READING · NYBALF 2026

Camonghne Felix reads from Let the Poets Govern

Camonghne Felix, introduced by Titilope Sonuga

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On the opening night of NYBALF 2026 at Harlem Stage, Camonghne Felix read from “The Pledge”, a chapter of Let the Poets Govern: A Declaration of Freedom, the book that gave the evening its name. The chapter begins in her first year at DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, on the Wednesday a friend pulled her by the belt loop through the back doors and into the city at noon, and follows the year in which she missed more than a hundred days of school.

From the streets and the young people who lived outside the school day, Felix moves to the novels she read in secret, Gwendolyn Brooks’s “We Real Cool” as her eleventh-grade teacher taught it and as she heard it, the youth theatre programme at MCC, the teen slams of Urban Word NYC and the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, and Sunday afternoons in the West Harlem living room of Abiodun Oyewole of the Last Poets. She closes on the argument that runs through the book, that the institution prepared her through negation and that rebellion was and is her liberation.

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0:00

Opening and introduction by Titilope Sonuga

TITILOPE SONUGA 0:02

She teaches creative writing at the New School in New York City and her forthcoming book, which our evening is named after, Let the Poets Govern. Please welcome up to the stage, Camonghne Felix.

0:19

"The Pledge"

CAMONGHNE FELIX 0:19

So in this chapter, which is called The Pledge, I write about my first year in high school at DeWitt Clinton in the Bronx just a couple of minutes away. I'll just start from the middle of the chapter.

[Reading: "The Pledge", from Let the Poets Govern]

0:38

The first day of high school

CAMONGHNE FELIX 0:38

On that first day of high school, I met a girl who was strange in a way that was different from how I was strange. Beautiful, dark skinned, and short. She navigated the social politics of the classroom with ease. I studied her for the first few days of class, taking subtle cues from her outfits and hairstyles, wondering about this dangerous energy, bright and sad and impulsive she was carrying around, wondering about whether or not I had it too. By the end of the first week of classes, she started to notice me. We became fast friends and on a random Wednesday when she asked me what I really wanted to do, what I would do if I could do anything but be in school, I imagined myself sitting somewhere in the warmth of the sun with her eating a bacon, egg and cheese sandwich and laughing and discussing the boy I was dating. I didn't know what the world was like during these hours I never got to see.

1:36

"Let's go"

CAMONGHNE FELIX 1:36

I told her all of this and she said, "Let's go." I followed rules because I was told that I had no other option because there was danger on the other side of a rule. We'll sign in and get marked present in third period and then when security is on break in the red hallway, we'll leave through the back doors. Easy. All the days before this day had gone by metronomically. One period following the other, the

rhythms reliable and expected. She was an aberration. Every Wednesday she'd disappear from fourth period, a disappearance I noticed and wouldn't return until the next day. I never asked where she went or why she left. It didn't feel like my business.

But today she was inviting me to join her in her elusive escape to be a partner in this drastic split from reality. In the third period, I practiced it all in my head, how I was going to back out of leaving, what valid excuse I could give her. By the time the bell rang, I had chickened out. She caught me trying to scurry to my fourth period class when the bell rang, grabbing me by my belt loop. "Come on," she groaned, pulling me behind her. "We're going."

2:50

Through the back doors

CAMONGHNE FELIX 2:50

I ran with my backpack beating against my spine like a pulse with my two hands out in front of me punching the lever on the doors with the weight of my entire body shoving the doors open flinging them into the wild expanse. We ran so hard our ponytails came loose and we didn't stop until we had made it to the bus stop far up the hill where no security guards were patrolling anymore because it was just the street. No longer the territory of the school. By our own will, we were let free into the void of the world at noon, where we could be real people among real people. I felt the sun on my face, that noon sun, such a rare and uncanny feeling, and saw myself and everything around me reflected in the glare of the bus window, tilted.

The world was not as it was at 3 p.m. And 3 p.m. Would never be as it had been ever again. Being free at this hour opened a portal in my life that I had dared to step through. I was out in the grown-up world armed with an ID and a best friend. I could be anything I wanted to be.

3:59

Running away and into myself

CAMONGHNE FELIX 3:59

That was the first time the world ended for me as I ran full speed across the threshold of the school doors running away and into myself. In that first year of high school, I would miss at least 110 days out of 180, failing the year by default.

4:16

Outside the school day

CAMONGHNE FELIX 4:16

We spent our days on the streets in a warped universe with other young people who had abandoned the job of being young people. These were all kinds of young people, some much older than others, some who were in and out of jail in homeless shelters, some who had been permanently kicked out of school and forced to test for the GED. There were addicts and dealers and kids with jobs and kids who bounced checks for a living. There were young mothers and kids whose parents didn't have the capacity to parent them. What we shared was a unique camaraderie organized around the fact that none of us were where we were supposed to be. In some ways, living outside bourgeois normativity, breaking the rules because they didn't work in our world, weren't relevant to our time.

Rebellion had been planted in me like a pomegranate seed. Breaking the rules was not just a choice of rebellion, but a rejection of an American education system that conventionalized institutional harm and the radical loss of sovereignty that all students must undergo to be in line with the institution. To be in the good graces of the institution in order to receive, in return, more access to the institution and the optimism it draws us towards. But I was always going to break the rules. In those streets, I witnessed firsthand the poetry of how we lived, itself a long interrogation of our otherworldliness. We were thinking about what made us different, about why we were living on a different rhythm than everyone else, why we couldn't just be who we were expected to be, why we were othered.

We lived outside the conventional present, living outside space and time. To exist at those hours meant that in some way we were free. To be outside and alive at those hours meant that we were in conflict with the systematized world, that we lived outside the normative optimism that everyone else was blindly trapped into. To be in conflict with the edges of time, with the edges of the world, meant that we were in conflict with the enclosure from inside the constraints of the enclosure. In this way, we opened ourselves up to a small blessing that can only happen if you're outside at that hour, like a bus driver waving someone's fare. The gentle way people greet each other.

A particular sad solidarity of being untethered at that time of the day. A kinship based on lack or loss. Outside the walls of where I belonged, I was able to carve out a different understanding of belonging. My friends and I spent hours on blocks our parents and friends told us to avoid. Learning the ecosystems of our neighborhoods, having conversations we wouldn't have been able to have anywhere else. We fell in love with the boys who were deemed dangerous by the world and found safety in their otherness. Felt loved by people whom we were supposed to see as unlovable. Our politics was born from experience and not just perspective. We were 13 and 14 respectively, picking up our boyfriends, taken in for stolen candy bars, from central booking in the middle of the day. 13 and 14 at a Titi's lunch table learning to prepare a pig for Beni.

We were the kinds of kids that some people called bad kids, but we had no shame about our delinquencies, no shame about having escaped. We lived in the fullness of life outside of time and became who we were going to be under the slow certainty of day.

7:49

Reading and writing in secret

CAMONGHNE FELIX 7:49

When I wasn't outside with my friends, I was at home by myself, surfing the internet and reading books as I watched reruns of A Different World. I would buy myself a baguette and a can of tuna from the bodega and eat blissfully as I turned the pages of each book, knowing early what it meant to experience pleasure, what it meant to gift myself. Knowing early how to provide myself peace amid the uneasiness of life at home. I sat with myself and came to know myself intimately, cataloging my quirks, identifying what made me different, writing to articulate it all to myself. At 12 I published my first poem, Purgatory, in a pay-to-play poetry anthology, a clear sign of who I would become.

Someone stuck in the middle, someone stuck between someone else's logic and mine. Between my first year of high school and my fifth, my sense of self and my creativity were developing alongside each other. In secret, far away from my friends in the streets, I would write Harry Potter fan fiction and short stories about girls who wanted and needed to be saved. I was consuming novels, going through at least two a week, reading whenever I could, hiding my books behind math textbooks during class and hiding away in the school libraries, getting suspended for fighting and then using suspension time to read even more. In some ways, I was disassociating. In other ways, I was building a practice that would sustain me for a lifetime.

9:17

Back to school

CAMONGHNE FELIX 9:17

When I was forced to go back to school at the end of the year and then forced to transfer to another high school to redo my freshman year, I returned feeling even more strange and more different than I had before. I could barely make it through the day without wanting to escape, without wanting to break out of the walls and be that other me who lived on her own terms. It was harder to do at this new smaller school, which had fewer exits than teachers who actually knew my name. I escaped when I could, but it didn't matter because I had been fundamentally changed by the experience of living outside the metronomic present, because I had read the poetry of the Misfits and had become one.

Outside my world, everyone seemed to be moving at the same speed, walking to the same tempo. Mine felt disturbed, off kilter, and inside my world, the misfits were walking to a different beat, breaking the rhythm of the metronome. I spent time with my mother's collections of classical poetry and even memorized some poems at her urging, including Maya Angelou's Still I Rise and Langston Hughes's Harlem. I appreciated classical poetry as a reader, but not yet as a writer. I understood intellectually the value of its beauty, but not the value of its application.

10:32

Gwendolyn Brooks and "We Real Cool"

CAMONGHNE FELIX 10:32

In 11th grade, my teacher introduced me to Gwendolyn Brooks, and it was one of the few times I was encouraged to think critically about how poetry worked. I was already writing poetry, had already published that weird, depressing poem in that pay-to-play anthology, but it wasn't until this encounter with Brooks that I understood what a poem could do. Our teacher, thoughtful and passionate, taught "We Real Cool" as a sardonic poem, a poem that warned against destructive behavior, that warned about the cost of rebellion. But to me the poem was far more than a reprimand. To me the poem said, "Fuck it." The poem said, "If I gotta go, let me go out fly." And I sing pleasure song in the nightmare of my enemy.

And the enemy was not in the room. Freedom's cost was worth it. To me, this was a poem about seven young people who lived in the fissures of the state, who had the nerve to choose rebellion as a mechanism of survival, who evaded order and suffered death because they could not or would not get in order. They didn't simply die, but were killed by the very constraints they escaped.

11:44

MCC Theater

CAMONGHNE FELIX 11:44

That same 11th grade teacher, Miss Kay, read my short fan fictions and poems and told me to really write with intention because she thought I was talented and that I needed a push. She recommended that I audition for a youth theater program at MCC Theater, a black box where kids like Amy Leon and Dominique Fishback were training. The audition was a series of exercises that we all had to participate in as either writers or performers. A writer would give a line to an actor to perform and so on. At the end of the rounds, the mentors went through the crowd of young people and selected 20 students one by one. When a mentor came to me, I stood there expecting disappointment until I realized I'd gotten in.

Getting into MCC was one of the first times that normalcy, feeling connected rather than needing to escape, felt available to me, and one of the first times my writing had been validated by someone other than my teachers. It turned out that I wasn't very good at acting or writing for theater, not as good as some of the other students.

12:44

Urban Word and the Nuyorican

CAMONGHNE FELIX 12:44

But a couple of months into my work at MCC, I was introduced to a small nonprofit on 28th Street called Urban Word NYC. I entered their annual teen poetry slam from which five young people were selected to attend the national poetry slam with hundreds of others from across the country. The first round was preliminaries and people who placed in preliminaries would move on to semi-finals and so on. The people who placed in finals would go on to join the national team. I went to the first slam at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe with huge confidence, riding the high of the poem I performed to applause for my classmates. There were a lot of kids like me who went on stage, kids who were newer to poetry, and some more experienced who quickly let me know I was out of my league.

I made it to the semifinals, but not the finals. I kept attending as a spectator. I had never witnessed expression like this, not online or anywhere else, and it blew my mind. The writing coming from these teenagers was crisp and precise. They were talking about abuse, politics, love. They were emoting throughout their poems, moving their bodies with intention, exclaiming onomatopoeias when a word in the poem correlated to the sound of a physical object like a gunshot or heartbeat. I left knowing that I needed to be part of that community with those kids, that kind of art, and those kinds of teachers. We were so lucky. Incredible, groundbreaking, award-winning poets, many of color, came to Urban Word to hold weekly workshops.

Among them were Aracelis Girmay, Mahogany L. Browne, Willie Perdomo, and Patricia Smith. I continued to learn about poetry there, deepening my study, and I fell even more in love with this genre that filled my life with images and colors that I couldn't see before. The mentors at Urban Word taught me how to think about metaphor, syntax, and form. I lapped it up like a thirsty animal, letting it fill me. It helped tremendously that the organization existed outside of school, that I had to take a train downtown to step into this otherworldly space where kids just like me, who knew the dirty side of the day, would all sit at a table to read and write poetry. That was the education I had been looking for.

14:59

Sunday afternoons in Doon's house

CAMONGHNE FELIX 14:59

After becoming immersed in the world of slam poetry, I began to find myself in West Harlem on Sunday afternoons in the living room of the poet and musician Abiodun Oyewole, who also goes by Doon, or Pops, of the Last Poets, and his good friend Afrika. It was one of the few places I was allowed to go on a Sunday, my mother agreeing to it with surprisingly little resistance, that being a small glimmer, a signifier of just how magical and pivotal those experiences would later come to be. In Doon's house, the cornbread was law. The greens were law. The smoke was the law. You did not show up unless you were ready to share a poem, a plate, a spliff, a song, your energy.

Sharing was the law. Learning was the law. You did not show up unless you were willing to sit and interested in sitting at the feet of those principles of sharing, studying, and self-nourishment. Those places were places I needed to be. Doon's, Urban Word, the Nuyorican, their logics were compulsive and worked well for me. I was with and among family and I knew this because the laws of the universe bent towards the justice of me. And mine and everyone who touched our world. And there was no confusion about whose life was worthy or whose life was valuable. And that was a socio-political and cultural triumph, a deep promise of what earnest community could be. Mos Def would stop by.

Yasiin is like family to Doon and the Last Poets, and anyone who ever stepped into that room felt the love of family touch them, even if they had no blood relation. Our entry fee, especially if you were a young person, was some artistic offering. If you were a singer, you had to sing. A dancer, you gotta dance. A poet, you had to sit in front of this poetry icon and receive his feedback. He and Afrika talked in between the poems. The topics always started off with a kind of conspiratorial broadness. Was the government responsible for the death of the Black Panther Party? Yes. Is the government responsible for all the drug-addicted musicians? Yes. Then the topic evolved as the poems got deeper and the conversation became philosophical.

Does our education system have the ability to offer a revolutionary education? We… Are we good art or are we provocative? Are black mamas getting the care they need or are we using black women to offer care in exchange for care?

17:28

Form, constraint and fugitivity

CAMONGHNE FELIX 17:28

I learned the most through this weaving, this braiding of genre, tradition, and politics. I struggled to write sonnets, tankas, and other formal forms, and I still do. But formalism in poetry has taught me even more about how a poem writes itself into and out of constraint, shape, meter, line, length, and other rules as a kind of fugitivity. Knowing the rules after all is about breaking them. In order to complicate tradition, poets engage with it, confront it. When we write out of the constraint and break the order of the poem, something is set free in the poem. Black poets especially have taken form to task, have broken it open and sutured it back together, giving it new skin, new rules, new relevance.

Take for instance the sonnet translated from the Italian word sonetto meaning little song. The sonnet is traditionally a 14 line poem written in iambic pentameter that might often rhyme ending with a volta, the final moment in the poem where the resolution completely disrupts the meaning and the feeling.

18:32

"The institution prepared me through negation"

CAMONGHNE FELIX 18:32

For artists, this is how we learn. Through active consumption and constant production, it happens as much in isolation as it does among the powerful communal influence of a collective. It would be 20 years before I learned long division. But at least I knew what an allegory was, and I knew how to understand tragedy as a literary event, and I knew what an epic was and how one long verse in a narrative form could turn the Bible into a Greek tragedy. The alienation I felt within the educational institutions shaped itself into an instinct that brought me closer to the education that would ultimately shape my worldviews, my political impulses, my social optimisms. The institution prepared me through negation.

By making me feel that I existed outside it and couldn't be contained by it, naturally I came to agree. Through this suggestion, I was able to gather the critical and fundamental pieces of myself into an authentic sense of knowing, the very sense of knowing that led me to this place of ultimate frustration and disillusionment within the institution of education and with all governing institutions that dictate and organize how we exist within a shared, burdened sociality. Rebellion was and is my liberation. Thank you.

NEW YORK BLACK AND AFRICAN LITERATURE FESTIVAL

ABOUT THIS TRANSCRIPT

This transcript was prepared by NYBALF from the verified caption track of the published recording and lightly edited for readability. The recording remains the authoritative record. Poems and readings are transcribed as performed and may differ from their published texts. Section headings are editorial. Timestamps refer to the recording on YouTube.

PARTICIPANTS

Camonghne Felix is a poet and essayist from the Bronx. She is the author of Build Yourself a Boat, longlisted for the 2019 National Book Award in Poetry, the memoir Dyscalculia, and Let the Poets Govern: A Declaration of Freedom (2026). She has worked in political strategy and communications and as a speechwriter, and teaches writing at The New School.

Titilope Sonuga is a poet, playwright and performer, born in Lagos and based in Edmonton, Canada. She is the author of the poetry collections Down to Earth (2011), Abscess (2014) and This Is How We Disappear (2019), and served as the ninth Poet Laureate of the City of Edmonton.

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USE

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