

Active Hope - A podcast collaboration

Episode 4, Part 2 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 executive producer of the Apollo Theater.

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

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: For the Kennedy Center.

Paola Prestini: For National Sawdust.

Kamilah Forbes: For the Apollo Theater.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: This is Active Hope.

Paola Prestini: This is Active Hope.

Kamilah Forbes: This is Active Hope.

Kamilah Forbes: Welcome back to our futurism episode. I'm here with Paola Prestini and Marc Bamuthi Joseph, I'm Kamilah Forbes.

Paola Prestini: This next interview deals with a project that I've had the fortune to embark on with a poet named Brenda Shaughnessy and Brenda is originally from Okinawa, Japan, was raised in California, has five books of poetry, of which the last one was called *The Octopus Museum*, where she really imagines what comes after this age of environmental destruction, racism, sexism, and what happens is that the Octopus are actually in charge. And so it's this really kind of incredible future, but the work that she and I have been doing together really centers around the idea of voice. And at the end, I think you'll see an interesting connection in terms of voice and music and where we live in the abstraction of art.

Paola Prestini: But essentially, the work that she's been doing in her work, and that I think we're trying to do in this work is really challenging the assumptions that disability is by definition loss. And so that leads us into this discussion where you're going to hear Brenda talk a little bit about her experiences as a mother, and as this incredible... yeah, just incredible collaborator. So let's hear it. Hi, Brenda, it's good to see you.

Brenda Shaughnessy: So great to see you. It's so great to be here.

Paola Prestini: So I remember during our travels, you came out with this incredible book called *The Octopus Museum*. And in it you imagine a world where cephalopods are essentially ruling over humankind. There's no future, there's just that moment. And this very powerful environmental lens, which I remember talking with you about is only matched by the power of love and of the desire for survival. And also these kind of questions that you really ask about the existence of our civilization and where it's going. Can you remember the moment that you wanted to embark on this book? And what made you think of this specific scenario?

Brenda Shaughnessy: Well, it's interesting that this episode is about futurism, because the reason why I started reading this book was because I felt like we had no future. I felt like, what are we going to do? We had this horrendous regime, political regime, the climate catastrophe seemed like it was inevitable, and it is, and it's looming. And I thought, "First of all, I have these kids, what about their futures?" And then I think, well, what about everybody's kids? And what about everybody's not-kids? What about the question of who deserves a future? Who among the disabled gets guaranteed a future? And I looked and I thought about my disabled son, and I thought, "Well, what does his future look like if it's all kind of goin' to pot like this?" And it was in sheer desperation and agony and despair and fury, a kind of fury for all of us. I don't have any sort of superhuman strength, but I can imagine scenarios, and I can write sort of paths.

Paola Prestini: Can you tell us a little bit, maybe a little bit of Blueberries for Cal? Let's hear it.

Brenda Shaughnessy: Sure. Yeah. So I mean, the other way to think about The Octopus Museum sort of idea is that there are always other ways to look at something. So you can look at a child who doesn't walk or talk like my son doesn't and you can create one narrative about that. But you can also look at another possible narrative. So that's where Blueberries for Cal comes up. So Blueberries for Cal is a play on a great book. It's a wonderful classic book that I'm sure everybody has read, Blueberries for Sal, and this is Blueberries for Cal. Cal is the real name of my actual son. So this is Blueberries for Cal. "Watching little Henry, six, scoop up blueberries and shovel them into his mouth possessed. I'm so glad I brought blueberries, wish my kids could, would eat them. Cal can't, Simone won't. Henry's sisters, Lucy and Jane, took turns feeding each other goldfish crackers and sips of juice, arms around each other's neck and back, tiny things.

Brenda Shaughnessy: "I wish my daughter had a sister like that and my son a nervous system that let him walk and munch berries. Sometimes I can't bear all the things Cal doesn't get to do. I want to curse everything I can't give him, admire, compare, despair. That's not the most real feeling I'm feeling, is it? I feel joy in Henry's joy, blueberries for the child who wants them. There's all this energetic sweetness, enough to go around, to give and taste and trust, more than enough. For Cal, too, I want to remember this. My children seem to subsist on music and frosting. Where there's frosting, there's cake, where there's music, someone chose to make a song over all other things on this earth."

Paola Prestini: Mmm. Brenda, that's so incredible. And that takes me to the next segment that I want to talk about, which is that you and I have been working together for about four years now. We've been working on an opera that's at the intersection of AI, and disability. And it's brought us to interview scientists in Copenhagen to Georgia Tech learning about FOXP2 genes and datasets. And I remember we were in Atlanta, the work is for Atlanta Opera and Beth Morrison Projects. And we had just had an incredible two days interviewing scientists, and we took a major left turn that day. And do you remember that moment?

Brenda Shaughnessy: I actually think it was, was it the storytelling guy that kind of made me read, he was sort of the low-tech guy. There was one low-tech scientist at Georgia Tech, he was like, I'm all about narrative, and basically machines can't tell stories. That's the whole gist of it. You can't make an algorithm to tell a human narrative. And it really struck me that what our opera was about, was going to have to be about the journey that we were taking. That we were taking together and that I was taking with my kid, and that we were taking as women ushering in the next generation of humans, and what that meant about our humanity, about our creativity, about our struggle, about our narrative, about our story. And that it seemed clear that the story had to be about Cal finding a voice, Cal finding his own

agency, becoming an independent person, and how was I as his mother going to help him do that? And how was I going to step back and let him do that? How on earth was I going to figure that out?

Paola Prestini: Right. And it's at that very moment, I think that for me understanding and witnessing this moment, I began to realize how important it is that desire for communication and joy actually drive innovation. And I remember in many of these interviews, it almost felt like science for science sake, but really, it's not. The idea of being able to have voice recognition that actually represents the person who hears in his mind, himself speaking. And so we began this process of recording Cal, you recording Cal, and allowing me to work with his voice, and to essentially begin this process of discovery of this character. And simultaneously as we're doing this opera, our friends in Copenhagen, who have an incredible impact lab called EnactLab, are actually creating a film on the documentary that essentially mirrors the process of creating the opera and two central characters.

Paola Prestini: One which is Jacob Nossell, who's the Director of Communication at EnactLab, and your family. And I want to talk for a moment about the moment that Cal hears his voice for the first time. And I remember being so scared. I remember coming over to your house, and I was like he's not going to like it, right? And there's that because he has such a visceral experience to music and-- reaction to music, pardon me, that if he doesn't like it, I'm going to know. And two, do I have this right? Do I have the right? So I don't know if you want to just talk a little bit. We're going to watch this clip of this first meeting. But if you want to talk a little bit about how you experienced that moment, and that question of rights. How do you feel about that?

Brenda Shaughnessy: Yeah, you know it's funny, like it's very easy to say everybody has a self, it's natural to have a self, we're all born with a self. Well, not really, the law often seeks to strip people of their selfhood, and personhood is hard won and it's not ever been automatic. It's been naturalized, but it hasn't been given. That's for sure. We pretend that it is and you look at the same thing with voice. "Everyone can talk, go ahead, free speech!" There's this idea that everyone, but not everybody has access to it. And we use that word access so many times when it comes to disability rights and disability right to be, the right to be for a disabled person. Like provide access, what do you mean provide access? Do you mean help them figure out how to find their voice with updated, clunky technology that doesn't actually fit the wavelengths and those sort of thought patterns and the way a disabled body moves? There are lots of obstacles to Cal finding his voice. And that is the primary conundrum of the opera is how does Mem, the mother character, and Kit, the child character in the opera, find a way to communicate with each other and meeting each other sort of halfway.

Paola Prestini: The segment that we're about to hear, Cal is hearing the moment where you actually start the opera with an owl who sings "Who," and then that goes into "Who is human." And then we begin to hear Cal's voice and he begins to hear it. And I'm curious, were you nervous that he was going to hear himself as music?

Brenda Shaughnessy: I don't know if nervous is the idea. I think I felt like a proud mom. I think I kind of felt like how any parent feels like if their kid is giving a recital, or if their kid is sort of doing something that really expresses themselves. When a kid shows a piece of art and says, "Look what I made," you kind of feel this pride, like oh, my kid's making something. And for me, it was a huge relief, like at long last, my child is able to make something of his own really, or be sort of part of making something which I didn't know that he was going to get a chance to do ever. So I was excited for him to hear himself really.

Paola Prestini: Cal communicates in so many ways. And I want to get back to this question of how he communicates because you had a major, I feel like a major epiphany that you shared with me over Christmas, but let's watch the clip and see Cal in this work.

Brenda Shaughnessy: Yep. So this is Paola.

Cal: [Cal vocalizes]

Brenda Shaughnessy: What are you saying? Saying happy to meet you?

Cal: [Cal vocalizes]

Brenda Shaughnessy: Saying glad to meet you?

Cal: [Cal vocalizes]

Brenda Shaughnessy: Can you say Paola, Can you say Paola. Can you? [Whispers] Paola. Maybe later. Okay.

Paola Prestini: Maybe I could play, do we want to play some music for Cal?

Brenda Shaughnessy: Totally.

Paola Prestini: Since, let's, I feel like I've been listening to Cal for a long time.

Brenda Shaughnessy: Do you want to hear some music? Do you want to hear it?

Cal: [Cal vocalizes]

Brenda Shaughnessy: Okay.

Paola Prestini: Yeah? Okay. So Cal, your Mommy sent me some beautiful recordings of your voice. And—

Cal: [Cal vocalizes]

Brenda Shaughnessy: Remember, I told you we were recording them? You've already heard them.

Cal: [Cal vocalizes]

Brenda Shaughnessy: It was a while ago.

Cal: [Cal vocalizes]

Brenda Shaughnessy: Maybe when you hear them, you'll remember.

Cal: [Cal vocalizes]

Brenda Shaughnessy: I think it's going to sound, I think it sounds really beautiful.

Paola Prestini: Do you want to see what it looks like? So what I've done here is taken different sounds of your everyday life and your voice.

[recording of Cal's vocalizations along with music plays]

Paola Prestini: I'm going to play you something else, one second.

Man in Background: That's pretty wild, huh?

Paola Prestini: [laughs] I'll play another thing.

[recording of gentle "who" sound plays]

Paola Prestini: So that's me asking 'Who is human?' which are your Mommy's words.

Cal: [Cal vocalizes]

Paola Prestini: And there's owls in there and cicadas, and you, and me, and your Mommy and Dana's drawings. Jeff's cello.

[Cal vocalizes along with cello music]

Brenda Shaughnessy: [Clapping] Wow. Cal, where do you hear it? Do you hear it in your ears? Do you hear it here? Do you hear it 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? Are you kind of like overwhelmed by how cool everything is? Your voice has become music and then you got to hear that music?

Paola Prestini: ... So I guess I want to talk about that epiphany that we had over winter. And it had to do with you accessing his language, and not vice versa.

Brenda Shaughnessy: Right. Right. That's the thing is that you can't give somebody a voice. You can say here, I'm going to give you a voice, now talk. You can't. There's so many ways that we've tried to get Cal to speak. And basically his response has always been to, at first you think, oh he can't or he doesn't want to or he's being difficult or he's being... But then suddenly I thought like, well, what if he's saying basically, hey, if I could talk, I would say what I want to say, I'm not suddenly going to be able to say what you want me to say. I'm not suddenly going to be able to just say mom, because you want me to say mom for your own reasons. I actually wanted to say something about the paint color of my bedroom walls, maybe he want to say something else that I'm not putting, planting in his head.

Brenda Shaughnessy: I think the big revelation for me was that we always assume when we're putting together sort of communication devices or switches or eye gaze, keyboard things that the disabled person has to somehow figure out some way to learn and translate his own thoughts into the language of the keyboard, the language of the alphabet, or the language of the oral sound and make those sort of mouth movements that will create those exact sounds. Well, what happens if we think about maybe

trying to just interpret Cal's many, many ways of expressing himself on his own terms? What if something like moving his hands to the music is actually his version of singing along, his version of singing in the shower, his version of a duet? What if the things like silence the way he uses silence, maybe it's just as nuanced as the way we use silence, where a specific kind of silent treatment might be sort of hostile, but in his case a specific kind of silent treatment says, "Nope, I don't want to do this activity. I don't want to look at the screen right now."

Paola Prestini: Well, and I feel like when you had this epiphany, it really mirrored finishing the opera and the libretto for the opera. And what happens is that Kit, who's modeled on Cal, actually saves the family. He's the reason for escape. And that's like an incredible, that they're these bookends I feel to your life is realizing these like incredibly powerful beings that you have.

Brenda Shaughnessy: That's a beautiful way to put it. I think that's really true that the big epiphany was the character of Kit, the one who supposedly cannot communicate, is the one who's going to have to communicate the next path, the next turn, the direction in which we're going. And the grownups in the room and in the family are going to have to follow his lead. That's the sort of, which is something that we never let disabled people do. And in this case, it felt like that has to happen, that has to happen in the opera, that has to happen in life. In order to be self determined, and you have to be able to make a decision about what you want to do next.

Paola Prestini: So in these journeys and just in your life right now and how you're kind of, I see you as this incredible octopus with your arms and tentacles over all these beautiful things, are there three things or anything about the future that you feel certain about, and anything that is giving you hope right now?

Brenda Shaughnessy: There's a resonance with language that goes far, far beyond anyone's ability. I've always wanted to believe that I was somebody who could really, really use language, really use the hell out of it. And maybe for me entering into the world of music and the world of your making of music, that uses words made me realize that just language, just actual verbal language is just the tiniest percentage of it really. That's where ideas can come through, but really, there's this vast cosmic waves of possibility of communication and music as another part of it, which I didn't have much access to before, aside from enjoying music. And I see how much of a communication vector it is for my child who can't use words. And it's become incredibly, it's a massive wave of hope for me. And music has become, for me it feels like the way of the future.

Brenda Shaughnessy: Like I can have hope, because there is this other way, you don't have to reduce everything down to words to make meaning. I see that if that were the case, then my son would be really, really cut off. But being able to open up to a world in which words, meaning, music come together, because I get to work with you on this opera, that's changed my life completely. It's the most profound collaboration I can imagine and definitely that I've ever had.

Paola Prestini: I love that and I love you, Brenda. Thank you for this.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: So good.

Kamilah Forbes: Mmm. So beautiful. Really beautiful.

Paola Prestini: So it's an ongoing journey, but I'm just so happy to be able to share it with the two of you and I...

Kamilah Forbes: We don't need words to make meaning. And this idea of music as a communication vector. I mean, a big part of, I feel like our jobs as arts leaders and communicators is there's always this need to advocate for the meaning within the work. But simply that statement and watching the communication, the profound communication, that Cal and his mother, his parents found with him, that was devoid of words, was devoid of contextualizing, but it was all filled with meaning, it was filled with love, it was filled... And the way in which he transformed once he heard the music.

Paola Prestini: You can see it in his eyes.

Kamilah Forbes: You could see it in his eyes, in his body, there was a stillness. And when he moved, it was just filled with such meaning.

Paola Prestini: And what would happen if we listen to each other in those ways? Where instead of prescribing "I know what you feel," I don't know what you feel, I don't know your experience, but I can attempt, I can listen, I can try to connect. And I feel like in all the meetings that we had, with scientists around the world, it was fascinating because I saw Brenda change during that process. I saw her at the beginning think maybe one of them will create something in time, to maybe I'm listening the wrong way, and that was profound. I mean, that was just such an incredible testament to who she is as a human but also to just how we need to listen. And yeah.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: The filter right now, the dominant filter for communication is self created, is self content. "Look at me, look at me, look at me, here's my Instagram, here's my..." right? There's a lot of activity there. There's definitely an active voice. But that relationship between mother and son was a lot closer maybe to what the future of communication could be, might be, should be. And I think it's one of the reasons why we wanted to integrate that relationship into this discussion about futurity, because it really is about active listening. And that is not something that we teach socially. And it's not something that gets reinforced in terms of our current tools of communication. And I wonder what those tools are. I wonder what your experience was, Paola, in thinking about making tools for listening, as a composer even, just like this is something that I am actively creating, but I am really actively making space for other folks to integrate themselves as listeners. And the listening device is actually the active voice in this relationship.

Paola Prestini: I love that, yeah, I love how you just said that, because that is actually the process is that, and it's something that I still haven't found an answer to which is, I think Cal likes to be part of this. I think that his sounds make sense in this. But it's something we'll continuously ask. And it's not something that I can just ask with Brenda, it's something that we have to ask of a larger community. So the question here is can you ethically do a collection of voices that allows for the technology to move forward, while at the same time understanding that in this specific case, that may be irrelevant. Cal may actually have what it takes to communicate, and in all the ways that he needs. So I think that's just a really, it's a profound journey. [Music starts playing underneath] I guess I would just say also that we communicate in sound, like so many of us communicate in sound that you can say so much.

Paola Prestini: I want to play a clip by the incredible singer and violinist Gaelynn Lea, from her NPR Music's Tiny Desk Concert. Lea was born with a genetic condition that causes complications in the

development of bones and limbs. She developed a technique for violin, which involves holding the bow like a baseball bat, with the body of the instrument placed in front of her like a cello.

Gaelynn Lea: [Singing] Our love's a complex vintage wine All rotted leaves and lemon rind I'd spit you out but now you're mine We bit the fruit, it seemed a lie I'll never know which way was right Now side by side we face the night And I love you And I love you We walked the pier and back again It was the most scared I've ever been You held my hand until the end And I love you And I love you

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Man that was absolutely gorgeous. It's such a great example of like, if we're going to have an equitable future, we have to figure out how to not only activate but operationalize listening. Operationalizing listening first as empathy and then as change or transformation feels like the future of communication. And the current tool that we have with the current set of tools that we have aren't necessarily fostering that trajectory.

Kamilah Forbes: Mmhm, Mmhm. Active listening, huh. Mm. Yeah, I think you're right because I think one of the questions is, how our structures and systems, how do they give voice? Communication requires both individuals to be equitable and in equity and dialogue against one another. And she asked Cal, where do you hear it? Do you hear it in your ears? Do you hear it in your body? So it's clear that you can't communicate the way I need. So I need to understand you better, maybe that's the route.

Paola Prestini: I critically don't want to lose this moment in time. I really don't because I feel like if we go back to the way things were in our field, with the power structures as they are, it's not good for anybody. Not good for the people in power either because it's failing.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah. It's a waste of an inflection point.

Paola Prestini: It's a waste inflection point.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: We can emerge in a more culturally healthy way.

Paola Prestini: That's right.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: One of the godmothers of this moment, it felt like there was a whole set of folks that were pulling out George Orwell at the beginning of the pandemic and said, "Here we are. 1984." And there was another set of folks that were pulling out Octavia Butler, and said, "Actually, no, HERE we are." The Parable of the Sower. And it's Parable of the Sower as a kind of seminal Afrofuturist text is maybe the third prong of this conversation today. Not so much that book and obviously that woman, but the idea of an Afrofuture. Well, here's a kind of school of Black folk, who even against the tide of genocide, are imagining Black people in the future, are saying there are Black people in the future. And we were privileged through Kamilah's brilliant insight, and expansive understanding to be able to connect to Tim Fielder, who's an Afrofuturist, graphic novelist. His latest work is called Infinitum. And I think we want to share the interview that I did with Tim with the people.

Paola Prestini: Exciting.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: So let's go there. Tim Fielder, how you doin' today brother?

Tim Fielder: Pleasure, pleasure. Thank you so much for having me, just a real honor to be here.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: One of the places where I'd like to start with you is taken out of the foreword, the prologue of your latest offering to the world, *Infinitem*.

Tim Fielder: Thank you.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: And in *Infinitem*, you talk about the occasion of being called an OG Afrofuturist. [Tim laughs]. Tell me about that story. How did it come to be? What was your reaction? And what does being an OG Afrofuturist, like what does that actually entail? Do you get benefits? Is there a 401k? Like just tell me all.

Tim Fielder: Right, right. Well, I can tell you to begin that there's absolutely not, absolutely not a 401k. [Bamuthi laughs]. If there was, I missed that memo. I've been a visual Afrofuturist since I was like 12 years old. And the years prior to that, I started drawing when I was like three or four. And I did just regular comic books, superhero comic books. But around the age of 10, 11, *Star Wars* came out. And not just *Star Wars* came out, but *Heavy Metal Magazine*, all those things came out. And that had such a transformative experience on me, that I began to draw science fiction, but then I had an exchange with my older sibling who really questioned or challenged me aggressively so to why would I have these speculative spaceship science fiction scenarios, but they're no Black characters represented within it?

Tim Fielder: It's really the challenge of many Black folks who live in the African Diaspora, specifically in countries like North America, where you don't see yourselves, so it never occurs to you to draw yourself or someone who looks like you. And so all of a sudden, everything became Black. I did Black science fiction, and I've done it, I am now 54 years old. And for better or worse, I have done this my entire professional life even when I was in comics, when I was in video games and animation, and then came back to comics about seven years ago. And here I am now with *Infinitem*, try to make sure to get the arrow right there [pointing towards his book *Infinitem*]. And that book is the first Afrofuturist graphic novel published by a Big 5 publisher. And I am aware of the importance of it, and I'm just happy to be here talking about it.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: It occurs to me that part of an Afrofuture is having Afrofuturist literature to tell us a story that there's both a form and function aspect to having *Infinitem* being published by a major publisher. You talk about *Black Metropolis*, and your work in general, but *Black Metropolis* in particular being a way to kind of retell, ancestral, and very specifically Orisha and Osha narratives, and that's very apparent in *Infinitem* as well. Well, there's a significant aspect of the story that is about the kind of the continuum of spiritual traditions and very specifically the continuum of what someone might call the supernatural embedding itself through word and action within kind of the body of the main character. Can you talk about why soulfulness, why spirituality, why the idea of magic belongs in the Black future?

Tim Fielder: Well, on occasion the interviews come up where someone will ask me something that no one has put to me. So you're the first to ask me that specific question.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Thank you, brother. I pride myself, I try.

Tim Fielder: Yeah, you did that. You did that. And I'm like, D'oh, he's going there! All right, so I am an initiate in an African tradition, horrible practitioner of it, but I am nonetheless. I understand the

magnitude and the importance of African-based spirituality. My job is to be a vehicle. I may not be able to tell you all of the procedures of a practice, but I can show you what it looks like and that is the job of the visual futurists. That's the job of a futurist, job of a futurist is to project forward, the job of an Afrofuturist, because so much of our past has been disappeared, destroyed, burned down, we have to reconcile our positions, our jobs as futurists by looking forward and behind. This is why a lot of typical futurists got kind of caught out there a little bit because people pay them all of this money, about projecting what trends, whether it be in entertainment, politics, social structures, and Black Panther comes out and makes \$1.5 billion.

Tim Fielder: And everybody's like, "Yo, where did this come from?" They didn't know, because that's not part of their mandate, it's part of my mandate, it's part of your mandate as a futurist. And so to do that means taking a real, honest look at spirituality and how it interplays with our experience.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Tying the capital aspect into that, part of where that takes me is that there is a past, and arguably, or not so arguably a present, that diminishes the value of the Black body, let alone the Black dollar while also elevating the Black body as fuel, as a natural resource, like oil. But in engaging your work and engaging in other kinds of Afrofuturist literature, in particular, you very rarely see a Black utopia in the future. Instead, we engage a Black future or an Afrofuture that continues to contend with these socio-pathological legacies. What do you think about the idea of a Black utopia? Can it exist? When you visualize it, what does it look like?

Tim Fielder: Right, what you're pointing out is the burden of the Afrofuturist. That's our burden. Part of what I do as a visual Afrofuturist both in my visual narratives and in my written narratives is I understand my job is I'm an entertainer. I'm to give you what you need, but also give you what you want. And it's about the interplay between those two things. And I'm never done, it just never ending, that I can tell you the story, I've done it Infinitum, visually and narratively, is not dramatically different than the stories I was trying to create 30 years ago. The difference is the world has changed. The world has finally caught up. Now, of course, I'm different, I'm older. I think I'm more mature, I think I'm a much better artist now than I was 35 years ago, but the spirit is roughly the same. It's essentially the same. It's just that now the world is caught up to where now they can receive what I'm saying, what I'm showing. And just it's like, for example in the questions that were put to me, it's like, I'm involved with an organization called the Black Speculative Arts Movement.

Tim Fielder: They just had a big thing that they did with a New York Live Arts this past weekend, the first Afrofuturist kind of showcase major in like years. And I was involved in that showing Afrofuturistic comics in that section, but there's also an aspect where I'm involved with BSAM where they're training Black theorists and visualists to project the future of Black America. But this is with UNESCO, this is with organizations like NSQUARE where we're basically being trained to do professional future projection.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Wow.

Tim Fielder: And I engaged in that process because I knew in order for my work to become better, and to rise really to the promise, that utopia that you're referring to, I have to get better, I have to learn more skills, I have to learn how to do horizon scanning, I have to learn how to do it.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: I love this idea of in order to be able to project a future, I presently must get better, which speaks to evolution. It speaks to growth, because in order to get to a future it can't look like now.

Tim Fielder: And the fact is, I hate to be a Debbie Downer, but we all are going to die. We're all here a finite amount of time. Infinitum is fake, it's make-believe, the only avenue we have towards immortality is through our children and through those things we leave behind. That's it. Our lifespans only extend a certain point. So we have it, our mandate is to leave something useful behind. And sometimes that usefulness can be painful, sometimes it can be pleasurable, but we should leave something that expands things forward.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: I'm going to ask you two more questions to close. And you've alluded to this a little bit but I am curious and this question is a little tongue in cheek. But I just want you to speak based on your experience, based on your pedigree, based on your understanding, given all that you know, given-- let's not say all that you know. Given all that you've done, your experience, your study, what are three things about the future that you know for sure?

Tim Fielder: I know that the planet Earth will be here. That's the first thing, for sure. I believe that human beings have within them that ear that was given to us by the creative force, the gene of self-preservation, which has within it the capacity to overcome all evil and all negativity. Because if it gets down to, it's like, I always think about Chernobyl. Chernobyl was this horrible accident. But when it happened, what did the Soviet Union do? They took care of that problem. Why? It's about self-preservation. I believe those first two things that self-preservation and the fact that the Earth will be here gives me hope. And that's the third thing. I believe that it is our job to act within those three points I mentioned. Earth will be here, self-preservation and hope. Our job is to work within those parameters to do our job to make sure that that comes together, that happens.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Well, then, finally, how to art and creativity then remind us that the future is worth it?

Tim Fielder: I have two sons. I have a daughter. That's it. Our children, I have parents who are fortunate enough to see my book release, see my other books released. The human experience makes it worth it.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah. I agree. Tim Fielder, one incredible man, one incredible artist. Thank you for your insight. And I can't wait to be face-to-face with you in the future.

Tim Fielder: Absolutely. I will say this final thing. Thank you guys for having me. And I have to put this in here because it's necessary. Infinitum can be purchased where all fine books are sold, Barnes and Noble's, Amazon, Bookshop.org, HarperCollins' website. Buy it because I got to earn it.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Brother, thank you so much fam.

Tim Fielder: Thank you.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: All right, we'll catch you on the other side, catch you in the future, peace.

Paola Prestini: What a beautiful man. [All laugh]

Kamilah Forbes: Tim Fielder. Amazing.

Paola Prestini: Oh I loved him. Wow.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: I didn't peep that he gave the Vulcan joint at the end [laughs]

Kamilah Forbes: Was that what that was? [laughs]

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah. So good.

Paola Prestini: Yeah.

Kamilah Forbes: Like it's in his blood, man, it's in his blood!

Paola Prestini: There was a lot of hope in there. I feel like there's something that keeps coming back, also with Marina's interview about the rhythm of the Earth, of the fact that like, there are these things that the, fingers crossed, won't be changed, you know about these rhythms and how we're only here for a certain amount of time. And then we're, you know. We're here, I think Tim Fielder even said, we kind of seed the next generation, I remember that one. It's something, we work within these rhythms and that gives us hope.

Kamilah Forbes: Yeah. And also your question about hope in the future, he immediately responded to his kids and the children and regeneration and next generation, and that is where we find meaning. That is where we find the meaning for tomorrow, that is where we find the hope for tomorrow and that's really kind of sticking with me and this notion of hope, notion of tomorrow, notion of the future. Because when we look back on this moment, when we are not here to talk about it, who was named this moment, who was named the work of what Tim Fielder is doing to push society forward, who was named the work of all of these artists that we have, and thinkers, their work in order to push this moment forward. Just the importance of naming, the importance of claiming, I think, is something not to be overlooked out of that conversation. One thing I want to remind us as we've been talking about these notions of future, and I'm going to share a quote by Miss Octavia Butler, "That all successful life is adaptable, opportunistic, tenacious, interconnected, and fecund. Understand this, use it, and shape God." [end credits music plays underneath] So with that being said, we are here in the cycle between the past and the future. And I thank both of you brilliant beings as we sit in this moment that will never be recreated again, as we sit in the moment of now, in this moment and the day that we've had so far, so thank you both. I also want to thank our featured guests, Brenda Shaughnessy, and Tim Fielder. Today you heard music composed by Paola Prestini and performed by Jeffrey Ziegler. You also heard Gaelynn Lea performing her music at NPR's Music's Tiny Desk Concert. Sensorium was filmed by Christina Martini Mulkey and edited by Daniel Oxenhandler from EnactLab. Special thanks to Brenda Shaughnessy, Craig Teicher, and their son Cal. Our producer is Sapir Rosenblatt and on behalf of my co-hosts, Paola Prestini and Marc Bamuthi Joseph, I'm Kamilah Forbes and this is Active Hope. Thank you for listening.

Paola Prestini: Thank you all.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Peace.