

Active Hope - A podcast collaboration

Episode 3 Transcript

Paola Prestini: One of the things that I've found the most difficult about having an immigrant identity is that I never feel like I can stop, and I never feel at home. It's not a thing that will ever change. That's the immigrant DNA. It's a blessing, but it's also... It's complex.

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 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.

Paola Prestini: This is Active Hope.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: This is Active Hope.

Kamilah Forbes: This is Active Hope.

Kamilah Forbes: Hey, hey.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Hi.

Paola Prestini: Good to see you both. I feel like every time we get together, a million historic things have happened, and I greet you with a tender heart.

Kamilah Forbes: That word "tender" is really critical right now.

Paola Prestini: Right, right.

Kamilah Forbes: I mean, for all of us to just have grace for one another, in order to heal.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Healing present progressive. Healing is active and enduring.

Kamilah Forbes: Wow. Wow. On the topic of healing, I just want to share that we have some beautiful music coming up in today's episode. We're going to hear performances by Magos Herrera, Vijay Iyer, and Wadada Leo Smith. And we'll feature music by you, Paola, and by Carlos Simon. So Paola, do you want to tell us a little bit about today's episode?

Paola Prestini: This episode I feel is very much about regeneration, and it's also very personal as you both know. So I just thank you in advance for bearing with me for the past month and a half, as I've told

you so much about why the border is so personal to me. As a child, I landed on the US Mexico border in a town called Nogales. It was something about that town, the division, the disparate synergies, the wishes, the dreams, the songs, the struggles that has essentially informed every aspect of my DNA. We had immigrated from Italy for a life on the border. My father is an instrument and reed maker, and the cane that's used for his product is actually grown in Northern Mexico.

Paola Prestini: And the promise for a better future was there, but as soon as we arrived, my parents separated. My mother and I began our life and it had a lot of uncertainty. I remember to this day, she packed our car with all of our belongings to try and make it in California, and I remember believing that everything I needed was in that car. There was a song, and it was [singing] "You're my number one." We soon made it back to the border. We didn't make it, but she succeeded at the immigrant's dream. She had to build new roots, and that has informed how I approach my life to this day. So today, we're going to take a picture of what it means to be on the border from immigration to migration, from fleeing to freedom, to being stuck, and all of the realities. Bamuthi, you said something last week that I loved, which is that the immigrant DNA is powered by hope.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yes.

Paola Prestini: But it's also powered by sacrifice, and at times by secrecy. Immigration, which is a national issue, is this border towns' everyday issue, but they don't get that support. Just in March, they recorded 19,000 children trying to pass the border, fleeing from poverty and violence. I really just don't think that as a country, that's built on immigration, on migration, on stolen land, on bodies, we can't turn a blind eye. So I'm really excited to build with both of you, a deeper sense of understanding of the borders, the empathy that's needed, and what translations can we find institution building in the name of better systems. So today, I want to ask both of you what borders mean to you and your practice and as human beings.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Wow, first of all, thank you for your bravery. The idea of borders are definitely geographical, but I don't know, when you ask that question, I just can't help but think of Hip Hop. Planet Hip Hop, Planet Rock, as a border-less nation of culture makers. With Hip Hop in particular, it's a culture that emerged because of very, very sharply drawn borders of gang territories in the South Bronx. Without those sharp borders and the intra-communal borders and the need to find peace because of broader crossings between Black and Brown folks, maybe we don't have the culture that has changed my life. But then I also think about diaspora and sounds like Bob Marley, and sounds like Fela Kuti, sounds like Miriam Makeba, sounds like Lauryn Hill, and maybe that's where art lives, is that there are all these sharply drawn borders, and we'll talk about the borders of our own families in a minute, but that is the thing about the art that I love, and maybe the cultural practice that I come from is that if it's not borderless, it does a pretty good job of obliterating borders, which I'm really thankful. Kam, how about you?

Kamilah Forbes: Man, so beautifully said, and Paola, thank you for that introduction to the concept of borders and a geographic standpoint, because I do think that me personally, I've always resisted silos, resisted restriction, and it's interesting being an artist within an institution that exists against categories, categorical definitions, categorical silos, even from the sense of departmental. I'm always interested in the conversation. Well, we are all here as creative beings to add to the stew that what it is that we're building is art in order and culture to move us forward. So whether you are in finance, development, marketing, PR, how do we build a cultural ecosystem even within the institution that looks like a creative collaboration within a rehearsal hall or a room of my dreams, right?

Paola Prestini: Yeah.

Kamilah Forbes: I'm always interested in that conversation.

Paola Prestini: I love that moment in a collaboration where you trust somebody and you give something over. I always have a vision for what something's going to look like, but I know that the minute I give it over that that person's going to take it into some completely different place. And I think that kind of sense of wonder and of abandon and of trust is so crucial. One clip that we're about to hear is, I traveled actually to the border to Nogales this past month to visit a friend of mine named Evan Kory. Evan graduated from Juilliard in piano, and I had heard that he had gone back to Nogales to start a whole bunch of different things. I was really curious to catch up with him, and we're going to actually hear Magos Herrera performing "Gracias a la vida." This is a little snapshot of life on the border and of this beautiful human being who's trying to regenerate through art.

Magos Herrera: [singing "Gracias a la vida" in Spanish]

Evan Kory: [Music underneath] Before I moved back to Nogales, I was in New York City for 13 years. As far as my decision to move back while living in New York, I just felt more and more drawn to home. The whole reason I was able to study piano and music was because of our family stores that supported that journey. So eventually, the opportunity came to move back. I was at a crossroads and I just went for it, and it's been one of the best decisions of my life, where I finally feel like I'm digging my feet into my community and growing as a person, as an artist. We're at our family store called Kory's. It's a bridal shop, and we've served this area for many decades. My grandparents started the store, and we are steps from the border here. This is one of the pedestrian crossings that is only for pedestrians, no vehicles.

Evan Kory: We've noticed that it's a very popular spot for families to come together because during the pandemic, the border has been closed. So Mexican citizens are not able to cross to this side of the border. So that means families are separated, friends, couples, where one person's on the other side, and one... So they're coming here to meet and talk. I'm not certain of it, but I think not all of the border crossings have the ability to see through like this. So I think there's people coming from all over the state probably, that this is their meeting point where they can actually see and potentially touch each other. Right before the border closed, we got notice that it was going to happen. Our store, all of the bridal dresses are usually put on layaway months in advance, and people slowly build up to their wedding date.

Evan Kory: So when we got news that the border was closing, we have to call all of the brides with their dresses that are on layaway here in Mexico to come get your dresses now because we don't know what's going to happen. There was a rush of brides, and we're still actually coordinating with brides so that maybe a cousin that lives on this side can pick up for them and take it over there. So our little bridal store has a very unique perspective. There's a lot going on in this border community, which doesn't get a lot of good attention often in the country. You hear about the border, and it's always about issues with international border crisis or drugs or trafficking of all kinds. Really, this community is so much more than that.

Evan Kory: Recently in 2018, there was razor wire attached to the border, which was one of the most aggressive things we've seen happen here at the border, and what's interesting is that shortly after that,

a bunch of artists got together and opened up La Linea Art Studio. So it was a direct response, I think, because we were thinking of ways to do maybe some public art that commented on the fact that we don't agree with the razor wire and little by little, it evolved to like, "Hey, let's open up an art space." One thing leads to the next. So you got to make changes one step at a time, and I think that the connection that we can have between friends and fellow artists, I really appreciate more than ever now. The human condition makes us strive for connection between each other, and that gives me hope.

Magos Herrera: [singing "Gracias a la vida" in Spanish]

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Gorgeous.

Kamilah Forbes: So beautiful.

Paola Prestini: There's so much to take there.

Kamilah Forbes: I am so drawn by the theme of intersection, right? How he talked about that space at the intersection of a bridal shop. How poetic is that, right?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah. Love stories and the consummation of love. Birth stories and the possibility inherent in a new life. There are certain things that are just part of the human experience that a border cannot cross, maybe that is among the more violent aspects of borders is that they are dehumanizing. They eliminate the narrative. I know I always go to literature, but it's a little like opening up a 300 page novel on page 270, and a character is drowning. You begin not even in the middle, you begin at the end of the narrative, and everything that's led up to that place of distress and of extreme struggle is taken out of the story, but a physical place like a bridal shop, you have a sense of a love that brought you to that place. A bridal shop is a place of arrival because people have hope in one another, because people feel compelled to build a life together. So it's the middle of the story, but it's also the beginning.

Paola Prestini: Right, right.

Kamilah Forbes: Totally, totally. At the intersection in which families are separated. Right at the intersection in which...

Paola Prestini: Well, so if that's the thing right on the very granular level. Nogales has a twin city, and because of this border closing for a year, the economy essentially has completely dried up. But the experiment of the idea of a twin city crossing two countries, what could it look like if it could thrive? I think what I really take from what he says is that it's change one step at a time. It's going back to your community. It's saying, yes, I could be in New York, but I'm actually going to go here because I'm needed here. I think one of the things that I've found the most difficult about having an immigrant identity is that I never feel like I can stop, and I never feel at home. It's not a thing that'll ever change. That's the immigrant DNA. It's the blessing because you get to see this kind of intersectionality that you're both talking about and you get to see all these sides, but it's also... it's complex.

Kamilah Forbes: Sure, sure, sure.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah. I've been thinking about my institution, which, not being from Washington, D.C., and I should acknowledge that the Kennedy Center sits on unceded Piscataway territory, not being

from here, people say, "Well, the Kennedy Center is geographically isolated," and I'm like, "No. It's not. You just take the blue line or the orange, like it's right there." But it is a place that in some cases, psychologically isolated. There's a desire for our institution to actually soften its white marble so that it has more of a sense of home, and that balance between the nomadic, the itinerant, the home to a few, and then home to many, a place of belonging where, as a cultural immigrant, you can find a different sense of home in this new place is a lot of the work that we're doing in Social Impact, and a lot of the work, I think, of 21st Century arts institutions that may also feel bordered within themselves.

Paola Prestini: Right.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: And we're trying to break that down.

Kamilah Forbes: For necessity of existence, quite frankly. I mean, I think about the difference of borders, I think of breaking down borders and all of our institutions, but as you talk about the Kennedy Center, I think about that as relationship even from the Apollo's perspective where there's a border of legacy and history that is so rich and vibrant and a true definer. But at the same time, if we think about how its porousness is what brought people to the institution and considered it home. The fact that the doors were open to all Black performers at a time in which they could not perform on any other stage in New York City. So we are in the crux because of a very similar challenge in that, how do we create space now for this generation of performers that is not independent of our history and legacy, but inclusive, right? So it's an interesting challenge, once we talk about borders, as we think about movement building, as we think about... And just movements through time.

Paola Prestini: Right.

[Musical interlude featuring trumpet and keyboard]

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: You just heard Passages, composed and performed by Vijay Iyer and Wadada Leo Smith. Paola, we've been talking a lot about cultural borders and institutional borders. Both Kamilah and I are children of immigrants, and you yourself immigrated to this country. I feel so honored to be close to your story. Can you talk a little bit more about your recent experience, and this very true, harsh reality of a political border, particularly as we're experiencing it now in 2021?

Paola Prestini: It's interesting that you ask me that because at the moment, I feel a little not grounded in myself in the sense that I think there are other things that need attention right now, and I want to be part of that change. So it's funny because being able to express what I did at the opening feels really important because I don't often talk about my story. As a composer, you're not a performer, you know what I mean?

Kamilah Forbes: Right.

Paola Prestini: I just say it through my music, but it felt really good to acknowledge that that story exists. But something happened recently that really moved me, and I was in, I think I told you both that as part of going down to Arizona, my husband and I drove through the South. So we drove through Alabama and we went to Montgomery, went to Selma. We saw the Legacy Museum, but the purpose of the stop in South Carolina was that my husband, who's half black and half Japanese, has always felt like a satellite. He never knew his family, and he has been looking for family for years on 23andMe, and he

found them and they were the most extraordinary, welcoming, beautiful people. It made me realize how privileged I was to want to flee.

Paola Prestini: I just want to sit in that for a second because I want to escape, that's in my DNA. I always want to run. I'm not great at keeping in touch. So all of a sudden to see his joy in finding second, third cousins removed when I have it, and I keep running, was like, "Oh, that's privilege." Let's look at that fair and square, but then I have to address that psychologically. We're not going to do here, we can do that one day over drinks [all laughing]. When you ask me about being an immigrant now, I mean, to me, it's like, I'm lucky. My story is a lucky immigrant story. Let's face it. But there are many unlucky stories and like the week we're living in which it seems that every time we meet, just the times we're living in, there's always something huge. That's where the energy is devoted. Does that makes sense?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: It makes all the sense.

Kamilah Forbes: Total sense, yeah, for sure.

Paola Prestini: Is it time to announce our special guest?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah, let's do that.

Kamilah Forbes: I think it is. I think it is.

Paola Prestini: Alright. So I was bowled over by Regina Romero. I had been following her for many years, and I'm just excited to share this interview. Before becoming the first Latina mayor of Tucson, Arizona, she was on the city council where she led Tucson in becoming an immigrant welcoming city, and successfully led colleagues in passing a no-border wall resolution. As mayor, she's believed deeply in delivering equity, inclusion and opportunity for all, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, immigration status, religion, or background. She has done incredible things, including prioritizing the creation of the city Race and Social Justice Initiative, including an immigrant advancement agenda, and something that I find particularly incredible because it hasn't been done, prioritizing formalizing the governmental relationships with the Tohono O'odham and Pascua Yaqui tribes. It is such an honor to have Mayor Regina Romero here with us on our third Active Hope podcast. Thank you so much for joining us. It's a real honor.

Mayor Regina Romero: Thank you so much for having me, Paola.

Paola Prestini: So I have just a few questions, and I really want to start with this idea of transformation. You ran for office on a platform focused on climate change, city infrastructure, and the economy, and then March 2020 happens. So I'm wondering in what ways has COVID forced you to evolve your approach and your platform, and search for new solutions, and how can we as leaders learn about adaptability and also about opposition and how to deal with it?

Mayor Regina Romero: Yes. You're absolutely correct. I ran on a platform of climate change and climate action for the city of Tucson, and when the pandemic hit, and we had to make absolutely incredibly difficult decisions. We really connected back to science, right? That's one thing that this pandemic and climate change have in common, that it is science that should be dictating to us, the policymakers, the decision makers, in terms of where we go. To be perfectly frank, the pandemic really highlighted the ills

that society has been suffering from for so long, the inequities, discrepancies, but yet the pandemic put a huge spotlight on the inequities that we knew we had, and we had not acted as a country.

Paola Prestini: Focus of inclusion has been such an essential part of your life and of your platform. One of the things I love is that you've been especially active in formalizing governmental relationships with the representatives from the Tohono O'odham and the Pascua Yaqui nations. I want to know what are those effort looks like and in your eyes, how can this multicultural approach lead to a better understanding and a better, if I can say, American identity?

Mayor Regina Romero: I'm the definition of intersectional, right? Layers of identity as a woman and a Brown woman of color, as a first generation daughter of immigrants, living on the borderlands. Really, I grew up speaking Spanish and then went into school and learned English at school. So the identity that I carry is multifaceted and connected to the borderlands, and connected to the two countries where I grew up, Sonora, Mexico and Arizona. The wonderful thing about it is that the Sonoran Desert covers two countries. It doesn't care about artificial borders. So when I tell people my family has been living in the Sonoran Desert for six generations now, people are surprised, but when I say I'm the daughter of immigrants, they're like, "What is she talking about?" So the Sonoran Desert covers both Arizona and Sonora, and the reason that is important is because in the Sonoran Desert, our identity is also connected to the Yaqui people and Tohono O'odham people.

Mayor Regina Romero: And the respect that we have, my family at least, has for the knowledge and the culture, and the language in the history of the connection that the Yaqui people and the Tohono O'odham people have to this land is very, very important. So 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 the borderlands and how we view Tucson, Arizona, which by the way, the word Tucson is derived by the Tohono O'odham word. It means black mountain. It's "Cuk Şon," and so we are in the shadow of the black mountain as the city. That's where our city was born, "Cuk Şon." So in my relationship building with the chairman of the Pascua Yaqui tribe and the Tohono O'odham nation, I want to recognize their flags in our city hall. I want to recognize their land and that we in Tucson, we are just a visitor here in their native land.

Paola Prestini: That's such an important role model, really for the rest of the country. That really leads me to this idea of living on the border, and how that infuses your daily practice in your life. But my question is how do sanctuary practices threaded in, and how do we support border communities like Nogales that are often really at the forefront of national issues and have so little infrastructure?

Mayor Regina Romero: Well, I was born in Yuma and grew up in Somerton, Arizona, and that was 10 minutes away from the border. I have family on both sides of the border in Sonora and in Arizona. As I was growing up, we would leave and in 10 minutes, we were visiting family on the other side of the border, right?

Paola Prestini: Yeah. El otro lado.

Mayor Regina Romero: El otro lado. We wanted to go eat really delicious tacos, and then we just got on our cars and visited family and went to the taquito place and the hot dog place. When I approach immigration issues, I approach it as like, nobody in Washington, D.C. understands the life on the border because they don't live it, and they don't understand that it is one community on both sides.

Paola Prestini: When I was a kid, there was no wall like that.

Mayor Regina Romero: No.

Paola Prestini: It didn't exist in this way. We used to call it the Disney Wall when it went up, because it was just so out of this world that this could happen.

Mayor Regina Romero: Yeah. Most of the border didn't have like a wall, right?

Paola Prestini: Right.

Mayor Regina Romero: You'd move back and forth from both sides of the border, the family on both sides. So as I approach immigration, being first generation born here, I connect to family and I do not see immigrants and asylum seekers as others. I see them as a family on the other side. So the city of Tucson has a rich history of being a sanctuary city. We are an original sanctuary city. This is where it was born, and I approach our policy as a city of Tucson, when I sat on the council, we declared our city an immigrant welcoming community. We changed policy and the face of SB 1070, and we really gave direction to our police department and our city manager to make policy that didn't otherize immigrants in our community, that included them as residents of our city.

Paola Prestini: I want to take another question. This one is a little bit personal. Every time we do these episodes, we like to have a prompt, an artistic prompt, and so there was one that actually, I really wanted to show you, it just aired on PBS, and it's a documentary that I co-produced with a good friend of mine named Murat Eyuboglu, and we worked with a conservationist who's really specialized in the desert and ecology, and the work is called The Colorado, and it spans in nine chapters the importance of the Colorado River through history, and of course our drinking water here in Arizona is 90% from the Colorado River. The film is actually narrated by the Oscar winner, Mark Rylance, and this chapter talks about the importance of water to farming, but it frames it through personal stories, and so this is a story that could have been many stories about a young man who had the ability to fly like a bird in terms of his running.

Paola Prestini: He had been accepted into the Olympics, but at this moment, he stays to take care of his mother. Just a few statistics that I want to read for our audience before we see the clip. One in eight Arizona residents is a first-generation immigrant. Over a quarter million U.S. Citizens in Arizona live with at least one family member who is undocumented, and one in six Arizona workers is an immigrant, and state industries like agriculture and construction depend on an even greater share of immigrants. So the question after you listen to these two minutes is what was growing up like with immigrant parents as farmers and what has it meant to you as a leader?

[overlapping singing with music]

Mayor Regina Romero: That was wonderful and powerful. That was wonderful and powerful. Well, I see the faces that I saw growing up, right? I worked in the fields myself.

Paola Prestini: Really?

Mayor Regina Romero: A lot of people don't know that.

Paola Prestini: I did not know that.

Mayor Regina Romero: So helping my parents and seeing my siblings, I'm the youngest of six siblings, and then just all the equipment that you have to use to be able to do the job right. Cover yourself up, gloves, and I did that. I picked lettuce, and my siblings did as well, and if we couldn't 'cause we were younger, we helped. Either we were on the sidelines because we had no daycare, right? Or we helped at home with all of it. But I remember growing up and living that life, which is a very respectable, by the way, very respectful.

Paola Prestini: So much dignity.

Mayor Regina Romero: And dignity and hard. Hard, hard work. Really, it was working on the fields that convinced me to go to college, but it's incredibly important work. Something that the pandemic also made us realize, right? That the frontline, that the people that are actually feeding us day in day out are not valued enough.

Paola Prestini: No, they're often treated as invisible.

Mayor Regina Romero: They're not paid well, they don't have health insurance, they're not taken care of, and it's incredibly difficult work.

Paola Prestini: Do you see a direct, just in terms of this role model that you are for so many women in terms of being a first, right? First Latina mayor of Tucson and what that means, and I'm wondering if you see a direct line from your experiences in the past, and is there a direct line in terms of where you are now as a leader?

Mayor Regina Romero: There's a direct line in that when I was growing up, I'd never really imagined myself to be an elected official, right, or a leader. The direct line is that I've never been able to lose... You know, my dad passed away about five years ago, but he always would tell us his kids like, "Don't ever forget where you come from because you will know where you need to go if you know where you come from." So as I grew up and develop myself, that core never really has left me and has always dictated where I go in there. That includes even art, the love of art, the love of nature is something that I grew up with, and in those long 12, 14 hour days in the fields, there's always time for people to sing and bring out a guitar, and focus on that art and being able to bring life to the people that were on the fields. It's all connected, but I never really dreamed of being an elected official. Never really dreamed of ever once being the mayor of the city of Tucson, being the first woman.

Paola Prestini: So is this one step at a time.

Mayor Regina Romero: And I stand on the shoulders of so many other women that I love and admire that came before me. So it is truly an honor.

Paola Prestini: My last question to you is, where are you finding hope right now?

Mayor Regina Romero: I am finding hope in what we have in front of us, that we have the first woman as vice president and woman of color, daughter of immigrants that understands what we carry and the value that we bring into our country. I'm hopeful that there's investment in working families and

children, in art, in education. I'm hopeful that we have a president that believes in climate change and wants to invest in resiliency, and green job creation and really doing something about what the effects of climate change are in communities of color and low-income communities, who are at the front lines of receiving the impact of climate change. I'm hopeful for those things and being in a position of being mayor, of being able to affect change in our city, that will take us in a progressive direction.

Paola Prestini: It's so exciting.

Mayor Regina Romero: And being able to have front and center, the equity issue that affects this country, and so many people in so many different ways.

Paola Prestini: It's so needed here at the border. So we are very lucky to have you, and so lucky to have you on our podcast, and fue un honor inmenso, espero de conocerte un dia.

Mayor Regina Romero: Muchas Gracias, Paola!

Paola Prestini: Thank you so much.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Wow.

Paola Prestini: She's a bright light.

Kamilah Forbes: So, so incredible.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: So many gems.

Paola Prestini: Right. Yeah.

Kamilah Forbes: So many. Just really profound. It's funny as she talks, and this idea of, she exemplified how movement then influences policy just in her body, right?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah.

Kamilah Forbes: In the way that our work is, when we think about cultural movements, cultural movements are about movement that births culture, we think about Great Migration, jazz, shoot, I mean Hip Hop even, right?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Mm-hmm.

Kamilah Forbes: But how this was really direct tie to policy change within her DNA.

Paola Prestini: Right.

Kamilah Forbes: It was just powerful and very straightforward. So clear cut, really powerful.

Paola Prestini: And there was a purity in her wanting to lead, which I was very drawn to because so often people want to lead because of power, and what you see instead in her is no, I'm actually doing this for my community.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah. Yeah.

Kamilah Forbes: Yeah. Right.

Paola Prestini: And that I thought, it's such a thing, I think for people who are in leadership positions to really think about, that you are in a service position.

Kamilah Forbes: That's right.

Paola Prestini: You're not in a power position. You're serving, and you have to know who you're serving deeply.

Kamilah Forbes: That's right.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: The idea, I agree with both of you, and Kamilah this observation of humanity as policy, that and the dignity of labor. And Kamilah knows this because I've been under her care as a director. When I was a younger artist, sweat was very much a part of my aesthetic. Sweat was part of my belief system as an artist that there was something about the chemical transformation that was taking place in my body that mirrored the psychological and spiritual transformation that I was trying to pull out of the narrative. There was something about me kind of falling apart that was also part of what I was trying to convey, and that is due in large part to ancestral movement.

Paola Prestini: Right.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: And ancestral migration, a mirroring of the sweat and the labor of the people that came before me. So when she talked about picking lettuce, and we're closer to the equator. People get pissed off because they're in air conditioned scenarios and they have to wear masks. Well, try being under the sun, and picking cotton or tobacco or lettuce or strawberries or whatever it is, and her tying all of that labor and you, Paola as interlocutor tying that labor, that sweat, that movement back to dignity, back to humanity, and now as a politician, she takes those lessons with her and embeds that sense of humanity and dignity as policy. Well, that is movement.

Paola Prestini: Right.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: It is legislative movement, and it's really just incredible to hear.

Paola Prestini: It's so interesting to me when she talks about who climate change affects the most. I think that's a lens that we really need to think about. That I don't think people think about often enough, who is this climate change really affecting?

Kamilah Forbes: That's right.

Paola Prestini: It made me think about something that I read about regenerative systems. It's this study from the University of Kansas, and it talks about interdisciplinarity and about the complex world and how we can think of creating a regenerative global community. It says, for example, imagine a healthy and beautiful city that generates its own renewable energy, returns all water back to nature cleaner than when it arrived, operates without waste, protects and regenerates natural systems and species, and this idea of trying to impose that thought onto artistic systems, right?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Speak on it.

Paola Prestini: What would it look like if we were creating artistic systems that were reflecting society, but regenerating also and giving back. And it was interesting because that model made me really think about how can we, how can we heal?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah. I mean, that is the gospel of our podcast in so many ways, right? The public healing, the healing apparatus, the culture as part of an integrative medicinal system, the infrastructure of hope, the infrastructure of inspiration as healing agent, all of that is ecological.

Kamilah Forbes: Yeah. That's right.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: All of it is a cycle.

Kamilah Forbes: Sure.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: I love that you're pointing that out.

Paola Prestini: And both of them said something that I really need to think about deeply, which is that I have always believed that if I architect something, it can happen, but really what needs to happen is that we need to take one step at a time.

Kamilah Forbes: Sure.

Paola Prestini: And that change, especially in moments like this actually have to happen, not slowly in that we'll put it off, but actually methodically where there is a culture of collaboration that's built, where you have to learn each other's languages, which I think is very germane to the border, right? Which is that when you have such different life experiences, you may not speak that same language.

Kamilah Forbes: Sure.

Paola Prestini: Well, you have to set up a system that is going to have to be modular and it's going to have to change, and it's going to look messy and you have to live in that broth.

Kamilah Forbes: Then somehow in the midst of all that mess, right? There is kernels of beauty that exudes from the stew, right?

Paola Prestini: Yeah.

Kamilah Forbes: Somehow in the midst of all of that.

Paola Prestini: Yeah. Those are those moments, right, that keep you going.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah. We want to transition, we're talking movement, we're talking movements, we're talking borders, we're talking journeys. We wanted to cite one of our favorite authors, Isabel Wilkerson, and her seminal work, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, and talk a little bit about the migrants' journey or the immigrants' journey from the launching point of hope. There are many species that move for survival. Humans also are species that move for survival, but very often they move out of a kind of optimism, that there might be something better on the other side of the journey, and for many people who left the South after being imported as enslaved people here.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Generations later, there was the liberty to move in search of something. Wilkerson writes, "Many of the people who left the South, never exactly sat their children down to tell them these things, tell them what happened and why they left, and how they, and all this blood kin came to be in this Northern city or Western suburb or why they speak like melted butter and their children speak like footsteps on pavement, prim and proper or clipped and fast like the New World itself. Some spoke of specific and certain evils, some lived in tight-lipped and cheerful denial. Others simply had no desire to relive what they had already left."

Kamilah Forbes: "The facts of their lives unfurled over the generations like an over-wrapped present, a secret told in syllables. Sometimes the migrants dropped puzzle pieces from the past while folding the laundry or stirring the cornbread, and the children would listen between cereal commercials and not truly understand until they grew up and had children and troubles of their own, and the ones who had half listen, would scold and kick themselves that they had not paid better attention when they had the chance." Wilkerson's words are truly a balm, a salve in this moment as we think about migrations, as we think about movement. She's influenced so much and so many. I mean, this book was obviously critically acclaimed, but in a really succinct and broad way told a very epic story. We want to share another piece that was influenced by Wilkerson's words. This piece *Warmth of Other Suns* is the work of the artist, composer, Carlos Simon. This was a piece that was commissioned by the Sphinx Organization. We'll share a little bit of that piece as well.

[musical interlude of violin, viola, and cello]

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: I love it.

Kamilah Forbes: Such depth and what a journey. I think we felt moving through that piece.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: And not for nothing, man. There's a long history of Black folk in classical music, but you want to talk about a journey, and talk about the chapter...

Paola Prestini: And Jessie Montgomery, first Black woman at the Chicago Symphony, its Composer in Residence. It's been tragically slow.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: And Carlos Simon himself was just named the Composer in Residence at the Kennedy Center.

Paola Prestini: That piece was exquisite, and this idea of secrecy that gets passed on through generations. What does that do to protect the next generation? I'm curious, Kamilah, if you could talk a little bit about that in terms of perhaps your own experience or just your understanding of it?

Kamilah Forbes: Well, thinking about the piece, thinking about secrecy, and thinking about the migrants' movement, immigration or migration, it takes a great deal of courage and flexibility, and in some cases, how do we make ourselves lighter for the journey?

Paola Prestini: That's great.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Wow.

Paola Prestini: That's powerful. Wow.

Kamilah Forbes: What do we leave behind? What might be too heavy of a burden to carry along what is already a treacherous journey? And just thinking about even just my own family stories, just recently, I was on another podcast about lineage, and I thought I was sharing what I knew is the truth about [laughing] about who my great-grandparents were until my mother heard it and corrected me, and I was like, "Bu I never knew that," and she said, "Yes. Because we never told you." It was a secret that could have been shrouded in shame, right, and I think it was an effort to protect, an effort to be made light, right? As future generations to be made light for your own journey.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah. The secrets that we, we've used words like shame and also words like dignity. We've talked about barbed wire and razor wire. We've also talked about humanity and freedom, and inherent in this podcast, this discussion, you incredible women, our various family journeys, inherent in all of this is a yearning for freedom. People want better. Better actually is part of the genetic impulse to survive. For some of us to survive means standing still, but for many of us survival means moving to the next, and being chased, impelled by the wind of your family history to get us a little bit further.

Kamilah Forbes: That's right.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: As parents, we may not be fully doing our jobs if we engender among our children, a propensity to be satisfied with where they are. As leaders, we're definitely not doing our job if we not pushing our institutions to be better than when we found them.

Paola Prestini: Right. I'm curious, put it to both of you. What do we see as some of the applicable tools in some of the stories that we've heard today about borders and crossing and secrecy, that we can translate to our life as artists and leaders?

Kamilah Forbes: To me, it's the notion, particularly that Mayor Regina Romero, that her DNA became policy and having that amount of faith and fortitude in her leadership, in her voice and her legacy, right? That was extremely powerful to me and something I think I'm now even searching for, what is it that I'm bringing, me personally? My journey, within my DNA, that I'm bringing to affect my own style of leadership and or institution. It's a big question.

Paola Prestini: That is powerful.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Then I think for me, I'm remembering the story of Evan Kory and the studio that was opened up at the border, and this notion of art at a charged and contested intersection. That the most important and urgent art is birthed under pressure, that comes out of the stress of the things that are closing in around it, and what artists do is they find themselves in these charged places, and make beauty out of contested sites.

Paola Prestini: That is so beautiful.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Paola, how about you?

Paola Prestini: Oh, last night I went to go see my first show. I had had my own string quartet performed, but it not in New York City. To me, living in New York City is about music. It's like this is why I can be here and not in nature, it's that I get to be around music. So I went to see a show, and somebody came up to me and they said, "So when is National Sawdust opening?" I was like, "Oh my God." I was like, "We haven't closed. I mean, we've been doing art since like March. We haven't closed." But they want to know when the doors are opening, and I was just thinking, "I don't know when it's going to open," because what I implore institutions to do right now, and I'm not talking to both of you, but institutions that are legacy institutions, is that this is the time to take time and to recalibrate and to not come back the way we were.

Paola Prestini: So I think that idea of change one step at a time, but also really thinking about who your community is and why you're doing it, and if you're the right person to do it? I mean, these are questions that white people in power have to ask themselves, not to escape and to give the power to somebody else, right? But to say, "What does it really mean to thread community? What would it mean to build a city that could regenerate itself? Well, let's impose that on an institution." So I think what I took from all of this, which is that, we're at this really big intersection and yeah, and there's a lot to think about and all these beautiful, beautiful images that are running in my mind.

Kamilah Forbes: Well, with that being said, Paola, I mean, it's apropos ending on that. I just want to thank you both, Paola and Marc, for your brilliance today in the conversation, and Paola particularly for opening up your world to us.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yes.

Kamilah Forbes: That was really brilliant, and thank you to our featured guests, Mayor Regina Romero and Evan Kory. Today, you heard excerpts from *The Colorado*, directed by Murat Eyuboglu and composed by Paolo Prestini, performed by Roomful of Teeth (Glenn Kotche and Jeffrey Zeigler). *Gracias a la vida* by Violeta Parra, performed by Magos Herrera, Ed Simon, Adam Cruz, and Jo Martin at National Sawdust. *Passages* by Vijay Iyer and Wadada Leo Smith performed live at National Sawdust, and *Warmth* from *Other Suns* by Carlos Simon, performed by the MET Orchestra Musicians: Angela Qianwen Shen, Julia Choi, Chihiro Allen, and Julia Bruskin. Our producer is Sapir Rosenblatt, and our project manager is Paige Lester. 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.

[vocalizations, joined with music from stringed instruments and sounds of nature]