

# Finding Sanctuary: The Orlando Pulse Shooting

August 5, 2016

**Host:** Edwin Ramoran

Dulcina Abreu\*

Elia Alba

Justin Allen (BDGRMMR)\*

Lawrence Graham-Brown\*

Virginia Grise\*

Maria Jose\*

Rosamond S. King\*

Zavé Martohardjono\*

Carlos Melgoza\*

Anthony Myers\*

Nicky Paraiso\*

Laurie Prendergast\*

Edwin Ramoran\*

Sara Reisman\*

Seph Rodney\*

Larilyn Sanchez\*

Ethan Shoshan\*

Sur Rodney Sur\*

Christopher Udemzue\*

\* Guests that Elia did not photograph.

**Sara:** Edwin introduced this idea of sanctuary in response to the shooting of over one hundred people in Orlando. We wanted to think about the intersection of Islamophobia, queer culture, homophobia, immigration, and gun violence. And, in a way, sanctuary underscores all of this.

**Elia:** I started the project in 2012, because when I began photographing these artists, I wanted to give them a voice. The first dinner was pretty explosive. One of the artists was captured at the very end of the recording saying, “Damn, this was intense but this was really good.” That’s what I walked out of there with, and I think every other artist at the table did too. It’s the safe space, the sanctuary, but it’s also feeling able to say these things without any reproach or reprimand. The question is, what can we do as artists?

**Edwin:** Honestly, I always want to cry. We’re post-Orlando, and a lot of us are still mourning. Not just that, we’re mourning over so many men, women, and trans people of color; everyone who has been murdered senselessly. I cried before I came back to New York. I left two years ago for a lot of reasons: to find sanctuary, a home, a family. In the past, I found sanctuary in going to Vinyl on Sunday at Body & Soul. We went to Danny T and we went to Shelter. I found friends and people who would go to a place where they love house music. You didn’t have to love house music to go to Body & Soul or Paradise Garage at that point, because it was about people coming together.

They felt they could let go of things and just be whoever they wanted to be, who they were raised to be, and who they were born to be. So, to have these things happen, people murdered in places of worship or convening ... What is sanctuary, how you define it? To me, it’s a lot of things. Going back to California, I’ve been going to church more. Having to reconcile my sexuality with the Seventh-day Adventist Church, there’s a real separation, but there’s also a real togetherness I found because my family goes to that church. I worship with them. I go to find the love that I haven’t had since living in New York for twenty years. There is a level of sanctuary in finding home again and trying to figure out what religion does, how you can impact your youngest cousin or oldest aunt. The other idea of sanctuary I was looking at is the idea of community—how do we keep coming together? We used to do it. A lot of us are still doing it. Another prompt for this dinner was the idea of protection. Many of us have been talking about protection for a long time. For LGBTQ communities, protection has been about health. For our generation, many people grew up not having sex and were still virgins in college. We thought, “Oh my god. We don’t want that.” It scared us into not meeting people. Later, we went to places where we could meet people, and there was sanctuary in that, because you related to the people around you, and you could surround yourself with people you know and love.

**Lawrence:** I don’t go to art productions a lot because of the work I present. I’m always attacked somehow, or just looked at oddly. I create my own bubble, and that’s one reason why I live in New Jersey. I listen to friends, I hear what friends say online. When it comes to sanctuary, I’m always searching for that perfect place—I hope I find it. But I’m at peace and that’s good.

**Zavé:** I’m really happy to be here because right after Orlando, I was seeking out different spaces. I went to Stonewall to be in the park with folks. There was a lot of grief, and there was a lot of rage acting itself out in a really loaded way. Then I went to a meditation space, where there was a very emotionally removed conversation about violence. I just found myself at a loss. Because I grew up in the city, I’ve come up in this queer, political culture, understanding this idea of safe space. Sometimes, I take a

really practical approach to it, “OK, I’m going to go to this space or that space.” Then I see how our emotions play out with each other, and it becomes very painful.

**Larilyn:** Sanctuary is something I’ve always worked on without realizing it. I thought about it as something very elusive, because I come from two different cultures. I grew up in the Philippines for part of my life, and now I’m here, as a queer woman of color. Identity is not something I can necessarily call a sanctuary, as I often find out in this racist or classist world. I’ve always found myself in situations where I am the only person of color or person of queerness. That unique person is not fully American.

**Virginia:** I never use that word; I never say sanctuary. What does sanctuary mean to me? The first thing I thought about was the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s when people were coming from Central America and churches bonded together to say, “What is happening to Central American refugees isn’t moral, and we are going to protect these refugees by any means necessary.” To protect a community isn’t necessarily safe. What does it mean to protect a community? What does safe space mean, and is there safe space? I’m working on a show right now called *Your Healing is Killing Me*. I call it a manifesto to move from individualized self-care to acts of collective self-defense. One of the lines from it is “No space is safe,” and I learned that at a very young age. If we can say no space is safe, then we can begin to identify what is putting us at harm as a people. If we identify what’s putting us at risk of being harmed, then we can begin to identify how to protect each other.

**Nicky:** Something I’ve been coming to terms with is, how does one, even in this group, find one’s authority to speak in a roomful of others, or communicate what is actually going on in the moment? I have been, only recently, as a person of color and as an artist, finding my own authority to speak. And that’s partially what’s going on in this country at this moment. People need to find their own authority to speak in order to make a difference. I’m the son of immigrant parents; I believe I’m the oldest person in this room. I grew up in the 1950s and ’60s and came of age in the 1970s. Sanctuary has meant so many things to me from being raised Catholic, being an altar boy, being in the

sanctuary of a church. Was that a safe place? Not always. Theater later became a sanctuary for me, and the artists and community who made up that theater. It's taken me sixty years to own the fact that I am a leader in my own community. What does that mean? Who are the leaders?

**Laurie:** It is more than a place, it's an act, it's a verb, it's a becoming. Thinking about refugees, sanctuary is often thought of as a place where you can seek refuge. How do I take refuge? How do I encourage others to find refuge? For me, it's in my breath.

**Maria Jose:** Thinking about sanctuary, video games are the first thing that come to mind. Growing up, I remember pouring my entire life and attention into the screen, which is still relevant with social media—these made up spaces where you can feel safe. Sanctuary is never simple; it's always complicated. Through playing video games, being on social media, you can create the illusion of being OK. I would have to say that's definitely one of my sanctuaries. When I'm with a lot of trans women, I also feel very safe. Particularly when we're walking down a sidewalk, strutting down, suddenly we outnumber our aggressors, and there's something very holy about that. I feel a sense of sanctuary in my reflection because being trans and looking at yourself is a lot. It's OK for sanctuaries to not be simple; it's also OK to trick ourselves into feeling safe.

**Sur:** I don't know if there's any place that's actually safe. Even if I feel physically safe, I'm dealing with psychic violence, people that are in pain, environments that are very temporal. So for sanctuary, I try to find a place I can hold for myself, where I feel comfortable, safe, and strong. I try to bring that into environments or go to environments where collectively I have moments of feeling I'm protected psychically. I never feel completely safe because I've realized that at any moment something can happen to change that. And I've become more interested in what people I encounter feel in terms of safety. I protect myself most through trying to be more caring around people, understanding, holding space for them to be able to do, or be, whatever they need to be without judging them. That is as close as I get. I value those moments when we can find them; they give me strength

to go forward to other moments in which I can create that or have someone create it for me. The idea of sanctuary is a temporal space, and I think what's fascinating about Orlando is the way that it's disrupted or interrupted. I tended to focus on the man that actually went in there and delivered the violence. I really wanted to know what he was doing. But the people who were affected, and how they were affected, were also really important.

**Carlos:** I think urban planning has potential for creating sanctuaries. As a queer, as a gay man of color, there's also the potential for people of higher authority to shut us down.

**Elia:** Your home can be safe, a sanctuary. You feel like your home is safe, and as a queer person it isn't safe; because you can't even rely on that. So where does that leave you? Maybe I'm really pessimistic. I don't know where that is. The violence towards people of color has always been there. We were aware of it then, but we're more vocal about it now.

**Seph:** I think one of the reasons why we are more vocal, and one of the reasons why it's been documented, is that we're in a moment of real social change in the United States. There's a particular and profound change in the social order. We know this as people of color, and everybody else in the world knows it too. There's a social hierarchy that we inherited, that we were born into, which, in general terms, is white heterosexual male and white heterosexual female, then everyone else. There are a couple of ways to think about this. One is that it's a continuum—not an either/or. There's a degree to which we feel safe in certain contexts; we feel safer in some and less safe in others. Safety is a slightly troublesome idea for me, and I'm not sure that we are safe anywhere. To be completely honest, I'm not sure that we should be. I tend to conflate safety with a certain kind of entitlement within different spaces. One of the things art does is actually making us not feel safe. Safe in our ideas, safe in our ideologies, safe in our ways of looking at the world. What if they get shaken up? Isn't that what we go to art for? That's why we subscribe to the whole system of aesthetic production.

**Laurie:** That it doesn't make us feel safe.

**Virginia:** I don't necessarily think sanctuary is safety. As a queer woman of color, I understood those contradictions very early on. I've never understood this world to be safe. As an artist, my work has always been about not being safe. Safety and sanctuary can be very different things. When I looked up the word sanctuary, it talked about refuge, haven, oasis, shelter, retreat, hideaway, hideout, protection, immunity, and asylum ...

**Rosamond:** And sacredness.

**Virginia:** And the shrine. Sanctuary equals asylum equals protection equals defense. So how do we defend ourselves in places that are unsafe?

**Anthony:** Coming here, I thought, "Well, sanctuary, oh, that's within. I can find that within." But what if sanctuary is not safe within? What if your inner self is not safe? What if your thoughts are not healthy? What if your spirit is not healthy because you've been affected by external events, or you've been affected by yourself? What if your mental health is not in a safe space? The self is not always safe. We're not even our own sanctuary at times. How do we deal with that and what does that mean for us? The core of change has to begin with some self-evolution. How do you create that safety within before you can do anything else?

**Seph:** One of the things that you're saying, though, is that sanctuaries aren't spaces you just wander into or inherit, they're places that need to be actively created.

**Sara:** I think they are both.

**Zavé:** I was thinking about the idea of practice, the active versus the passive. When I think about the word safety, it seems like a preexisting, already established thing. How we get to be safe in the world is also determined by how the world sees us, as a threat or a non-threat. I think about a verbal practice I do most days, which is, "May I be safe. May I be protected. May I be ..." I don't assume that it's there, but by invoking those words I have a practice of personal shield-building that helps me to walk through the world. Not to escape the feeling that someone's coming up behind me, but so I can actively witness and feel everything I encounter and extend compassion, safety, and protection to the people around me. I think about systems of violence that are continuing to chip away at

our individual or community practice. Most people in the world want us all to have love, security, means, education, wealth, and health. Wealth in the sense that we are not so beaten down every day when we come home from work that we have nothing left for ourselves or for anyone else. The systems of violence, capitalism, environmental degradation have taken the rug out from under us over and over again.

**Sur:** It's very difficult for people of color to find and develop their own sanctuaries because part of what we need is protection from white supremacy, which undermines sanctuary for people of color. When we talk about how things are opening up, seeing videotapes of this violence, because people can see it now, they understand it more. It's important for those people who never believed, that thought we were overexaggerating—the white supremacists. Of course, they're going to shut it down because of the way in which it upsets the power dynamic. They don't want us ever to feel safe, because if we do, they lose control. We have to fight this fear because it's what's killing us. White men, specifically the ones who are rising up in anger right now—there are a lot of them who are really angry—believe that society essentially consists of men like them who are constantly in battle with other men. The only means at their disposal to keep themselves whole, and to survive, is violence. So, violence has been endemic, but they are also in fear of each other. If people of color disappeared, it's not like they would stop fighting. There would still be mass shootings—but for different reasons. Everyone's in fear. I don't think there's an amorphous "they" who are keeping us fearful. We are afraid because we've grown up in a society where this ideology is embedded in everything we do, in the capitalist system, in our churches, in our civic organizations. There's this notion that if I don't get my thing, then you're going to get it; you're going to take it from me. Or I'm not getting it because you're taking it from me. One development is—and this is happening throughout the world—we're developing a clearer sense of what constitutes safety and sanctuary. It's about empowerment.

**Virginia:** I don't feel safe, but I don't feel fearful. That's in part because I walk with a lot of privilege. When Orlando happened, my partner looked at me and said, "Are you

scared?” and I said, “I don’t feel fear.” She then asked, “Are you safe?” and I told her, “I don’t feel safe.”

**Lawrence:** This is about power, so it’s in your hands. Again, with safe spaces, you have to always check. You have to go back and check for safety, making sure that the lock is on. You constantly have to reevaluate; just because you have a system in place doesn’t mean it can’t be broken. You always have to double-check.

**Elia:** This itself is a privileged space.

**Laurie:** Does that make me privileged because I’ve been invited into a privileged space?

**Elia:** Not necessarily. I don’t know where you come from.

**Laurie:** Exactly.

**Seph:** But to Laurie’s point, there’s a thread running through the conversation that’s important to bring to the surface, which is the tension between individuality and the collectivity. Being empowered by a community that is empowered, as opposed to a self-centered kind of empowerment.

**Maria Jose:** There is a lot of theorizing and a lot of talking, but it’s a lot to ask for. We don’t really have the power to bring these structures down. All we can do is theorize.

**Anthony:** There’s a legacy of white privilege. I believe that power moves, and it moves beyond just whiteness. It’s a bigger thing. It’s personally hard for me to say, “Oh, it’s the white man.” I get white privilege, but maybe because I move in a number of different worlds, I believe it’s a little deeper than that. I’ve been oppressed by women; white women, black women, gay men, my family. I believe there’s a bigger issue in the movement of power, being able to identify it, and its ability to liberate or cripple.

**Virginia:** I think things need to happen on a very small scale, at a localized level.

**Rosamond:** What you’re saying makes me think about the way Orlando will be written about historically. Part of what we do as artists is dream of what could be, but we also document what is in ways that history cannot. The thing about a tragedy so huge is that it can suck a lot

of energy. The same weekend Orlando happened, two major rulings came down in CARICOM, the Caribbean Community, that related to sexuality. So, this positive thing happened to Caribbean people, and yet Caribbean queer people couldn’t really talk about it because you could only talk about Orlando. We need all of the different ways that we can speak, contextualize, and present.

**Edwin:** I was looking at Orlando as a massacre, as a real, palpable, historical fact, and how we are writing our history. Before, we had to go back to our history with Stonewall. Another thing that happened this year was Stonewall becoming a national monument. It’s a huge uplifting moment. This week I went to Stonewall for the first time since it became a national monument. When I walked inside, the first thing I saw was a list of names of all the people who passed in Orlando. It became a joy kill. We’re always mourning. It’s not just about white supremacy being embedded—it’s founded. This nation-state, founded on the genocide of native people, on mass slavery—the bringing of people and ripping their families apart—was based on colonialism, which spread through Western expansion. History really does inform. It’s about what we do with that history, but the reality is we’re still battling with the erasure of history.

**Virginia:** We’re always rehashing our trauma. There’s the question of what we do with it. Not that it doesn’t exist. It exists, but then what? What do we create?

**Larilyn:** Well, going back to history, talking about power structures, powerful people are going to try to keep their sanctuary, their comfort zone. In order to do that, they will do whatever they need to keep other people down. And historically speaking, colonialism functions this way: “You are worse than us, so we will rule the country.” When we talk about “What can we do as artists?” in recent history, there’s hip-hop, which was based on people being angry, but at the same time celebrating their culture.

**Elia:** That was also disco. I’m a hip-hop fan, don’t get me wrong, but disco was about that; it was creating sanctuaries. It started with black and Latino men in the ’70s, in NYC, when the city was bankrupt and people were abandoning it. Right after Vietnam, NYC was going through a really difficult time.

**Larilyn:** It’s still scary to be gay. The divisiveness of the media can make you feel unsafe.

**Elia:** In Orlando, it was a person of color attacking other people of color. So, I don’t feel like we can talk about a white color dynamic.

**Edwin:** Oh, yes, we can.

**Elia:** For me, Orlando has more to do with homophobia than a black and white dynamic.

**Zavé:** Not just another person of color, but a Muslim person. We’re in a time of heightened Islamophobia, so heightened politically that in order to see yourself as American, you are complicit. You sign up and say that no Muslims should be allowed to be in this country in a time when we are turning away Syrian refugees. Specifically turning them away and legislating the taking down of sanctuary cities.

**Virginia:** Something I’ve witnessed in my lifetime is the rise of the word “terrorism.” There’s this idea that what happened in Orlando wasn’t created here, it was created somewhere else.

**Seph:** It seems to me that the Orlando shooter was someone who was fearful himself because of his sexuality. So there’s a way in which, again, this fear is widely distributed. If someone is fearful, like people who are gay, queer, or on the continuum of non-heteronormative sexuality, that’s not a place to begin to actually realize yourself. I think it’s really important to understand that fear is not helpful. Fear is toxic to the kinds of communities we want to create and we want to live in. Again, it’s widely distributed. It’s not like we corner the market on fear. White men are afraid. Heterosexual Muslim men are afraid. Heterosexual Muslim women are afraid.

**Edwin:** That was the whole thing about Orlando. Everyone was gay or queer by association, for being there. Just being in that place. Not everyone was, and that’s another conversation. But that’s the stigma we’ve all had to live with.

**Anthony:** I aspire to be an elder. We still have work to do ourselves. It’s not just about one generation; we all need to be activists at whatever age we are.

**Zavé:** We are isolated. We live in a country that believes in individualism, and it breaks us down on a community level.

**Laurie:** Edwin talked about the dance floor as sanctuary. That’s a way in which we can actually betray our own historic moment, our own realities. Because to imagine that there wasn’t stuff around skin and color and body, the way I danced or didn’t dance, or whether it was to disco or hip-hop, betrays the fact that we do not all get along. We hate the fuck out of each other, we hurt each other, and we deny each other, just as we love each other and engage with each other. I didn’t go to the dance club to be safe, I went to be free. What happened to liberation and dreams of freedom? That’s why we did all of this. Just to be free. Sometimes that means being safe, sometimes it doesn’t.

**Maria Jose:** Gender and patriarchy have not been mentioned much in this conversation.

**Elia:** That’s a whole other thing.

**Maria Jose:** But it’s not a whole other conversation—it completely overlaps and intersects with everything. I don’t really identify with most of the things that are being said because trans people are not part of the conversation. We are the minority, and I think, “What do I do? I’m just listening to a shit ton of cis people.”

**Anthony:** How does spirituality—not religion—play a role in finding sanctuary, and how can it give us some relative respite from the noise? Can we find ways to be reenergized through practice in spirituality?

**Dulcina:** It’s very important to have a spiritual connection because it makes us connect to each other. We can feel connected with souls that were.

**Maria Jose:** So, to the point of divinity, I was talking to a trans woman at the beginning of this year. I was sort of dating but not really. I would tell her she was a goddess. And she said, “Well, yeah, you can self-appoint divinity.” It really stuck with me. How you can appoint divinity onto yourself in order to cope with being in a mortal world.

**Elia:** I feel sanctuary should belong to everybody. We just don’t feel safe. It’s not about fear, it’s about feeling safe in the world.