

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.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: For the Kennedy Center.

Paola Prestini: For National Sawdust.

Kamilah Forbes: For the Apollo Theater.

Paola Prestini: This is Active Hope.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: This is Active Hope.

Kamilah Forbes: This is Active Hope.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Hey, favorite people?

Paola Prestini: Hello, so good to see you.

Kamilah Forbes: Hey, folks.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: It's always so good to see y'all, to hear you, to be with you. How you doing?

Paola Prestini: So good. It's kind of bittersweet. This is our, for now anyway, our final episode, it's been such a beautiful, beautiful experience.

Kamilah Forbes: End of the season, end of the season, wow.

Paola Prestini: End of the season.

Kamilah Forbes: Yeah.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: End of the season, beginning of a new season.

Kamilah Forbes: That's it.

Paola Prestini: There we go.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Right, like the solstice, the light.

Kamilah Forbes: Exactly.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: And also, when we started this journey, we were nationally and globally in a much different place. Speaking of ends and beginnings, we were in a place, I want to say the first time we recorded the podcast, but we were relative to art and arts institutions in a place where we were beginning to engage the glimmer of possibility that maybe by the end of the year, we'd be bringing people back into our spaces.

Paola Prestini: It reminds me of what my son Tommaso said in that very first pilot episode with Jasper, where he said, "I can feel the end of the near-the-end, kind of near-the-end, almost near-the-end. I can feel it. I can taste it, but it's not there."

Kamilah Forbes: It's not there. It was that little light at the end of the tunnel that was quite little.

Paola Prestini: Very, hope was very opaque.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah, hope is opaque, and one of the reasons why I think we engaged each other on this journey is because we needed each other, as artists do. The making of community, the curating of community, which is also part of all of our roles. There's one thing to put content on stage or to put it on digital platforms, and it's another thing to intentionally draw folks together in order to make something larger than the individual components, which I think is what's happening here with National Sawdust, the Apollo, and the Kennedy Center. Those three organizations coming together to produce a thing.

Paola Prestini: I've been doing this work for this Nordic culture fund, and I was asked to collect signals. I had never heard that word. And essentially, it's trying to find these moments of, I think of it as hope, but let's say moments of example that are happening in the world right now in terms of really bridging communities, social impact, how in my case, what do the arts have to do with that? And it made me think of a few of the hopeful moments that we've talked about together, but also that both of you signify to me. So, one of the things I think at large that happened during the pandemic, which I hope gets replicated, was that call, culture at three. This idea that all these organizations in the city, from the smallest to the largest, working together to help each other out. That would have never happened!

Paola Prestini: And then I think about Bamuthi, the Kennedy Center became this example for not partitioning off social impact and community building, but saying, "Actually, this is our main platform." Like, when did that ever happen? And then, Kamilah, you creating a work of art during the pandemic, under those conditions that was so extraordinary, became an example of the fact that artists will always create in any way, shape, or form when there's a need. And so, I too am in this weird transition. But I also think that there's so much that happened that gave me hope, and that I think we have to bring forward with us. And finally, just often I haven't been able to dream with other people in ways. You have to say, "Well, how much can I really say before I sound crazy or before I sound completely like out to lunch?" And it's been such a joy to be able to actually learn that there can be a structure to futurist thought and to dreaming. That's amazing, so I'm really grateful for that.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: I was going to say, Paola, that futurity, which has been the arc of our discursive trajectory. Futurism, futurity takes on a different moment where we are all in a similar, if not an identical, psychic present. That ethos of collective dreaming that you're talking about was something that we all had the invitation to participate in for a strong period of time. That there was an invitation to activate the empathy gene in a different kind of way, and also access to a similar place. And now an

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 why. I'm trying to make meaning. I feel so much destiny and purpose in the miraculous nature of my life, and in connection with others. And I sense that not everyone feels that. And I'm like, "Why not?" How do we awaken that sense that each person's life is really valuable, and it really matters. And it's what we make of it, and there's a before and an after of trauma. So, I feel like I'm all up in that stuff.

Kamilah Forbes: Mmmm mmmm. And to that note, this journey, and when I think about your writings really becoming almost that intersection of the wise, as a place to interrogate, as a place to ask questions, as a place to interrogate answers. And I see that so much in Emergent Strategy and in your latest book. And so I ask, and I know you've been around, and I've been just tracking and stanning you. Yes, I stan you so hard [Both laugh]. But I want to ask you the why of what brought you specifically to this place, to this book of Emergent Strategy, of why asking this very large question and building out the system and modalities that we find in that book.

adrienne maree brown: Yeah, so I had been facilitating, let's see, I started working on that book in 2012, really being like this book is what I want to offer. And so, I had been facilitating at that point for about 15 years. And I kept seeing the same patterns happen over and over again. And what I was seeing was that, even though we were fighting against all these things, and we had an analysis around the power dynamics, we kept practicing them on each other. Like we would come in into a space and we would get so rigid, and we would get so domineering, and so competitive with each other. And it was like the sacred thing that we had come to do fell away or disappeared.

adrienne maree brown: And I was reading Octavia Butler, the god over and over and over again, and blown away by how her leaders were operating. So in her text, she offers us these young Black women protagonists, and it's all about change. It's all about getting in the right relationship with change. And so,

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, such a force and leader, but also Octavia Butler as a science fiction author. An author, when I think about science fiction, where futurism plays into this world of looking towards the future in order to create our own reality, or push our reality forward, right?

adrienne maree brown: Yeah, I--

Kamilah Forbes: I wanted to... Yeah, yeah, go ahead.

adrienne maree brown: Well, I was going say-

Kamilah Forbes: No, please, please.

adrienne maree brown: ... one of the things I talk about a lot is the imagination battle, which is a concept that I got from my friend, Terry Marshall, from Intelligent Mischievous. But this idea that we're living inside of a world that someone else imagined, or other people imagined. The way that supremacy plays out is someone else's imagining of how the world is and should work. And I love thinking about that because then it means the future will emerge from what we imagine. And so, if we accept what has been imagined, and we just try to fit our dreams inside of it, that's what the future will feel and look like.

adrienne maree brown: But if we actually imagine, what would it actually look like to have no prisons, to defund the police, right? If we've tried that experiment for 250 years, and it hasn't worked, what would it look like to try something else? And what would it look like if everyone actually had a living wage and healthcare, and you didn't have to necessarily labor for those things, but they were a given. Just imagine what would be possible for this species if we were in those conditions, and I get very excited by what we can imagine together.

Kamilah Forbes: That's right. That's right. Collectively, right? There's a quote that's on, I know what you like to say on page 15 of Emergent Strategy, right? "All successful life is adaptable, opportunistic, tenacious, interconnected, and fecund. Understand this. Use it. Shape God." That was a quote by Octavia Butler. But that really seemed to shape your philosophy around Emergent Strategy, and I wonder if you could just respond or share a little bit around that as well.

adrienne maree brown: Yeah, I mean, when I was working on Emergent Strategy, writing it, thinking about it, a big piece that was coming to me was how do I get in relationship with the elements of this? How do I make this understandable? Because I knew early on in the process of it, I was like, "This is so big." These are huge concepts. We're talking about reimagining everything, changing everything. And so, I was like, that's going to overwhelm people if there's not some handles and some sort of like buckets to attend to. So, I spent some time thinking through what are the different components. So I went through and I created these buckets. And then I went back and read Octavia again. And when I came across that verse, which I had read no less than 100 times. I have read the Parables over and over and over again.

adrienne maree brown: So when I read that versus I was like, "She put it all here, it's all here, right here. All successful life." So for me, that's the fractal. All life from the smallest to the largest scale is adaptive, interconnected, tenacious, which I think of that is how we think of the transformative justice. Our resilience, our capacity to go through harm, go through loss, go through trauma, but come back and iterate, come into the next form. Opportunistic, it's that nonlinearity. It's like we're not necessarily in a straight line. If a better opportunity comes for our growth or change, we move, but it's iterative. What we practice matters. So all of that, and then the fecundity. It's about creating more possibilities. In nature, the healthiest ecosystems are the ones that are most biodiverse. There's many, many possibilities for how to be and survive and live in them. And in our human nature, we keep trying to narrow it down. There's, you're either left or right, you're Black or white, you're straight or gay, you're this or that. And that binary thinking is not in any way account for the true complexity and beauty of our species.

adrienne maree brown: So, I was like, it's all here in the quote [laughs]. It's all here in the quote. And then the idea of studying and practicing it, and then shaping God. Shaping God to me is such a beautiful concept that Octavia offered us. How do we take responsibility for who we are, and that we bring to this world? That we're not victims of it all. So now I will often tell people that. I'm like, "If you're not going to read the book, read page 15. It's literally all there and make of it what you want." Yeah.

Kamilah Forbes: I wonder what you can offer as it relates to specifically artists and activists as we move along the ever changing path, talking about the connection between individual and larger systemic change because quite frankly, again, I think, particularly this year, where there's been such huge seismic changes in our world. It's been very difficult for individuals finding their place and their role in that landscape. How do we all make a difference? How do we find that moment of hope? Where do we go?

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 a party that everybody in the entire universe seems to be at, and we're dancing, literally moving at the same rhythm across time space continuums. What I have found myself diving into was who is creating work that I need during this time? You are one of the artists I was creating work that I needed during this time with *Between the World and Me*. I felt so moved by the depth that I felt artists moving into of being like, actually the world does need to change. How do we change in this time?

Kamilah Forbes: Something you just hit on was you started to talk about this moment and rest. And just self-care, and what I love about you talk a lot about the idea of system change, individual change, but also individual care. And if I can even think about *Pleasure Activism*, which was another book that you've written, and in theory that you've truly interrogated. In the transformation of a society to more and just future, in what ways do you think pleasure activism can affect leadership and policy?

adrienne maree brown: Well, the core idea of pleasure activism is that we all have the right to pleasure. And for some of us, for those of us who have been marginalized and oppressed, that means we have to reclaim that right. We have to reclaim that sense that we already deserve it. We don't have to bust our butts and labor, labor, labor to get two weeks of vacation a year, and that's our lives. But that actually, it should be woven in. We've given so much, and we've struggled so much, and it's traumatic to be marginalized all the time. So there's something about actually returning ourselves, returning to ourselves, returning to that part of ourselves that's like, I have a body that is wired for pleasure. And I mean sexual pleasure, and I mean drug pleasure, and I mean boundary pleasure, and I mean poetic pleasure, and I mean, dance pleasure, and I mean bath pleasure, I mean collective pleasure, all of it.

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 resources right now for people who are like, what does freedom actually mean in this moment, at this time? We've never been so resourced, we've never been so resourced, so that gives me a ton of hope.

adrienne maree brown: And then the fact that people are turning away from the petty dramas of social media and turning towards deeper relationship. I see that happening every day. And that gives me hope, because I really am like, "That space was not designed for us, and it is not keeping us safe. And if we cannot use it to foment joy, foment connection, foment solutions, don't spend any more time there than you need to. Bring your attention to where you can actually be in authentic relationships. And so, it gives me hope to see how many people are like, yeah, let's divest some of our attention and energy from there and bring it to the real, the flesh, the connection.

Kamilah Forbes: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Gosh, adrienne, that's absolutely beautiful. I just want to say thank you. Thank you for sharing. Thank you for all that you've shared. And just your brilliance, your beauty, your centeredness. There's so much wisdom that you shared today, and that you share consistently. And thank you. And we look forward to talking again.

adrienne maree brown: Thank you so much. The little cat in me is purring. I'm like [purring noise] [Both laugh]. Thank you so much for the love, and for seeing the offer. I keep thinking about being a channel. How could I be a channel for the good stuff to come through? And being in a conversation like this with someone I deeply respect and just feeling like, oh the channel is flowing right here, that's what gives me hope.

Kamilah Forbes: It is flowing.

adrienne maree brown: Thank you so much for this space and time.

Paola Prestini: There's so much there. That was profound.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah.

Kamilah Forbes: She is something else. There's a lot to offer in the way that she organizes thought, permission to practice change.

Paola Prestini: Right. I mean, at a personal level, and then in terms of institutional modularity, it's incredible, right? I mean, I loved that idea because it's so true. As a society, being scared of change because these systems don't allow for that, for the systems to actually change, which take time and which take flexibility, and which actually take consistent evolution. That was amazing. And also this idea of is our democracy functioning? Do you budget with anybody else? There's so much... Like lack of transparency in a lot of these systems because, of course, people are doing their best and are af-- I want to say that because I believe that, and doing their best and afraid of change and afraid of that kind of transparency. That's interesting.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Two things that hit me were the idea of a bio cultural diversity. The idea that nature loves diversity, and that monoculture has been... I mean, you're seeing it right now with the discourse around critical race theory that monoculture has been a hegemonic weapon. It is the way to isolate groups of people into thinking that their beauty, their music, their fashion, their bodies are out of order with nature. And so, the adaptation of looking at the ecology, looking at environment, and the way that the most verdant garden, the most verdant ecosystem is so because there are so many different kinds of species that are present. And then transposing that concept to culture. That if we're talking about diversity, if we're talking about equity, if we're talking about inclusion, it's not because of numbers, it's not because of proportion. It's because we are at our best. We are at our most verdant, if there is cultural diversity.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: And then I also really loved the right to pleasure. I feel like I talk about it all the time because being at the Kennedy Center with this affiliation, the federal government, there are always ties in as a monument to the 35th President. There are always ties to federal legislation or the rhetoric of the head of state and so forth. And so, I've been really basing a lot of the work that I do in Social Impact in the call of the 14th amendment, in the call of equal protection. And, yes, we should be equally protected under the law. But to be enfranchised in this country doesn't just mean legal protection, it means you have access to the purchase. You have access to the franchise, which yes, is about justice. But yes, it's about dignity. It's about literacy, and it's about pleasure. We all have the right to feel good.

Paola Prestini: Right. It makes me... Both of these points that you brought out make me think of this incredible person that I met a few years ago. His name is Vitor Pordeus, and he's Brazilian, and he suffered a psychiatric break early in life. He was going to be a doctor in Brazil. And something happened and he just couldn't continue. And so, he ended up creating this thing called The Madness Hotel where he took over this psychiatric hospital, and essentially created this program where he created workshops, theatrical performances, documentaries, and pretty much fundamental artistic scientific records to show, first of all, that this kind of diversity and mental health is also incredibly important. But that also, this way of working through theater could actually create a safe space to combat this kind of reductionist way of looking at mental health.

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 comfortable not knowing what's happening the next second. I live in that. But it also has to do, as we all know very well here, with the inequities that people face going into that change, and the fact that society from the beginning doesn't actually look out for the happiness quotient of its humans. I was thinking about this idea of what you do for yourself, what you do for your community, the fact that excess doesn't lead to pleasure, which is such an incredible and true statement that she says, and it made me think about, early on I had read about Bhutan, and it had... Did you all know that about this, it had this concept known as the Gross National Happiness Index? And so, it was a country that was closed to Western influence, to outside influence, and it opened in 1970s for tourism. And in order to essentially approach westernization, they decided to create this Gross National Happiness Index.

Paola Prestini: And so, it's not just about how much people laugh, but it's actually about sustainable development that gives us much weight to the human flourishing as it does to wealth. And it's something that they still practice. They measure essentially nine key areas of happiness every five years. Psychological wellbeing, health, education, good governance, ecology, time use, community, vitality, culture, and living standards. And I just thought that that was such an interesting idea of what does it mean for a country to be happy? And what could we learn in our institutions and in our communities, what can we put forward that would allow for a happiness index? I like that.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah, that is a new world order. [Kamilah and Paola laugh] It is. Around what base or bases or concepts do you order society? Around what concepts or bases do you order your organization? Our organizations tend to be ordered around an economic narrative, in which culture is at least in our business, culture is the business. Culture is the product and there is the pleasure quotient because people respond to the product because it gives them joy, it gives them inspiration, and that as adrienne was talking about, that as the antecedent for policy decisions. I love that that thing of the truth of the orgasmic yes. And the honesty therein as a way of thinking about environmental policy.

Paola Prestini: Totally, I love that. And then I just want to say the flip of that is that we see so many things happening in our artistic societies that are so wrong. And it makes me think, Bamuthi, you said something a few sessions ago where you said, "If I showed you what I felt in here, I wouldn't get done what I needed to get done." It really surprised me. Often you say things that really surprise me, and that one was just so true. And it makes me think, at what point do we draw those lines when things are just not okay? Because I think when you are a builder, you try to say, "Okay, I'm a builder? Where do I draw those lines? Where is it not okay?" At what point do you speak up? It's a question for three of us. Where do we draw these lines? Where is it not okay? How much can we speak to when we are all builders?

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 building that infrastructure and that permission structure that you're talking about is constantly including in our collective stream of consciousness, these ideas of beauty and possibility.

Kamilah Forbes: To continually be launching pads, right?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yes.

Paola Prestini: Right.

Kamilah Forbes: That we are part of a continuum. The work that we build, the work that we make space for is all part of a continuum.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Tenacious.

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 conversations that we've had, and the lives that we've built, really are predicated on thinking about a new normal. We spent 40 some odd years, all of us thinking about a different kind of normal.

Paola Prestini: Well, it makes me think of Regina Romero, the mayor.

Kamilah Forbes: Yeah, that's right.

Regina Romero: But yet the pandemic put a huge spotlight on the inequities that we knew we had, and we had not acted as a country. For me, as I make policy decisions I want to make sure that the recognition of the original people of this land is front and center in how we view...

Paola Prestini: Here's a woman who came from hard working farmers, came into this position with such struggle, has a platform that's about the environment, and then boom, the pandemic happens. And what does she do? She's able to actually continue that work, but then really do the equity work that that place needed on the border. To do that work to include the communities that had no voice, and how that transformative opportunity may not have happened as quickly had the pandemic not happened.

Kamilah Forbes: That's right.

Paola Prestini: I think that's such a... I love that. I loved that moment, and that interview.

Kamilah Forbes: Don't waste now waiting on your normal.

Paola Prestini: Exactly, just thinking about this moment where, where we have all these beautiful memories that we've shared. I wonder if either of you can speak to some of your favorite moments or moments of hope, or moments of strategy, or just moments of the interviews that you've led or that you've listened to that that fed you.

Kamilah Forbes: Yeah. One thing that comes to mind for me is Cal.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah.

Paola Prestini: So, Cal, your mommy sent me some beautiful recordings of your voice. And-

Cal: [vocalizes]

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

Cal: [vocalizes]

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 about artists on the board.

Van Jones: The artist should be imagineering and architecting, not just policy, but the economy, too. I think there should be no corporate board that doesn't have three or four artists on it now. Don't tell me what you can do with a spreadsheet and whatever because these spreadsheets have been documenting our demise for 200 years. [Bamuthi laughs] What can you do with [Van laughs] You know what I mean? What can you do in liberating human creativity and potential at a time when...

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: And I remember he was just like, "Oh, yeah." Like this idea, and it's been an idea that I've thought about a lot. I think what we postulated then was how many working artists do we think are on the boards of all the Fortune 500 companies in this country? There was this way that I watched

him angle it like, "Rrr?" Like a Scooby Doo, just turn his head a little bit. And that's when I thought, okay, something is happening here, where we have the ability to just poke at folks that are aligned with us, but we have an opportunity to take that alignment, raise it a level by just slightly turning the angle on what our folks believe to be true. And that was a great moment. And then very quickly, the other thing was just everything that Paola did in relationship to that conversation we had about the border and contested sites is so musical, so passionate, so intimate.

Paola Prestini: Such a beautiful opportunity that you all offered me to talk about home, which is such a fleeting and elusive thing for so many of us. I have to say one of the things that really stuck out to me was when Marina talked about how you can codify or approach futurism and she talked about growth, constraints, collapse, and transformations.

Marina Gorbis: ... that when you think about all these visions of the future, there are four sort of archetypal ways in which we think about the future and construct scenarios in our minds...

Paola Prestini: And to be able to have someone who lives in futurist thought actually codify how we can think systematically about dreaming was something that totally floored me. And then of course, I could never remember the word constraint. I always remember just the other three. [All laugh]

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah, yeah, yeah, of course.

Paola Prestini: It probably says something about me.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Amen.

Paola Prestini: I was like, "What's that other one?" I could never remember it. [All laughing throughout]

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yes. Don't even ask it. Don't even think about-

Kamilah Forbes: Yeah, let's leave that one off. You can leave that one off.

Paola Prestini: There was one that I just... I don't know.

Kamilah Forbes: I don't know why. I don't know why I can't remember that one. [Laughing dies down]

Paola Prestini: Yeah.

Kamilah Forbes: Wow, wow.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Well, it's been sweet. It is a season.

Paola Prestini: It has been.

Kamilah Forbes: It really has. That's right.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: The season, it is always the season of change somewhere, and certainly in our worlds. It's been so great.

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 called Truth by Kamasi Washington from a live performance at the Apollo Theater. And so, on behalf of my co-hosts, the very lovely Paola Prestini, and the incredibly inspirational Kamilah Forbes, and also hollerin' at our whole squad at the Kennedy Center, at the Apollo, and at National Sawdust, our whole production team here that's been incredible and patient with us. It's been a true pleasure. We thank you all for watching, and we thank you for listening. Stay hopeful. See you on the journey.