? How do we hold that all of us experience systemic violence differently? How do we meet each other in that and hold space for each other? And these are some questions.

I'm seeing this in sort of like these broad terms because there is something happening in the school right now where we're being asked to really understand the commitment that we're making with the school. This is not easy work, right? We're asking folks to say, hey, come in and look at the ways that white supremacy and capitalism and patriarchy has shaped you. And not only that, you're going to do it in mixed company. Right? And so, there's a seriousness to it. Even though I like to bring in play and joy and humor into my work, this shit is real, right? This is the work. Yeah, being a newer school, I think we're still figuring out how to really hold that without bypassing, without overriding, without using language that feels inaccessible. How do we make the work accessible, right? When most people in our community often aren't as financially resourced, right? And so again, just these bigger questions around not only sustainability, but access and how do we relate to one another given the conditions that we're in. So, still learning but please come and join us.

Shawn Aaron: 47:22

I learned some of that stuff is some nasty work, right? It's deeply ingrained and sometimes we don't even realize it, right? This is so conditioned. So, yeah, if someone listening wants to be a part... Was this just for students or is this for practitioners who are already professionals?

denim chang: 47:42

No, it's for anyone who wants to learn more about somatics and their relationship with their body. Yeah, I would love to have more folks join us and to be vulnerable, to be honest about the process of starting a school. Yeah, anyone can join. I would love to meet more people from this community and more. Yeah.

Shawn Aaron: 48:11

And so how can people reach out to you if they are interested?

denim chang: 48:15

Yes, so the website is somaticsthepeople.com. We have an Instagram as well, it's somaticsthepeople on Instagram and people can always reach out to me. I'm huesofdenim. I think all my links are going to be in the show notes probably on Instagram and I have a website too. So, send me a note. I love chatting with people. I love getting to know folks who are interested. We usually have an open house at the start of every season so that people can come in and ask questions and see if it's the right fit for them. Yeah, those are some of ways they can find out more.

Shawn Aaron: 48:53

Yes. So, we will make sure to put all of that information in the show notes, so folks don't have to go digging for you. Just scroll down and click the links and it'll send you directly there.

Shawn Aaron: 49:07

Thank you for tuning into this week's episode. So, from whatever platform that you're listening to this week's episode on, please be sure to give us five stars. And if there's something within this episode, whether it's the guest or something that I said, or maybe the guest said that resonated with you, be sure to go and leave us a comment on this episode or leave us a comment on the show. So, what happens is, if you feel like it resonated with you, I'm sure there's someone out there who hasn't even heard about Dem Bois Podcast. It may resonate with them, and actually it could save someone's life to hear these stories, right? Because we believe that visibility equals possibility, but there isn't any possibility if we aren't visible. So, if you go and leave comments, the more comments you leave, the more five-star ratings you leave, then this podcast will be available to more folks to see. And so, we want to be visible. We want to be out there. We want folks to know that we're here and that our stories are out there for them to listen to. And so, if you could do me a favor, please go ahead and rate the show or leave a comment. Until next time, see you on the next episode.

50:21

And so, I want to ask you because, you know, I was very inspired by you even before I'm looking at you, you know, virtually, I should say face to face, your bio. Your bio just, you know, impeccable to me.

denim chang: 50:38

Thank you.

Shawn Aaron: 50:39

Yeah, because you know, I read a lot of bios and sometimes people don't know how to talk about themselves. Right. Sometimes folks minimize the work that they do and it's like, you know, and also your bio will be in the show notes for folks to read over. Just reading the bio before I even get to hear your story, before I even get to know you, Like, I feel like some sort of a passion in the work that you do. The words, your lexical choices were very specific. And do you mind, can I read it actually?

denim chang: 51:19

Please, I might cover my eyes, but please. No, I'm just kidding.

Shawn Aaron: 51:25

Let me read it.

denim chang: 51:26

Okay, I'm going to be like broad-chested and sword within. Let's do it.

Shawn Aaron: 51:29

There you go. There you go. "So, a somatic trauma resolution practitioner and erotic power enthusiast. In his work, he bridges body-based intelligence, the ancestral wisdom of his Taoist lineage, and his love for relationship anarchy to support our healing work in feeling more vulnerability, intimacy and belonging. He is the creator of Somatics for the People, an emerging school for liberatory embodiment and identifies as a transmasculine nonbinary immigrant and survivor on the autism spectrum, and a love and sex addict in recovery. When not avoiding his writing practice, he's in muay Thai or at the drums.

denim chang: 52:22

Lots of words. I wrote that.

Shawn Aaron: 52:24

Yeah, you wrote that. I didn't make that shit up. I'm sorry if I didn't deliver it as...

denim chang: 52:34

You were excellent.

Shawn Aaron: 52:35

...but when I read it, I'm like, whoa, like I just felt like I can feel your essence. It's crazy because I have kind of have those connections as well as some similar, which you

spoke of earlier, but it was just like, wow, it was delivered very, very well. And as a person, so now that I'm meeting you, see every word.

denim chang: 53:01

Thank you.

Shawn Aaron: 53:02

Yeah. And so, I want to ask you, how did you get to this point? From Malaysia to present day. How did all of this work? How did the things that you're doing, your choice of the work that you're doing in the community, how did that all find you?

denim chang: 53:22

Thank you for that question. It was a lot of difficult decisions, sometimes decisions that were about running away from things that hurt me, but in doing so, running towards myself. Choices that allowed me to choose myself. A lot of curiosity around who I am and how I wanted to move in the world and solitude. There's been years where I've been alone. Well, I have people, but the kind of solitude of self-inquiry and of self-knowing that you have to do in solitude and receiving support, allowing myself to be supported, allowing myself to be witnessed as a vulnerable person, as I've embraced more masculinity, I found myself being like, ooh, vulnerability feels a little icky now, because masculinity and vulnerability don't go together. But we know that.

We know that that's not okay. We know that that's what we're trying to shift. But I do recall a time when the shape of masculinity and vulnerability was a little something to practice. But allowing myself to be seen and to be held and supported.

Maybe not always by people, but again, by nature, by my ancestors. I work with a goddess named Kuan Yin and she's the goddess of compassion. And so, allowing myself to be held by these energies and the vulnerability that invokes. Not being afraid to sit with the pain. When I say I'm an erotic power enthusiast, Audre Lorde's essay, I have to acknowledge that uses the erotic, the eroticist power. That's the invitation, right? At least how I'm interpreting her work. She's saying, go there, feel the chaos of your biggest, strongest feelings, because that's where your power is. And I would say that my willingness to go there has allowed me to be who I am today. Yeah.

Shawn Aaron: 55:41

Every word. You are amazing.

denim chang: 55:43

Thank you, Shawn. I'm so grateful to be here. Yeah.

Shawn Aaron: 55:47

And so, when we talk about vulnerability in my community, I always say visibility equals possibility. What does visibility equals possibility mean to you?

denim chang: 55:59

Yeah, I think what's coming to me is allowing ourselves to be surprised at what can happen when we allow ourselves to be seen. Yeah.

Shawn Aaron: 56:11

I can go ahead and end it right here.

denim chang: 56:20

Thank you Shawn.

Shawn Aaron: 56:22

That was beautiful. Yes. And so, you know, not everyone has that ability to break through.

denim chang: 56:29

Yeah.

Shawn Aaron: 56:30

Some folks will never break through. Sadly, some folks won't make it in our community for whatever reason, whether that's self-harm or just things that the power that that be. And if today is someone's last day... And I won't say last day physically here because we don't want to put that on anybody in our community. But if you were to usher that person into that, that moment of breaking through, whatever it is, to get to the point where they can thrive and succeed and be in a place where you are, what would you say? What would you say to someone listening?

denim chang: 57:10

I'm going to end this on like a cheesy note. It's like *'listen to your heart when it's cold.'*

Shawn Aaron: 57:20

Singer, yes! You didn't put that on the bio.

denim chang: 57:23

I couldn't even end it. Listen to your heart. Trust that your heart knows, even if it's spicy or sour or resentful there's wisdom there. There's wisdom there. Yeah.

Shawn Aaron: 57:37

Beautiful. Beautiful. This is great. This has been amazing. Yes, this is the part of the show though. So, you listened to some episodes, know, this is the part of the show where I like to ask my guests a random ass question. Any question on this list you know may or may not have anything to do with what we talk about, but you know, in the past couple of episodes though, folks have actually picked a question that has something to do with what we talked about, so I don't know. Let's see. So, I have 84 questions, 83 questions. Well, 84, I do have 84, I'm lying, excuse me. So, pick a number between one and 84 and let's see what your question is.

denim chang: 58:18

33.

Shawn Aaron: 58:21

33. 33 says, oh, it doesn't have anything to do with what we talked about, but that's okay.

denim chang: 58:29

That's okay.

Shawn Aaron: 58:30

33 says, what is your favorite movie?

denim chang: 58:33

Ooh, what is my favorite movie? Why, that's hard.

Shawn Aaron: 58:38

That's why it's your favorite. That's easy. You got a lot of them.

denim chang: 58:44

I have at least three. I don't know if it's problematic because of who is the director, but I don't know why, but I love Pulp Fiction.

Shawn Aaron: 58:58

Okay.

denim chang: 58:59

You know, it's Quentin Tarantino, I get it. We're not supposed to like the man. But Pulp Fiction is interesting. I don't know why, that's going to be my answer. Maybe that cancels out everything I've said today. That's okay. I can't think of anything else.

Shawn Aaron: 59:15

That's horrible. No, what you had to say was very important. if somebody like you know, wasn't present in this and you weren't in the story anyway. And it's unlearning all that shit. What's your favorite is what's your favorite. You can't help it. Right.

denim chang: 59:30

I can't help it.

Shawn Aaron: 59:31

Yeah, it's almost like saying, I know this may be problematic too. Please forgive me.

denim chang: 59:36

Please forgive me people of the internet.

Shawn Aaron: 59:37

Yeah, this is going to be problematic. This is like saying, and I will make it more current. Okay. Diddy. All the things that happened with Diddy and you like, but he was my favorite artist. It's kind of like that don't take away the artistry. You kind of get to separate artistry and the bad shit that a person, I don't know. That's kind of like the same thing with me. Or even like R. Kelly or like, it's like, yeah. But you kind of like that song where you're like, damn, but it's R. Kelly and I shouldn't really like that song. Yeah, it's kind of hard to separate, you know, people and their doings. I feel like too, people are human beings. As human beings we're nasty, we do some horrible shit to each other.

denim chang: 1:00:18

We do; we really do. It's true. That's unfortunate. Yeah, thank you for understanding.

Shawn Aaron: 1:00:28

Yeah. I tried to take a little bit of the heat off of you, but that's your favorite.

denim chang: 1:00:34

I mean, ask me again in two years. We'll see what it is then.

Shawn Aaron: 1:00:38

Okay, you coming back in two years because you just said it a few times. I've brought people back before so don't play. I'm a mark it down. Come circle back around in two years from now.

denim chang: 1:00:51

I would be humble, but who knows, maybe you'll be at the T-Boy Strip Club in Chicago with me. You can ask me then too, but...

Shawn Aaron: 1:00:57

I think if I'm at the T-boy strip club, I ain't asking no damn questions.

denim chang: 1:01:04

Yes, appropriate.

Shawn Aaron: 1:01:07

Yes. My favorite movie. I've said this before. My favorite movie of all time is Love Jones. Love me some Nia Long.

denim chang: 1:01:16

Yeah.

Shawn Aaron: 1:01:16

And I will tell anybody that I'm romantically involved with if Nia Long says Shawn Aaron come on, I'm coming. So, bye to whoever it is. I love you but if Nia Long says come with me and this is no longer.

denim chang: 1:01:29

No longer. I love the commitment. It's good to know yourself.

Shawn Aaron: 1:01:34

Yes. And thank you so much for being a guest on the show. I really appreciate you. This has been amazing. You are amazing.

denim chang: 1:01:42

You as well Shawn.

Shawn Aaron: 1:01:45

Yes, and I love to practice healthy masculinity whenever I can. And I want to tell you that I love you. Just keep doing the work that you're doing, it is beautiful.

denim chang: 1:01:54

Thank you, Shawn. I love you too.

[1:01:57 - 1:02:19 Musical Outro]