



Reimagining and Redesigning with Antionette D. Carroll
Episode 1: Reimagining and Redesigning Democracy with Merle McGee
Transcription

ANTIONETTE: Welcome back to Reimagining and Redesigning with Antionette D. Carroll. I am lucky to be here with the wonderful royalty queen [laughs] --

MERLE: Oh wow.

ANTIONETTE: Merle McGee. [inaudible 00:19] [laughs] Of course, I think we're going to talk a little bit about how we met. But I just have to say, when I met Merle, it was when I had the privilege to go to Amsterdam with Bloomberg CityLab. And I'm, you know, in a country that I don't really know. I'm in a space where I don't really know. And Merle just kind of came up and was like, "Who are you? What are we doing? Let's make magic happen." [laughs]

As you listen to this conversation and you hear our discussion, you will see why Merle is now one of my favorite people, period. And so, Merle, I am very excited for you to be here and share more about your work and what you're doing and reimagining and redesigning. But first, I want to just say welcome.

MERLE: Thank you. [laughs] Wow, I feel honored to be here because I know I am in the presence of a deep intellectual genius, royalty. So, much gratitude. And I'm glad I said, "Hey, girl. How are you doing?" after that experience because I'm [vocalization] I'm in my feelings right now, right? An honor and a privilege to spend time with you and get to know you.

ANTIONETTE: Absolutely. You know, just for a little grounding for folks, when we were there, we had the opportunity to see this beautiful theater puppetry performance that was created by refugees. And it was this enlarged, young girl that's been traveling across the globe, bringing people together through kind of the visual experience of searching for their home and for their family. And we were able to walk through Amsterdam having that moment. And, like, a few of us in the crowd were looking at each other, like, are you experiencing what [laughs] I'm experiencing?



But what I love about moments like that is we were able to connect at a spiritual level, at a level of, like, humanity and humility, which I feel like doesn't happen as much. When you show up in conferences, you know, it's like, "What do you do for a living?" What was even greater about that is that I didn't realize how dope you were [laughs] because we connected in that moment.

Folks that have now started to listen to this podcast will see I don't really give a lot of bios because I like for you all to be authentic and tell us what's important to you and your story. So, tell the folks a little bit about yourself and what systems are you working to reimagine and redesign.

MERLE: I think the thing to say about myself is a lot about also the things that I want to reimagine and redesign. I am a person who is striving to experience the full humanity and to be experienced in my full humanity as a person on the planet, you know, vis-à-vis my relationship with myself and others and the planet.

For me, this journey around reimaging and redesign really just sort of began [laughs], I guess, you know, as a young person who sat in the classroom (I was in third grade.), my teacher said some things that I knew not to be true based on the experience I had of myself, of my family, of my community, you know, and the lessons and the wisdom passed on to me from my elders in my family that caused my very first sort of civil disobedience.

[laughter]

ANTIONETTE: Come on.

MERLE: And so, I grew up in suburban New Jersey in the context of, you know, just, like, a nice, middle-class kind of experience. I had the good fortune, though, of my grandmother's legacy in working to desegregate the schools in the town that I grew up in to be able to have access to Black teachers. And so, most of my elementary school teachers were Black women. And they weren't just like newfangled, like, we just got here Black women, but, in fact, very seasoned along the way kind of folks. It was a privilege that I was afforded because of the labor that her generation did, right?

So, my mom went to a segregated elementary school, and my uncle and aunt, you know, prior, did as well. And my grandmother fought to bring more equity, if you will, to the school



systems because they didn't just fight for the schools to be integrated, but they also fought to have Black teachers be able to teach in schools as well. And so, they were looking at the long game around how to ensure that their grandchildren and those to come after weren't going to just have educators that didn't look like them but were in integrated classrooms.

And so, the one non-Black teacher that I had in elementary school, you know, just sort of shared her opinion about the intellectual ability of the group of students [laughs] that I was a part of. I had to protest. Now, it got me sent to the principal's office. But I gave my parents a lot of credit because they stood by me, and they were like, "What you not gonna do is damage this child's spirit with, you know, lies about your attitude about Black folks basically."

For me, reimagining redesigning a world where I have access to my full humanity, and people get to be seen and experienced and cared for in their full humanity has really been the legacy handed to me from my grandmother, and my grandfather, and my parents. And so, that's a little bit about, you know, just sort of, like, how long I've been thinking about, this ain't right; something wrong here. And not just that, but let's do something. Let's speak about it. And then, later, as, you know, I've grown into adulthood, let's actually work to reimagine what we want the world to be or how we want to be in the world.

ANTIONETTE: Look, anytime a Black person says, "What you not gonna do," you know movements are about to happen [laughs], whether it's internal in the family, or it's external in an entire sector of education, right? Many times we talk about how do we reimagine? We design these large, grandiose systems because they are large, and they're overpowering, and they're all-encompassing.

We talk about education as, like, a narrative and lively shaper. It impacts our perspectives about each other, our life expectancy, our quality of life. It's very large. And the work of your ancestors, you know, the work of your family, and the work you're doing going on is really looking at, what does even that intervention at the city level, at a community level, what is the ripple effect of that to really sustain the impact over time? And not just kind of that performative work, right?

MERLE: That's right. And I think it's important that we know that people are systems. People are institutions. They don't exist outside of us. We are, and we represent institutions in our bodies all the time. There's no real division between the systems and institutions that we're seeking to



transform or reimagine or redesign and ourselves. And, you know, Grace Lee Boggs said, "You want to transform the world? Transform yourself."

[laughter]

ANTIONETTE: Exactly. So many folks I've talked to they make it seem like it's pie in the sky. And it's like, these are made of people. Like, we --

MERLE: That's right.

ANTIONETTE: It's literally made of individuals. And in your life, in your career, you know, you have worked with multiple folks. You've worked with multiple systems. You know, you've worked at YWCA. You've looked at Planned Parenthood. You're now doing the deep work at Everyday Democracy. You know, how have these different spaces been similar, and how have they been different when you've tried to look at how do you change the system sustainably for the better?

MERLE: I would say that all of those systems, right? And if we think about systems as particular fields or areas, like education, and then they have different tentacles off of them, healthcare, all of those systems what they have in common is a root of White supremacy and anti-Black racism. They have a root in the theft of land, and the theft of people, and the theft of labor. They have a root in hidden advantages for some based on race, class, and access that is a thread because those institutions and systems were created by the people who have these ideologies and beliefs. So, listen, I think everything has anti-Blackness in it.

ANTIONETTE: [laughs]

MERLE: But I think that you know, that's a common thread. I think that there's also, again in the thread, that there are people who are often inside of institutions and systems that are working actively to be complicit in, you know, the system's ability to mete out less than stellar results [laughs] for everybody. As much as there are those who are complicit, there's always a coalition or a group people who are looking to make them more just. And so, I think institutions share those things in common on the biggest threads.

And then, you know, institutions, systems are like society. They have the norms. They have their norms and practices, the things that you see above the iceberg. We all know that



reference [laughs], right? The iceberg and the things that happen below the iceberg. And for sure, the things that happen below the iceberg, the attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions, are the things that ground those institutions.

And so, as I have thought about the work that I've been doing over the years, it is, yes, on some level, to address the things that you see above the iceberg, but that the real transformative change that needs to be sustainable happens in the places and pockets where it's not so visible, the hidden norms that shape how people get viewed around promotion, right? Get viewed around performance, and work style, and ethics.

It's also the norms and beliefs that drive how children, particularly children of color, get treated inside of educational institutions and systems, where the attitudes that shape the formation of our nation are very much alive and well in the institutions because they're alive and well in the people inside the institutions because the people are the institution.

ANTIONETTE: Yep. You know, you talked about the impact of race and class, you know, in the institutions we're navigating, in the work that we're trying to dismantle and reimagine, right? Because I think dismantling, we talk about the kind of negative side, which is important but, you know, it shouldn't just be, let's turn down. It's also, what does building up look like? What does it look like to shift power to build, right?

In your organization at Everyday Democracy, so you are the President and CEO. And so, in this space, you are directly looking at racial equity as a central focus. And I'm curious if you can elaborate on your organization's kind of efforts and roles to identify how to dismantle, how to reimagine...well, I don't want to reimagine institutional racism but reimagine what is separate or opposite of anti-Blackness and institutional racism [laughs], as well as, like, your commitment to centering racial equity in all aspects of the work that you're doing.

MERLE: Well, you know, and I love that question because I don't think you have everyday democracy, right? If we were to take it from being the name of an organization to, like, you know, democracy every day, I don't think we have everyday democracy without the acknowledgement that, as a nation, we've only been on the journey for the last 60 some odd years towards building a multiracial democracy. We've been a multiracial society since before 1619, right? Lots of groups here...even before people were categorized by race, there has been a multiracial society. And we have been navigating our ability to be in each other's lives and worlds from that time.



But this business of building a multiracial democracy, and dare I say, a multiracial democracy that's inclusive, that is rooted in recognizing that the business of building that multiracial democracy must include reckoning with who we are, and the founding of our nation, and some of the poor attitudes and beliefs that have driven, you know, this nation to civil war, right? And to the kinds of retrenchment in the commitment to racist ideology that we've seen, you know, really since the Black guy got elected. [laughter] I mean, it's – have in

ANTIONETTE: There was an increase in hate crimes and hate groups.

MERLE: Exactly. Exactly.

ANTIONETTE: When President Barack Obama was elected, right?

MERLE: That's right. And we have to be honest, right? We have to be honest about that, right? And we have to be honest about why.

And I think that you know, the moment that we're in with the inevitability of becoming a multiracial democracy and the commitment that people like myself, and you, and others, you know, have made to making that real, the counter to that is the work, I believe, of Everyday Democracy, which is to get people from across different perspectives to interrogate why they hold on to the beliefs that they have that pull them from the fabric of community and each other, as opposed to towards one another. What are the attitudes and beliefs, and what are you holding on to? And why are you holding on to those things in service of what you believe? I guess you gain.

And so, the work of Everyday Democracy is really about bringing people together in a formal and structured way to be in community with one another, to grapple with the more challenging elements of what it means to try to govern ourselves, and how to show up and be with our neighbors, right? Because all politics is local, right? All democracies are local. How do we get into relationship with one another is a part of the work and the journey.

And, for us, we believe it's important for us to be able to name the conditions that created where we are today, to see those with clear eyes, to take responsibility for not just what had happened, as people say, right? But also, what will happen because we're making a



commitment to doing something different, to engage in different, to divest from a White supremacy culture, right? The myth of self-importance based on gender, based on sexual orientation, based on race, based on class, like, based on ability. One of the earliest and most clear isms that this nation hasn't really sort of grappled with is ableism.

ANTIONETTE: And the intersection of identities and ableism is [inaudible 17:38]

MERLE: Exactly, right? And I see that as foundational aspect of land and theft of bodies and labor. Because if, in fact, the classification of good bodies is tied to productivity and a means of production, then bodies that are not suited for this system in that way get labeled as bad or not good bodies, or worse, right?

And there's a terrible legacy of ableism in this nation that I see really as tied and foundational as the other isms that we talk a little bit more about. But then, you know, ableism at the intersection, right? Of all the other kinds of identities that people share that are marked in our society, as opposed to those that go unmarked, and unmarked being universally what we see as good, and valuable, and worthy.

ANTIONETTE: Mm-hmm. What's pertinent to note as well in what you're saying is while we're speaking from a United States context, this is applicable to many different countries across the globe. Anti-Blackness is applicable to many different countries across the globe. Ableism is applicable to many different countries across the globe. And yet, there's many rooms I've been in where, you know, folks are saying, "Oh, you're always centering it from an African American perspective."

But we saw with the murder of George Floyd that the movement was global. [laughs] It was not just a United States conversation. And when I still show up in spaces, I'm very honest that I am coming from the perspective of a person in the United States. Because we love to go in other countries to tell them what they need to fix and what they need to do but don't ever want to look in our own backyard and say, "What are the things that we're going to change?" right?

And what I also found important from what you were naming earlier is you talked about this idea of pockets, right? Like, the pockets of change, the community change, like, the importance of being place-based and human-centered in the work that we are doing but



understanding the intersection of many different identities because me showing up as an African American woman, one, I'm not a monolith. There's many different versions of African American women. I come from different geographic background. I've come from many different experiences, because of my cultural heritage, because of my familial history. There's a lot of

things there.

And you kind of equated it to the nature of neighbors. We don't know each other in many cases. I was on a project...I think it was in, like, 2015, where it was around really trying to know your neighbors. And I was one of the first people to raise their hands and be like, look, I don't know who they are. [laughs] I've lived in my house for many years. My husband knows my neighbors. And, you know, sometimes I look at him like, ooh, you friendly [laughs], right?

But there's this nature of we lose the idea of indigenous connection because we don't have the connection of being neighborly. And we don't really understand the importance of unpacking what does it mean to be in a place and how we show up as who we are in a place, right?

And I'm curious, with you, with your work at Everyday Democracy, how do you grapple with diverse histories, diverse cultures, diverse identities when you're giving people the space to really unpack, unlearn, recreate what does democracy mean for all of us, while I'm also kind of being knowledgeable and aware of my living expertise?

MERLE: Yeah, you know, I love that question. Some of the work that we've been doing to reimagine the way we do our work at Everyday Democracy includes engaging from this human-centered idea that the way that our society is constructed, there is the opportunity for folks to have experienced trauma in trying to navigate moving about in a society that is structured with so much inequity.

And so, as a part of our approach to thinking about, you know, how do we get into dialogue, it's really holding and setting the container for the dialogue to happen. So, some of that includes utilizing trauma-informed practices to hold space for folks, using practices that will allow us to ensure that people, however, they show up, can participate. So, if that means being more clear and explicit about access needs and embedding in the way we do our core practices around access, and making it such that everyone has access needs, and so we can destigmatize that piece.



But also, it's going into a conversation recognizing that people from varying backgrounds and experiences are coming into a room but still are inside the same context that creates the space in the room. And so, for that, utilizing a multi-partiality facilitation approach, which allows us to really, as facilitators, hold space for those who are historically left out, left behind, marginalized, silenced in the context of an open dialogue, to ensure that we're not replicating the cultural norms in an inequitable society in which, you know, we're sort of existing and holding this container.

So, the work really, for us, has been about really recognizing what does it mean to create that kind of space as facilitators on that technical level, you know, the multi-partiality, the trauma-informed, and all of that? But then, also, just to think more about the fact that people are moving sometimes from trigger to trigger, and sometimes the responses are just triggered responses. And so, we've circumvented not only our rational mind sometimes in these heated conversations, or debates, or whatever, but we've also circumvented our heart, which is the center of where we have the opportunity to exercise empathy and compassion in the face of observable harm.

I live in New York City. I have been trained over the last 30, some odd years that I've been here to every day override some level of empathy that I have about the economic inequality that exists in this city. That, for me, feels like an important place to lean into as an organization but also as a society that is now sort of disembodied in our connection to our hearts and our empathy for one another and, dare I say, for ourselves.

So, the work of the dialogue, you know, work for us is around, yes, how do we get groups of people together to solve civic problems together that wouldn't normally come together to think about these things? But also, our work that we're building is, how do we bring people together to have the conversations that have been the stumbling blocks to this nation being able to move forward and towards a multiracial, intergenerational, interdependent democracy that recognizes really the philosophy of Ubuntu, that leans into recognizing that we are tied together; we are inextricably linked?

And if we don't begin to lean into our connection, well, I don't know if we will have a planet, you know. But we will struggle, particularly as a nation, if we don't revisit those stumbling block conversations, move our shame into action so that we can transform how we show up with one another on a daily basis.



ANTIONETTE: Now, it's interesting because, you know, you got to the point around the action, right? Because in my work, we talk about how language setting is the first step of any equity-centered, community-centered work. But we also talk about how do you build humility to actually become empathetic? What does it look like to really kind of unpack what you are carrying with you, what you are giving to others, and vice versa right? Like, that is a key component, especially even when you think about the role of power and positionality before you can even get to the action part.

And there's many spaces where if they are doing that, and I say if because some are not even doing that, they stop there. And they don't get to the space of action. So, you know, one side of me wants you to really kind of give me some thoughts on, you know, what does equity and action look like in your work, in your sector?

But then, you also got into the independent democracy part, and maybe these work together. Because we actually, for the last few months, have been working together with, you know, you, myself, some of our young leaders at Creative Reaction Lab. Dope activists, and leaders, and creatives from across the country have been reimagining and redesigning what does democracy look like through the lens of interdependence? And how do we develop framework and guidance to get us to that space?

And what I love—and it is still a work in progress because it always will be—but how differently we all approached it, to think about, one, should we even be calling it democracy? Is that the goal, right? [laughs] But then also, what is the role of nature? What is the role of animal and organic [inaudible 28:51]? What is the role of us? And, you know, the history of it, right?

And so, one side of me wants to go there, and then the other side of me wants to go to equity and action. So, I'm going to have you pick which one do you want to dive deeper into? And I can't promise I won't go back to the other one because I'm not going to let you off the hook. [laughs]

MERLE: Yeah, you know, I mean, what I'll say about equity and action is people need to know what it means.

ANTIONETTE: Yes.



MERLE: We all remember when the work came out around sort of describing habits of White cultural norms or dominant norms that White supremacy...whatever it was called. I can't remember exactly now. And people were like, okay, so, [laughs] if we write something down, that's White supremacy? [laughs]

ANTIONETTE: Yeah, like, the characteristics of White supremacy, Tema Okun, you know, beautiful words. We use it in ours, but yes.

MERLE: Yes. Right. Right. You know, obviously, I'm not trying to minimize that because I believe that the work was seminal in the same way that Peggy McIntosh's Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.

ANTIONETTE: Yes.

MERLE: Right? Was pivotal in that conversation, particularly around finally doing a thing that felt important to me, which is Whiteness as a pathology. And when I say Whiteness as a pathology, I mean the belief in the idea of whiteness and what it comes with as the pathology, not people, right?

And so, this, you know, sort of journey into this world of sort of, like, oh, now we have some language, then that became, oh, you're picking on people, oh, you know. [chuckles] And it is like, some of the best [laughs] experts now are people of color. Because it is a mindset that has been internalized around this myth of the rightful state of the world that we live in. And so, when I think about equity in action, some of that work is, first and foremost, challenging and busting that myth that the inequity that we see in this ideology, in this pathology, is the rightful state [laughs] that should be. So, that's the first thing, right? Because --

ANTIONETTE: The idea of normal and neutrality, right?

MERLE: Right. Exactly.

ANTIONETTE: Like common sense, you know, all of that, right? Yep.

MERLE: Exactly. So, this first part of the equity work is sort of tackling this idea that, hey, this whole thing is a social construct that has material impact. So, I'm not saying it doesn't matter.



What I'm saying is it is constructed for a very particular purpose. And if it had been constructed, it can be deconstructed.

ANTIONETTE: Yes.

MERLE: In that part of the work, you kind of then think about, well, what does it mean to dismantle oppressive systems? Well, as you alluded in the beginning of the conversation, you could take a wrecking ball, and you could knock everything over, and then everybody is just standing in rubble.

ANTIONETTE: Yep.

MERLE: And that's the thing.

ANTIONETTE: That's what some people want --

MERLE: Some people want that. And then, there are people who are like, well, you know, if we can incrementalize our way [laughs] through (I just made that word up.) through all of this, we'll get there eventually. And that is untenable, right? So, you have these two extremes that feel untenable.

And then, I think the third way is what you started to allude to before in our conversation, which is that we can dismantle systems of oppression as we build systems of equity and more just in how they function and operate for folks. Now, have you ever seen them do something called point a building? Have you heard of that?

ANTIONETTE: No, actually, I haven't. No.

MERLE: Okay. So, what I understand pointing a brick building means is that sometimes you have a leak in a building in the bricks, in the section, and you can't find it, you know, whatever. They will take each brick out and put whatever [laughs] they need to, you know, put there to cover and then put the new brick in, and they do it brick by brick. So, they're not tearing down the building, but they are reconstructing the building brick by brick, as they are dismantling the pieces that are failing or the grout, or whatever the stuff is that go in between the bricks have eroded and allow water in. And that's the process is that you know, they take a brick out, and hmm, hmm, hmm, put another brick in, and so on and so forth. And so, the question always needs to be, what are you building?



ANTIONETTE: Yes.

MERLE: What are you building? Because I think that has been a little bit of some of what I think happened in 2020, where there was righteous rage and then the subsequent sort of reckoning of the nonprofit sector. And what the sector was reckoning with was power: how it was held, how it functioned, how it operated. And what were we going to do with it?

ANTIONETTE: Yeah, history of exploitation, you know, like --

MERLE: Exactly.

ANTIONETTE: Should we exist? You know, it's all so many things to unpack. Right.

MERLE: Exactly. For me, the work of doing equity is being able to hold literally the both...and of what needs to happen, which is that really inequitable systems must be dismantled, but you must build something that is inspirational in its place that represents the possibilities of building and having a more just society or institution.

ANTIONETTE: Yes, yes. Oppression doesn't beget oppression, essentially, right? It's kind of, like, when --

MERLE: It's your [inaudible 35:08] right.

ANTIONETTE: If you have been seeped in the culture, you know, it's hard for you to redesign it if you don't unpack first. Because you can easily be rebuilding another form of oppression, right?

MERLE: That's right.

ANTIONETTE: Like, that's literally what could happen. So, I'ma pause you a bit, though, for a second because, whoo, we have been talking about some heavy stuff, right? And I have added this piece into the conversations I've been having with guests, which I want to give us a space of pause.



So, a few colleagues of mine created this framework, you know, coined the term equity pauses. And they put equity pauses in to encourage reflection, humility, [inaudible 35:48], all of that to be mindful that when working in social issues, wicked problems, inequities, injustices, it's a lot of heavy and emotional work and a toll. And so, we need to pause for it.

I'm going to flip it a bit. And I've been asking people to do a liberation pause for me. So, what I'm going to do is I'm going to give you just different categories. And then, I want you to name the first thing that comes to mind for you [laughs] that is liberation in that form for you, right? Not for anyone else. This is for Merle McGee, right? [laughs]

MERLE: Okay. [laughter] Okay.

ANTIONETTE: You don't have to give a monologue. It is all about --

MERLE: Yeah, very quickly.

ANTIONETTE: Keep it moving. Right.

MERLE: Gotchu.

ANTIONETTE: I can tell you're an avid book lover and reader. So, I'm going to start there. When you think of liberation and the word book, what comes to mind for you?

MERLE: Oh my goodness. Definitely Sister Outsider by Audre Lorde. And I'm Not Your Negro by James Baldwin.

ANTIONETTE: Hmm, yes, yes. [laughs] Actually, two wonderful books. I'ma then ask you, what about film?

MERLE: Total Recall. I have been on a Total Recall type of thing. I just found out that there's a remake of it. I didn't know that.

ANTIONETTE: Yes.

MERLE: I'm talking about the original version with Schwarzenegger.



ANTIONETTE: Yes. With [inaudible 37:22], not the one with, I think, with Colin Farrell, I think is when they --

MERLE: I don't even know that one. I'm going to have to look it up. But I just recently heard that. But, for me, Total Recall because I think it really captures the story of underground resistance in the face of overwhelming control and domination, down to the point of the air that you breathe, and what happens when we allow corporations to dictate what humanity has or doesn't have and then who gets left out. Because, in my mind, I was like, the mutants are Black people. [laughter]

ANTIONETTE: I love it.

MERLE: You know, or working-class folks or working poor, anyone who is dispossessed by inequitable structures and societies. So yeah, that's Total Recall for me. And then, I just love when that glitch is like, ma'am, are you getting on the plane? And then, the thing just, like, opens up --

ANTIONETTE: Oh yeah, that's a great scene. That's such a good scene. I love that scene. They did something similar but did a spin on it in the new one because I've seen the new one too. You got to check it out. What about a plant?

MERLE: You know, I'm falling in love with the ZZ plant. There's lots of things. I could talk about the Aspen tree forest all day long. But the reason why I love the ZZ plant is that it is beautiful and low maintenance.

ANTIONETTE: [laughs] Amen. Yay. That is my type of plant because I --

MERLE: And you know what? You kind of need that to sustain a movement: beauty, you need joy, and to be a little bit low maintenance. So, the threshold isn't so high that you have to reach in order to have that joy.

ANTIONETTE: I support this holistically. I've killed succulents, okay? [laughs] So [laughs], like, Amen to that.

A historic person or a historic designer for justice who comes up for you when it comes to liberation.



MERLE: My mind goes to Black, queer feminists [laughs], you know.

ANTIONETTE: Okay. I love how you picked a whole group. [laughs]

MERLE: Yeah. You know, I'm like, you know, my mind goes to, for this moment that we're in, the dreamers, the architects of the current manifestations, and the Cara Pages, and Erica Woodlands, and, you know, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, and Adrienne Maree Brown, and so on and so forth. Really, right? It's The Combahee River Collective, right? This group of folks women, right? Black women, Black, queer, feminist women who recognized the importance of putting words to the experience but not just words, putting an analysis.

So, the question around equity, right? What do you need? You need an analysis, and you need a commitment to recognize that the past is the present and that that's what you are attending to as you move in the work of doing.

ANTIONETTE: Okay. Color.

MERLE: Most of all, I love all the blues. And the reason why I love all of the blues is because it reminds me of Yemaya, the ocean. And I really love dark blue because that reminds me of the depths of the ocean, the places and things that are completely...the mysteries, you know, that we'll never know what's at the bottom of the ocean. So, I love blues. I love all the blues.

ANTIONETTE: Okay, last one in our first round. Your choice, when you think of liberation, what comes up for you?

MERLE: I'll say Capoeira Angola, in particular. That's the art form that I have trained in over the years. And I say Capoeira because it is an art that was not supposed to survive, but it did 500 years. And the fact that people are playing Capoeira Angola and Afro-indigenous martial arts, but African arts [laughs], martial art all over the world, and that 500, 400 years later, I'm doing it as an affirmation not only of the art itself and those who kept it but an affirmation of my own humanity in the process and my connection to that lineage, that's liberation. Capoeira is [Foreign Language] Like, it is the liberation

ANTIONETTE: Look, I'm about to go to class with you. Like, [laughs] we have to go together. I love it. It brings me so much joy. Like, you're bringing my liberation and just, like, bringing that



history in. And yeah, I always love the way you are answering these questions. It brings me so much joy.

So, let's just jump back in. Thank you for taking the liberation pause with me. I want to go back to the point you brought up about point it, right? Like the pointed, and the bricks, and going brick by brick. So, it reminds me a bit of what I talk about a lot around how equity to me is cathedral building.

So, some people, when they hear, they're like, "Ooh, tell me more," right? Because I'm like, whether religious or not, let's think about the process of cathedral building. Cathedrals, the physical manifestation of them, took hundreds of years. And the individuals that created and the first plans that were laying the first bricks and using the different mortars and materials they, understood that they would never see the final piece. But they believed in the work so much that they understood the role that they were playing.

But also, like, these physical buildings, if you don't sustain them, if you don't take care of them, it deteriorates over time. That's how I view equity because some people talk about equity like it's a stopgap. Like, we have an equitable society. Check, right? But we see that even with what's happening in policy where people assume that certain policies can't be overturned. And that's the work of equity is that this is a sustainable approach and work that started with our ancestors and will continue with our descendants, right?

And so, with that, I'm going to ask you an ambiguous, but I feel like you can handle it question. So, thinking about the idea of bricks, thinking about the cathedral that is equity, what is your brick in the cathedral of equity?

MERLE: Hmm. And I love that you put it that way because one of the things I always try to tell people is, get in where you fit in. You can't be the ceiling, the wall, the gargoyle, the -- [laughter].

ANTIONETTE: Yeah. You're right.

MERLE: You can't be all the things, right? But when you recognize that if you are in your lane, and on purpose, and holding steady, you are essential to the whole structure, that's what keeps the building up, that all the bricks agree that we gon do our part.



ANTIONETTE: Right. [laughter]

MERLE: For the work that we're really trying to bring into the world at Everyday Democracy is the importance of being able to have good dialogue, not a discussion. I go, you go, I go, you...where I don't you...I go, I go, you go, you go, you know, all the time. But even discussion it's like, I go, you go, and...but a dialogue that allows us to pause, be embodied, recognize that we are present to the humanity in ourselves and in others, and to lean into what are those possibilities.

What comes out of the possibility of my seeing and being in my full humanity and being and seeing you in your full humanity? Recognizing that there may be ideological things that we are going to not see eye to eye on all the time but that there is a possibility that we can be to each other what we need to be to each other, which is fellow [inaudible 45:53] on this very brief moment that we have on this rock, right? Where we're not actively harming one another, as the condition of being seen, heard, valued, or respected.

I think the work of Everyday Democracy is really teaching people how to engage with one another towards social action. It's not dialogue, for dialogue's sake. It's to what end? How do we understand the issue that we're trying to solve civically better from multiple perspectives, centering those who are most impacted? Because we know they hold the central information but also solutions around how to transform systems, you know, by the very fact that they're navigating and surviving them all the time. Like, that's really the work of Everyday Democracy. How do we get in good conversation with folks?

ANTIONETTE: Right. So, I'm going to challenge you a bit.

MERLE: Please do.

ANTIONETTE: So, that's Everyday Democracy's brick. What's yours?

MERLE: Oh, my brick. Oh, me? Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't understand the question.

ANTIONETTE: No need to apologize because here's the thing, I want people to know about the work of Everyday Democracy because it's profound work, right? Like, there's not many spaces that are talking about independent democracies, right? Like, I think that's important to unpack. And I also want people to understand who's Merle, the redesigner for justice.



MERLE: I tell the truth. I seek the truth. I am not afraid to lean into it. And I'm not afraid to take people along on the journey to grapple with it. It's like I said at the gathering when we...like Bernice Johnson Reagon said, when there's a promise of a storm, if you want change in your life, walk into it. If you get to the other side, you will be different. So wade in the water because it's going to be troubled water.

My work has always been to wade in the water and to encourage and inspire folks to wade in that troubled water with the faith and knowing that we got this. We have the capacity. We have the humanity. We have the compassion. We have empathy. We have the wisdom and the discernment. If we could make it, it can be unmade. If we learned it, it can be unlearned.

And so, that, for me, feels like my purpose, to really be able to carry people through what feels like contentious situations where they're not sure if they're going to make it [laughter] if it's going to, like, you know, are we all going to fall apart? Is this just going to go to hell? And [laughs], you know, and then we find out, hey, guess what? We made it. And we are transformed as a result of it because we went into that space trusting and believing in ourselves and our own ability to transform and change our minds, change our hearts, change the way we think we understand the world around us.

ANTIONETTE: Hmm, what's your biggest I don't know right now?

MERLE: If any of this is going to work. I'm just playing. [laughter]

ANTIONETTE: Look, speak for all of us because let's be clear, there is no path of equity. We are trying to figure it out, okay? [laughs]

MERLE: We are trying to imagine a world that we don't remember. It may be in our ancestral collective memory, but it's so far back. [laugh] We're trying to grasp at it. We're like, what? Huh? You know, I was thinking the other day, like, what would life be like if we didn't have to, like, work to be worthy of a home? Like, come on, y'all. What is that? Like, that's wild.

So, I think that the biggest I don't know is what I think anybody would, I guess, say in the moment where a lot of things are in flux. We have never, to my mind, been in the moment that we are as a nation today, as we have been since 1865, when we got to make a decision



about how we wanted to move as a society. And they made a choice, the right one. Went on record with that [laughs], right?

But I think we're back at that moment where we're getting to have a chance to decide, do we want to build this multiracial, intergenerational, interdependent, democracy? Or do we want more of what we have, which doesn't work for a huge swath of people? And even the people who think that it's working for them, it ain't working for them either. Because the psychological wages of Whiteness does not give you universal health care. It doesn't give you quality education. It doesn't guarantee you clean water, houses.

So, like, that, I think, is the question that I have. I don't know how all this is going to turn out. But I got to keep running. I got to keep going. I got to keep doing my part. Because if there's a chance that it could work out, I want to say that I was a part of it. No, I'm just playing. [laughter] No, I just want to...I want to play my brick. You know, I want to be my brick.

ANTIONETTE: Yeah. I want to be a part of the legacy building, right? Like, that's so important. I want to close on this question that I think is flowing a bit from where you were naturally already going, which is wonderful. We don't know what indigenous culture looked like. We're trying to get connected. We're trying to learn. We're listening to, you know, elders, you know, trying to get that. And 100 years from now, our descendants may be thinking the exact same thing.

So, I'm curious for you; let's imagine we're in the year 2123. What's different about the world for our descendants? How has it been reimagined and redesigned to give them and us what we mean for joy and liberation?

MERLE: Joy is your birthright, and that we've built a society that is constructed around the belief that your birthright is to be cared for, well-loved, joyful, able to apply your gifts and your talents to the construction of the society that you're living in. And that we have governance systems, and societal norms, and values that are rooted in the belief that just because you're here, you're worthy. That's what I would wish. What's possible stems from that kernel of truth.

ANTIONETTE: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. This was such a great dialogue [laughs] and conversation. But it's been a pleasure to have you on the Reimagining and Redesigning podcast. Thank you. Thank you for saying yes, and for giving us just a sliver of that brain



because there's so much [laughs] more in there. But it's been a pleasure, and I'm excited to see what you do next.

MERLE: Oh, thank you. Well, we're on this journey together, so we're going to be together. We'll be there.