

Active Hope - A podcast collaboration Episode 5 Transcript

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: My name is Marc Bamuthi Joseph. I am a poet, I'm a dad, I'm an educator.

Kamilah Forbes: I am Kamilah Forbes. I am a storyteller, a director, a producer, a wife, a mother, a daughter, and the executive producer of the Apollo Theater.

Paola Prestini: My name is Paolo Prestini. I'm a composer, I'm a mother, a wife, and a collaborator.

access to a similar past or to an identical past that we can reference as we think about the futurity of culture in this country, and about the making of art. And I think that our guest today is a great example of someone who holds the lessons of moving forward with pleasure, and moving forward with strategy. Kamilah, what was your time like with adrienne maree brown?

Kamilah Forbes: It was a dream! I mean, and seriously, I mean, I have been a fan of hers, and reading a lot of her works, which we talked about in this interview. But to be able to be with someone and sit with someone in real time and really understand and hear from them, and how their constellation of collective thought is connected was really magical. She's so inspiring. And I just love anyone who roots their philosophies in science fiction writing. [All laugh] Roots the philosophy of activism in science fiction writing. So, adrienne maree brown, it was so incredibly beautiful to be with her, and I'm excited to listen and share our time that we had together.

Kamilah Forbes: adrienne maree brown, it is such a pleasure to have you on today on our podcast, Active Hope. I can describe you with so many ways, and so many different words. [adrienne laughs] I describe you as an activist, an organizer, a facilitator, an author. The author of a book that honestly I live by, Emergent Strategy, just in my work as an arts administrator, as an artist. But I wanted to know, what brought you on this journey that you're walking today?

adrienne maree brown: I feel like I am constantly learning. I feel like my central purpose on Earth is trying to learn what it is to be a human being. Why we do this human experiment? And why does it hurt? Why do we have conflict? Why do we love? Why don't we understand that we're nature? And writing has been such a gift for me because it's like, okay, inside of all that why, there's lessons, and there's questions. And so, yeah, I feel like I'm a student. I feel like I'm asking a lot of questions.

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that started clicking something in my mind. We're scared of change. We're demanding change, but we're not practicing change. We're actually resistant to change. We are not sure what it would look and feel like if we changed. So, when the moment comes, when we're on the precipice of change, we default to the familiar instead of pushing into the unknown, and that was one of the lineages of it. And then at the same time through my mentor Grace Lee Boggs and others in Detroit, I came across the ideas of complexity science, and the work of Margaret Wheatley, Leadership and the New Science, and particularly the concept of emergence.

adrienne maree brown: The idea of emergence is that complex systems and patterns arise out of relatively simple interactions. And it's like a golden rule for how our entire universe functions is that we do these simple things, birds flapping their wings and staying a certain distance apart. And all of a sudden, you have these massive gorgeous murmurations avoiding predation. I'm like, "Ooh, what is our nature? What is our emergent nature? What is our human emergent nature? And how do we get a right relationship with change, given that that's our nature?" So that's what is all in the soil of that book. And there's a lot of asking other organizers, "What do you know about this? What do you know about this? What do you know about this?" And it still enlivens me, these ideas enliven me.

adrienne maree brown: We've done a lot of in-person live experiments with it, and it astounds me what people can do when they're just asked to listen to themselves as bodies of nature working to be in collaboration with each other, and working to change. People know the changes that they want to see. They know their ideas for how things could change, but we give each other so little permission to practice changing, to be something different. We're constantly trying to correct each other into what's already known and familiar and allowed. And so, much of Emergent Strategy is really like, this has to change. We're not free yet. So, that's the water of Emergent Strategy.

Kamilah Forbes: Mmm, I love that. I love it, and what I also love so much about all of what you're saying is that the kernel, the inspiration, or the wealth source really started, it really was sparked not only by your mentor Grace Lee Boggs (1918-2015), but also by the work of other organizers like Margaret Wheatley (1943-2022), and others like her.

adrienne maree brown: Yeah, I love this question. I want to first day a good friend of mine, Alexis Pauline Gumbs. One of the things that she teaches is we're not individuals. And so the first thing is to relinquish the concept of our selfness, in that strict sense, that there's always interdependence and always interconnected. And one of the things that I often think about is even though I am an introvert in almost every sense of the word, like I truly could just be by myself in a little cabin writing all the time and be pretty satisfied with life. But even in that scenario, I depend on the land, I depend on all the people who work to create the food that I need to eat. I depend on my beloveds. I depend on all my ancestors and the teachers who came before me who helped me to begin to think critically. There's so much interdependence and interconnectivity.

adrienne maree brown: And so, one of the things I think about for an artist is I think about Toni Cade Bambara. And the idea that the work of the artist is to make a revolution irresistible. And revolution seems like such a sexy, irresistible idea for many of us when it's far off, and we're trying to produce it. We're like, "Oh, like, if it's a player, and then we'll make a revolution." They'll be like so sexy, all of us are going to be so amazing. [Kamilah laughs] But then when it's actually happening, which is like that moment last summer I was like, "Wait, the whole world just came to a stop." A world that we were told cannot come to a stop is at a standstill, and we're not flying, and we're not using gas, and we're not interacting with each other the same way. We're all masked. Literally the aesthetic of our whole world is completely transformed and changed.

adrienne maree brown: And inside of this moment, some of us are going to burrow inward and be terrified of the change, and others are going to find new ways of surviving. And I think we saw that. The mutual aid networks that emerged over this past year have been incredible, and artists have been a big part of that. I was blown away by how artists got us through this past year. I was like, I am by myself, but I'm not by myself because D-Nice is DJing s[...].

adrienne maree brown: There's so many things, and only we know from within what our pleasures are. So, that concept to me, I feel like if we had a society that was shaped around the idea that we're all bodies that are wired to feel good. And there are ways that we can feel good that align with our values, and that bring us forward. I think we would have a very different structure to all of these things. The way we think about what home is, the way we think about disability justice, and the needs of different bodies just to be in space together. The number of people who are like, "Because of the need of my body I have to be in misery to go be with other people," is wild to me. That's like, but we know people have chemical sensitivities. They need wheelchairs, they need ramps, and can't see, and can't hear. We know this, and we know that it's actually much more than we're told.

adrienne maree brown: This idea of normal, a lot of it is how do we let go of the idea of a normal body, normative body, normative way of being and actually be present to all the kinds of bodies that exist and what feels good to all of our bodies. So, that's one piece of it. I also think there's a lot about power dynamics inside of this that would get challenged. We are very comfortable living in a society right now where a very small, elite sliver of society feels like they get access to pleasure. And the power structure is such that the rest of us labor to support their pleasure, to support their egregious wealth. I think if pleasure activism was guiding policy, there would be a cap on how much anybody could hoard because excess does not lead to pleasure. Excess doesn't lead to pleasure for the collective. So, even for the individual. I'm like I love doing my drugs, but I know that excess is what takes me away from the enjoyment and into something else. Obsession, addiction, overdose, right?

Kamilah Forbes: Sure.

adrienne maree brown: We know, the body tells us, there is an enough. And what is that enough? And how do we collectively as a society reclaim that enough together? So, I would love to see that. The other piece of pleasure activism is boundaries. Your No makes the way for your Yes. How do we learn to say No to those things that are harming us and to say Yes to a future where we all get to exist? So, I would love to see pleasure activism policy. I hope this is okay to say here, but I've said it, I've been saying it recently, and I really believe this, which is the orgasmic yes is this own level of knowing, the orgasmic yes. And I was saying I don't want to fake orgasm of a climate policy. I don't want to fake orgasm of a justice policy. I don't want something that's like, mmh diddle diddle. I'm like, "That didn't hit it. That didn't do what it needed to do. I am not satisfied." So, I'm like, "How do we generate a collective sense of what is satisfying our actual long term needs, our full body yes?"

Kamilah Forbes: That's really powerful in a few ways. A lot of what we've been talking about, I think, with this podcast has been how we personally navigate as leaders of institutions, artists through change, and how we as individuals move through a collective structure. If only our collective structures could also mirror those same practices of pleasure activism, right?

adrienne maree brown: I believe that's the goal.

Kamilah Forbes: If only, you know, those moments to pause.

adrienne maree brown: I think this is why we practice as individuals because I think a lot of times we'll have ideas, and we'll have ideas at the collective level like, "We need to do this." But if there's no personal practice, there's nothing for the collective to build upon. And this is my critique of democracy because I'm like, we're like, "Why isn't our democracy functioning?" But I'm like, "Are we practicing

democracy?" Do you budget with anybody else? And like, make decisions about resources with your block or your building or anyone else? It's hard to do. So, I'm like, we have to practice what we want to generate, and scale to a human scale, a collective scale. I think pleasure activism is a beautiful one to encourage in each other. Even asking the question, what brought you pleasure this weekend? Or what pleasures have you scheduled and planned into your coming week? Or how are you making space for pleasure in your life? That changes the workplace if you know that. It matters that your wholeness is being attended to and not just what you can do for this institution.

Kamilah Forbes: I love that. I love that. I've got so much inspiration even just from that. My last question because I know we're wrapping up on time is always about, what is... You've listed many hopes for the future, and I also wonder what is giving you hope? If there's one thing that is actually giving you, providing you hope right now? One thing, what might that be?

adrienne maree brown: Gosh, there's actually quite a lot of things. I'm like, "Hmm." I'll say it briefly. Children are giving me hope. I am blown away by the resilience of children through this past year and a half. Knowing this is what they know, and they're showing us that you can adapt to anything and still play and still have fun. That's giving me hope. The amount of resources that are currently out around abolition is giving me hope that there's all this curiosity and need, and there's all these resources coming towards it. So Mariame Kaba has *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*. There's *Beyond Survival* by Leah Lakshmi and Ejeris Dixon. There's *We Will Not Cancel Us*, which I just put out. There's an *Abolitionist Handbook* coming out from Patrisse Cullors. There's just so many texts. Angela Davis' whole works. There's so many re

Paola Prestini: And so, just makes me think a little bit in terms of like diversity of bodies, non-normative ways of... Non-normative bodies, non-normative ways of thinking. How can we create a more inclusive space? And also, how can we use our practices to bring that healthy way of functioning forward? And I just thought that was such an interesting kind of intersection to what adrienne was saying. A little bit of a leap, but what would it look like if everyone actually had a living wage and healthcare? Just imagine what it would look like if we had conditions that led us to health, that led us to wellbeing. And there are people out there exploring, experimenting, creating change. It's there. It's hard, but it's there.

Kamilah Forbes: It's that, again, it is there, and it's how do we, again, giving each other and ourselves a permission on an individual level to practice because sometimes the collective can be daunting. That collective of, I know we want change, but it's so daunting, particularly on societal and structural. So, that kind of kernel of where does that individual and the collective path connect I think is so powerful.

Paola Prestini: Right, and it's also, I mean, part of it is how you're born, your DNA. I happen to be

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Kamilah Forbes: Right, right. How much can we speak when we're all builders? I mean, it goes, I think it's back to how often are we thinking about the collective, and who is the collective? That's part of our job is about providing service. We talk about community, we talk about audiences, we talk about ecosystem. But there's compromise in a lot of decisions that we make if we're really real with ourselves. But I think what you're asking is very real questions. And I know that there are... And when we all I think draw lines in service to the collective. But yet, at the same time, we all have to compromise at times in service to our institution, in service to systems.

Kamilah Forbes: The big question, I think, then is, how are we pushing against those lines of compromise moving forward? How are we pushing against those barriers in order for, as she talks about this imagination battle?

Paola Prestini: I love that.

Kamilah Forbes: Because we're living inside another world that were existing, how are we pushing against and creating the boundaries of the world and the future in which we want to imagine for tomorrow?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Well, that's one of the things that I loved about what you did with *Between the World and Me* is it was so... Damn, here I go with the tears. It was the way that you and the team edited not only the monologues, but the visual picture, the tableau of *Black beauty*. And the struggle therein is part of the way that we light the imagination and set it on a sea towards something like justice, to be able to see ourselves in that way. And it is the purview of creative people. She said tenacious, opportunistic, she said iterative. Those are really powerful tools to internalize and then make material out of but it's this thing of the iteration.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: We have to create something for folks to fantasize about. We create something for folks to imagine. If it's not going to like on some Harry Potter, just kind of like appear out of thin air. What are the visual, sonic, literary cues that we enter into the public imagination, so that we might dream forth? As Shakespeare says, right?

Paola Prestini: Mmm, I love that.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: So, part of that combat that we're talking about in the imagination, part of b

Kamilah Forbes: Tenacious, and coming back to what she said, the biodiversity and the criticalness of we cannot... I mean, I take that into just even in our work and thinking about how as we talk about diversity, and what that actually means, and how essential that is because if we're on a continuum, an imagination spectrum, if you will, how the wide range of voices and how critical that is which I think and, I know Paola you have a sharing that really does speak to that.

Paola Prestini: Yeah, no, I love it. She says this idea of binary thinking does not in any way account for the true complexity and beauty of our space. And that pleasure activism and this idea of normal and how do we let go of the idea of the normal body, the normative body, and making space for pleasure activism, for disability justice, and that leads us to this next offering. Kamilah, as you said, it's Molly Joyce, and it's a piece on scars and disability justice and non-normative bodies. She's a wonderful composer. She was recently deemed the most versatile, prolific, and intriguing composer working in the vast new music scene by the Washington Post, and her work is concerned with disability as a creative source. And this is a performance from last year. So, early 2020 when we commissioned about 100 artists to work during the pandemic for the first time, digitally. So, this is, let's take a listen.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Awesome.

Molly Joyce: [Singing "Form and Flee"] you are so physical you are so personal you are so clinical and so emotional you are me you are me you are me you are me you are me can you be oh so free one two three form and flee you are so critical you are so mythical you are so pivotal and so dysfunctional you are so minimal and oh so magical you are so visual and sometimes fictional you are me you are me you are me form and flee you are me can you be oh so free one two three you are me and so free you're not conformity but you're complexity you're not normality but you're vitality you're not uniformity instead diversity you are me and so free.

Kamilah Forbes: Stunning.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Again, again, otra, otra.

Kamilah Forbes: So stunning, so stunning. And what a beautiful, I mean, just the sentiment as we think about this as our culminating season episode, right?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah.

Paola Prestini: Yeah.

Kamilah Forbes: "You are me and so free." That sentiment of collective consciousness takes us into this next phase of our institution, our future, our country, our own personal journeys on this Earth. That was, she's something.

Paola Prestini: Yeah, she's a beautiful writer. Yeah, it makes me think a lot. I've been thinking lately about how we move forward and this pull between the self and our health, our community. On a macro scale, this idea of how we deal with this sense of localism and repair that we need after the pandemic, but also the truth, which is that because of digital connection and extreme communication, we've got global connection that has almost never seemed so close. And that institutionally, we actually need to be thinking in these shifting parameters where you don't actually create a business plan out of what you

think you know, but what is real. And that if that's real, then you actually have to be modular about it. And you have to build in, of course, the capacity for change. And then what does that mean to your stakeholders, to you?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: I agree with you, Paola, that there's... My friend, Yao says, "Don't waste your now waiting on your normal." That's been a grounding sentiment for me that the future is ours, and I think we spent a lot of the last year racing to get back, racing to reclaim some sense of normal. But the guests that we've had this season, the convers

Brenda Shaughnessy: It was a while ago. [Music plays, accompanying Cal's recorded vocalizations with cello music]. Cal, where do you hear it? Do you hear it in your ears? Do you hear it here? Do you hear all over your face? Do you feel it over your body? [Cal breathes heavily]. Where do you hear it? Does it come everywhere? Just in here? Or all over?...

Kamilah Forbes: That just really just been sitting with my spirit and my soul. You know, adrienne talks about yes. We respond to that in the arts and the work that we do because sometimes when we make decisions on work, there's not language that you can identify of why it's working. Maybe some people can, but at least for me, a lot of times it's the gut. It's that yes. And into remembering the moments with Cal in conversation with the music, and his voice, and how his communicative patterns were being played back to him, and how that feeling, and then watching his mom react to him. That to me is the core essence of what we are here to do, and it is move spirits and souls for me. It's all very much on a spiritual level that we transform beings. That's at the core essence of what our work does, and transforms on levels that many times we may not even begin to articulate, but it's also necessary for human survival. So, that's one that that just totally sits with me still.

Paola Prestini: I love that.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Everything, all of them.

Kamilah Forbes: Everything.

[Kamilah and Paola laugh].

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: All of them. I remember interviewing Van Jones and hearing him talk about... I remember watching him have an aha moment around the deployment of artists...

Van Jones:...The power was in the people and the people's power was best expressed through their artistic creative expression. And then when I...

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Because I think we really we were talking about the prison industrial complex, and we were talking about policy. And he's a veteran of the Obama White House, and he's on CNN, and there's commentary. And there's like... He's a person whose currency is measured in political discourse, in political rhetoric, and in policy action. But most of our conversation was about art and culture. And the role of artists and the role of culture makers in creating the conditions that elevate political rhetoric into policy. But then there was a point in our conversation where we talked about boards, and we talked

Paola Prestini: That's one of the special things for me that's come out of this are these new friendships that we forged, and I'm excited to do things together, to dream together, and I have a name for the next podcast we do.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Okay.

Kamilah Forbes: Yeah. What is it?

Paola Prestini: It's called Active Power.

Kamilah Forbes: Oh, yes, let's sit in the power! [All laugh] That's what I'm talking about.

Paola Prestini: Seriously, let's sit in that power and how do we transform?

Kamilah Forbes: That's it. And just to quote our friend, adrienne, because the future will emerge from what we imagine, and instead of will, how about the future is emerging from what we're imagining here. Active Power, I like that.

Paola Prestini: It's a beautiful way to end.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah. Well, to those folks who are listening, this is Active Hope. We want to thank our featured guest today, adrienne maree brown. Today you heard music composed and performed by Molly Joyce. And right now, what you're hearing is what I would call a hope enhancer. It's