

**Episode #:** 1

**Executive Producer:** Emilia Nielsen

**Producers:** Emily Blyth and Coco Nielsen

**Music:** [Prince Shima](#)

**Episode Title:** Telling Stories to Change Systems

**Guest:** [Dr. Syrus Marcus Ware](#)

**Release Date:** February 1st 2023

**Website:** [EmiliaNielsen.com](#)

## Transcript

(References included below)

**Syrus Marcus Ware (SW):** Well the first thing I would say, absolutely, is it turns out, you don't actually have to pick one medium and only do that for your whole life – thank goodness! Life is way more exciting than that!

[Music: Ascending, bright, twinkly, uplifting, electronic]

**Emily Blyth (EB):** This is *On Being III*, a show about creativity, disability and identity. I'm your host, Emily Blyth.

[Music grows then fades]

I'm not usually in the hosting chair, as I work behind the scenes as a producer here at *On Being III*, but for today's episode I'm excited to slide on over and share a conversation I had with activist, artist, and scholar Syrus Marcus Ware. You may know Syrus from his extensive prison abolitionist work or from his integral role as co-founder of Black Lives Matter Toronto. Or, you may have seen his larger-than-life hand drawn Activist Portrait Series. Then again, maybe you started following him on social media for content that both makes you laugh and offers actual fodder for the revolution. But no matter how you encountered Syrus or his work, if you've had the pleasure to, you know he is an absolutely beautiful force to be reckoned with. I'm lucky enough to have sat down with Syrus to talk disability justice, how to turn towards the things you love, and why building care into everything you do is the only way to go. Here's that conversation.

**EB:** It would be great if you could start us off by introducing yourself, sharing your pronouns and maybe sharing anything else that strikes you as important to say off the top by way of an introduction.

**SW:** Great. My name is Syrus Marcus ware. And I'm an artist and activist, a scholar, a parent, and someone who really loves trying to use creative methods to address systems change and social change. I use the pronouns he/him. I'm a mad, trans, and disabled person, and very proud to be part of my communities.

**EB:** Thank you so much, and quite expansive communities that you are a part of through this activism and your scholarly work and your creative works as well. I want to take some time just to thank you for that energy. And for the inspiration it's brought me in my own work, where I was first introduced to your work through the performance and engagement workshops: "Activist Love Letters." So I noticed on your website that you have run one of these workshops since our first lockdown in Toronto for the COVID 19 pandemic. And given the importance of connection that was already embedded in the project, I was wondering if you could tell us about how the COVID 19 pandemic has shaped this experience working with this project for you and perhaps beginning by describing the project for our listeners who may not be familiar.

**SW:** Absolutely. So "Activist Love Letters" began in 2012. It was first performed at the Feminist Art Gallery in Tkaronto, or colonially known as Toronto. And the project is an attempt to get people to be more connected – more interconnected – as we learn in disability justice, that interconnectedness and inter-reliance is essential to survival in the future. And it tries to give some support to activists in our communities who are advocating and fighting for social change, fighting for better conditions, and fighting for justice, by creating connections between strangers with these activists who are doing this tireless work in our communities. I wanted to create a project that would bring people together with activists, but also have just strangers talking to each other, which I think we don't do enough of. It's a love letter project. So I invite...well first I begin the performance by reading aloud from letters that activists have written to each other. Well known activists like James Baldwin writing to Angela Davis, when she was in prison; like Leonard Peltier and Mumia Abu Jamal's letters that they've written back and forth in support of each other's cases, while they're both incarcerated. Letters that Les Feinberg wrote in support of CeCe McDonald. And the like. And then I invite strangers to write a love letter to someone in their community who's doing work to make systems change happen. And if they don't know an activist in their community, I've got bios that I've typed up and I string them up sort of like a clothesline with clothes pegs holding up the bios. And people can go around and find someone who's working on an issue that they find is in synergy with what they're interested in. And they can write them a letter. Sometimes it's a long letter, many, many pages long. Sometimes it's a short letter that just says, "Oh, by the way, I love you," you know, "thank you so much for what you're doing." And now I've been doing the project for 11 years and I've mailed over 1000 letters all around the world – to the Philippines, to Japan, all over the States, South America, the continent of Africa, Australia, all over. I've never mailed a letter to Antarctica, but maybe that will happen at some point. And it's been amazing to get responses. I included a mailing address, so I get responses back from people. And we begin these conversations and dialogues. And this project actually inspired other projects that I've done, like the Activist Portrait Series, and the Activist Wallpaper Series, because I was getting these responses from the people that we were writing to, and I wanted to get to know them better. So I started drawing them as well. But yeah, it's been an amazing project, I'm really thankful for the chance to do it. And so because the project is so much about reaching out across distance, doing it during a pandemic has, you know, it's really actually lended itself well to this phenomenon. We did digital iterations of this project, including working with my colleague, Dr. Stephanie Springgay, and she hosted a series of workshops and performances online. And we did an activist love letter performance as part of that. And I got people over zoom, to connect with each other, first of all, from very different

locations, and then to read aloud letters to these people who I had gathered, and then invited them to write letters to people in their communities. And then they went out and mailed them. That was the one big change, with doing it in a pandemic, because normally, I collect the letters at the end, and I mail them. And in this case, people mailed their own letters, which was the first time. But it worked really well doing it digitally. And I think it was really interesting, bringing people together from very different communities. Often the performances happen in one community and the community members are all, you know, sort of coming together in one place. In this situation, there were people who had tuned in to the zoom from all over the world who were then going out and writing the letters. It was really great.

**EB:** Wow, that sounds so impactful. And I'm wondering, too, about the ways that...thinking about the portrait series, you've done as well. And if I'm not mistaken, these portraits that you created of these activists, they were 12 feet tall some of them. So big, big pieces of art. And so I'm thinking now about the ways that having somebody read out this love to you in a room online would make you feel seen. And having these portraits done as well, would make you feel seen in a way that I think maybe both artists and activists can sometimes be reluctant to really identify as the artist or as the activist with this sense of, am I doing enough to call myself this identity? And I just think it's wonderful that both of these projects are able to, in a time of disconnect, bring these really important individuals to the forefront and bring love into their life for the work that they're doing. I wonder if you could speak to seeing that impact and how that translated for the people who were seeing their own portraits or having these letters read to them?

**SW:** Yeah, I've been doing this Activist Portrait Series as I say, shortly after I started getting responses from the activist love letters. And you're right, they're huge. They're six feet by 12 feet, five feet by seven feet: very, very large – larger than life – portraits. And it's been amazing to get to draw people. It's a super realism. So it's a graphite and paper, but in a super realist style, so it looks like a photograph; it looks like the person. I think a lot of the portraits are inviting to the audience; it kind of draws them in, in part because people are in these poses that are familiar, these poses of life. Because, I interview people while I take their photographs, and I ask them particular questions. I've asked all of the people that I've drawn the same three questions: I've asked them to talk about how they got involved in organizing, which is actually not the most interesting question, but it makes their face do particular things, and I take lots of photos. And then I ask them, if they could travel through time and space, to any point in human history to get involved in a social movement, where would they go and when would they go and why? And they kind of do this sort of speculative, speculative fiction face. And their face changes. And then I ask them if they could describe for me in words the feeling that they get when they first realize that they're falling in love. And then their faces do particular things. And I take lots and lots of photographs. And then I draw from these photographs. I listen to the audio of their answers, while I'm doing the drawings to really bring them into the room. In earlier times people would sit for their portraits, often very particular people. Portraiture is implicated in, you know, power and privilege, in a big way. Who got their portrait painted, had a lot to do with how much power they had in society. This project reframes the painting frame around different people, around people who I think are really deserving of that honour. But anyways, we have these busy activists who absolutely can't sit for 72 hours while I draw them, so I take

photographs. So I listen to audio, so that I can bring them into the room while I'm drawing them so that it can still feel like that experience of having a sitting. And yeah, it's been amazing to just get to do this. I've done many portraits at this point, maybe 40, or 50 portraits, and have shown them around. And I've been playing with the portraits, manipulating them digitally as well and making some wallpapers. And that's been really exciting to sort of play with that. So that's the Activist Wallpaper Series, which takes these graphite drawings and turns them into digital archives that then get changed and transformed again. So I'm really interested in playing with that. And this idea that the people...you know, there's this one portrait I have of Queen Tite Opaleke, who is an activist – disability justice activist – who was based in treaty three in Winnipeg, and now is here in Toronto. And there's this image of her with her face, sort of in, I guess, rapture, or ecstasy. I think she was talking about love, or maybe she was talking about time travel, but she's thrown her hands up, and she's just in this moment. And a lot of people say, "I want to get to know her better," when they see the portrait. And I think that's the reaction that a lot of the portraits create, is this desire. This is what I mean about being sort of pulled into the activist story. And hopefully, that desire to want to get to know these people better, will translate into care, into actual care in our communities, so that we can care for these people who are making systems change possible and real, allowing us to move into a future that is so much more just than the present that we're living in now. So that's what the portrait series has been. You know, I've really been so thankful to these activists who have trusted me with their image, who have let me draw them. I've recently started doing some digital drawings of activists. I just did a large wallpaper that's at Harbourfront Centre, that is a portrait of Courage Bacchus who is a black deaf Olympian, an actor and performer. She's incredible. And so I did a digital portrait of her, which was fun to play in that medium. And I partnered her image with this image of echinacea – purple coneflower – this healing medicine repeated over and over again in this wallpaper.

**EB:** Wow, there's so much going on underneath those portraits and in this research process. And in some ways, it's no surprise for me to hear that there's so much story behind each of these portraits, and that you've really focused on trying to translate that sense of story through the work and hopefully, beyond that into a sense of care. It does feel like story is a central part of your work. Some examples I can think of are the stories that you have shared about the historic and ongoing activist history in Turtle Island, such as the work that you co-edited with Sandy Hudson and Rodney Diverlus. So that was *Until We Are Free: Reflections on Black Lives Matter in Canada*, a book that came out originally in 2020. And I have heard many people say and will agree, I think, every Canadian should spend some time with this book and some time with this book in their hearts. As well, I see this comes out in the ways that your activism engages with speculative fiction, which is something that we've already kind of brushed on today and the ways that your work has imagined new societies through for example, *Antarctica*. I wonder what draws you towards story and how do the narrative frameworks that you employ impact your activism and your scholarly practice.

**SW:** Thank you so much for your generous feedback on *Until We Are Free*. We loved working on that book project, it was a project that grew out of community, was created by community – because community authored these chapters. And it was just so beautiful to get to do that

project with Sandy and Rodney, who I love dearly, and who have been able to be shoulder to shoulder in the frontlines, doing direct action together. But the chance to sit back and reflect was so essential. And especially for that book, with so much being written and said about Black Lives Matter, not directly from us, but actually about us, we wanted a chance to sort of really document what was happening from the people who were at the center of the organizing, which was our community. So people wrote about mothering in the movement, people wrote about queer and trans people in the movement, people wrote about art in the movement, Black and Indigenous solidarity; really beautiful to get to experience that. And yeah, I'm a storyteller fundamentally, you know, I definitely love telling story. My grandmother is 95 now, and she told us stories every night, you know, when we get ready for bed and, and storytelling, and reading was really a big part of our growing up, and our childhood. And I remember, you know, taking creative writing courses, first in high school, and then in university, and wondering, you know – I thought you had to choose – so I wondered, should I be a writer, should I be an artist – a visual artist – you know. And I really felt torn, because I thought that you had to pick one thing. And so I initially went down the road of visual art, and was doing painting and drawing and performance art for many, many years, and then realized, wait a minute, there's stories here that are part of this, that need to be told; there are stories that are coming out of me that need to be told. And I first started telling stories as children's literature. My first couple of books actually were...although I had written academic chapters, and of course I had done academic writing...but some my first books were children's books I wrote for Flamingo Rampant, which is an indie press – queer press – here in Tkaronto, and also has a footprint in the States. And then went on to creating books for adults, for other audiences. And it's been amazing to get to tell these stories in this way. And then, you know, the opportunity came up to do a studio visit with the curators for the Toronto Biennial. And this was just before the first biennial, maybe two years before the first Biennial, which happened in 2019. So in 2017 or so, we had this studio visit. And I met with Tairone Bastien, and Candice Hopkins, Katie Lawson. And we talked about my practice. And I was telling them about the drawings. And I was telling them about the love letters. And I was telling them about all of these other things that I had been doing. And they said at the end of the studio visit, "Is there something that you want to do that you don't feel that you've had the time or energy to focus on? Is there anything that you're really excited about, but that you would love some dedicated time and resources to dive into?" And I said, "Well, I'm going to tell you something I've never told anyone but I'm actually writing a story about Antarctica." And I hadn't told anybody that. I had been writing it here and there, little bits when I had time. Because I had read this interesting news tidbit, which was that people had been born in Antarctica – sent there to stake a future land claim. And so I was like, "whaaaa?" So I started writing this story, which I thought was going to become a novel. So I said, "I'm writing this novel, and it's about Antarctica." "That. that's the project we want to support." That's what they told me. They said, "We want to support whatever it ends up becoming, we want to support this project." And I decided to make it into a play. And that became my first play, which was *Antarctica*, which was followed up by *Mary Birdland Freedom*, which was part two of the play, which happened in the Toronto biennial 2022. I also then wrote the play *Emmett* which was featured on CBC gem and Obsidian Theatres 21 Black Futures Project, and it was on CBC gem for a year in the year 2021. And then have now written a new play called *Does That Make Me Crazy?*, which is premiering at SummerWorks this summer. And it's been great telling stories in that way, where

you get to tell a story that someone doesn't just go away and read, but that actors bring to life through their creativity and through their process. And I've had the opportunity to work with some incredible actors: Yousef Cateura and Ravyn Wngz and Dainty Smith and Heath Salazar, through the *Antarctica* and biennial projects. And I'm now working with this incredible cast for *Does That Make Me Crazy?* and getting to tell story, again with humans at the center.

[Music: Quick, light, percussion, descending keyboard, minor tones, chill]

**EB:** Incredible. I have so many different thoughts, just the number of projects that you work on... I actually am sitting here beside me with a copy of one of the books that you illustrated which...the illustrations are just beautiful. So this is *I promise*. And it's written by Catherine Hernandez, illustrated by Syrus Marcus Ware. And one thing I wanted to ask you today, Syrus, thinking about the different forms that your creative practice takes – if there's any advice that you might share with students, or people who would consider themselves maybe emerging researchers or emerging creative individuals? What would you say to students who are looking for ways to bring more of their whole selves into their practice, given the sometimes restricting paradigms of academic institutions, and thinking about embracing creative and crip practice identity, for example, or, or saying, you know, "I've started with books for children. And now I'm going to orient myself towards books for adults. And now this thing that I thought might be a book is actually going to be a play," and it just seems emergent and fluid and so responsive. So I wonder what you might say.

**SW:** The first thing I would say absolutely, is, it turns out, you don't actually have to pick one medium, and only do that for your whole life. Thank goodness! Life is way more exciting than that. So you can be a multidisciplinary artist. And more and more, we're starting to see support for that. We're starting to see funding through the arts councils for multidisciplinary. I teach at McMaster University as an assistant professor in a new program that is an interdisciplinary program called iArts. We're seeing more training, more opportunities for people to get to work in and around and in between, and the spaces between these mediums. So one: you don't have to be an artist, or a writer, you can be both, which is great. So I would just say, don't feel that you have to pick one thing, you can follow your creativity and see where the story is. Is this story a sculpture? Is this story a song? Is this story a play? You know, you get to decide and play around in a bunch of different mediums. So that's the first thing I would say. And the second thing I would say is that it's amazing to get to work with community members. And I would just say, building care into your practice from the beginning, when you start your practice, as an artist, building care in...You're going to be pressured with time, with budget, with resources, to do things fast, and to do things in a rushed way. And that is not the most conducive for supporting community in a process. You want to build extra time in, and extra care. I believe in routing all of our work in disability justice frameworks, and disability justice, as articulated by Patty Berne and the folks at Sins Invalid, necessarily involves things like interdependence, which is this radical idea that isn't so radical at all, which is that we can take care of each other, that we can commit to taking care of each other. So what would that look like in a play? Well, maybe it doesn't look like eight hours of rehearsal a day, maybe taking care of each other, looks like shorter rehearsals, more breaks, you know, more pauses. Maybe taking care of each other

allows the actors to sort of innovate some of their movement so that it works with their bodies. You know, the care can look in these different ways. So I always have food at my rehearsals and things like that. With the Activist Portrait Series, I'd be like, "Come and have this conversation with me, I'm gonna take your photograph, AND bring you lunch." And I would bring them lunch and, you know, eat with them and build care into the practice, because that's part of how you help to support your community. And so really, just building care into how you do the work will not only allow community members to be respected and to be cared for in the process, but it will allow you as an artist to have a long career because you're not going to burn yourself out, you know, by the time you're 27. You're going to be able to continue working because you built in care for yourself as well. So that's something that I think is really important. And then I would say you know, do what you love. It can be very tempting to get pulled into maybe taking a bunch of commissions and drawing things that other people want you to draw. But if you don't love it...if you love it, then keep doing that. But if you don't love it, turn towards the things that you love to do. Maybe it turns out what you love to do is singing acapella on a tightrope above a circus tent. Find out where you can do that and go and do it and see what comes of following what you love. And you mentioned this idea of emergence, and I love following the great mystery. You know, this life is a wild one, we're in a multiverse. There are many, many universes potentially. And, you know, wild and magical things can happen in this place. We live in this beautiful, beautiful planet that is so full of life. And so full of mystery, and mysterious life. Why not follow it? Why not listen to that mystery? So I'm a big believer in emergence. We actually just did a choreographic exploration for my new play *Does That Make Me Crazy?* And with the actors, I was like, "Let's try just playing for the first 20 minutes and see what comes. See what your body wants to do when you hear the music. When you hear the lyrics. You know, what is your body calling you to move...you know, how does your body move?" And we just went with an emergent strategy. There's that Adrienne Maree Brown book...but that emergent, you know, quality. And it made this beautiful choreography that we're now using in the place. So: following the great mystery and just being wowed by what is here on this planet; doing what you love; caring for your community members; and not feeling that you have to stick with just one way of making your story told or making your art project visible.

[Music: High-pitched, happy, reverberating electronic percussion and keyboard]

**EB:** Oh, what an important and really hopeful reminder. I can feel – as a relatively new PhD student myself – I can't feel my body responding to that answer. And a sigh, that perhaps I've been holding in since my MA defense, is shuddering through me just thinking about these reflections on doing things with care, in community, with joy. And not because a certain timeline has said. So a really, really important reminder, thank you so much for that Syrus. And I wonder as well about the ways that, in order to follow these creative joys, sometimes we really do need space for that one thing that you're thinking about that you haven't had time for and where we find that space as creative people, as artists. And so actually already on this season of *On Being III* we spoke with Jenna Reidd about the upcoming residency in the islands in Tkaronto. And I believe that the name of this residency is "TAKE ROOT AMONG THE STARS: A mad, deaf, and disabled arts residency." I'd love to hear more about what this project means for you and what kind of opportunities it's creating.

**SW:** Thank you. Yeah. So of course, we get this title that comes from Octavia Butler, who was disabled and, you know, ended up dying actually of cancer. Well, she fell on her doorstep, but as a result of this illness that she experienced. And she wrote in *Parable of the Sower* that the destiny of earth seed was to take root amongst the stars. And it just seems like such a beautiful prophecy or manifestation – for those of us who are mad, deaf and disabled – to imagine that we get to live on and we get to take root amongst the stars. That she is literally amongst the stars because an astronomical phenomena was named after her...I think it was Octavia Butler station. But she literally is taking root amongst the stars and looking down on us here on Earth. And sort of existing in this otherworldly space. This residency is a chance to come together as mad, deaf, and disabled people to have dedicated time to make work, which is something that for a lot of crip artists, we aren't given that opportunity or we don't have that opportunity. A lot of residency spaces and art spaces are inaccessible. They often prioritize non-deaf, non-mad, and non-disabled artists in their sort of roster, and their sort of curatorial vision. And so there's a lot of people who have great ideas for projects, but they just aren't being given the opportunity and space. And so we wanted to make a space that was by us, for us – which is also something that comes out of disability justice, this idea – and that was sort of rooted in disability, mad and deaf justice. And said, “What would you do if you had two weeks: to dream together, to be together, to work on your own projects and your own practice in this community of practice and care?” I love doing things at Artscape Gibraltar Point. I've done many, many programs there – both as a resident but also facilitating programs there. And it's a space that is so specific and so special in Tkaronto, because it is a place that for thousands of years people have done ceremony, and people have come together and people have gathered as part of the trade routes that were here. And so this land, this place is a beautiful, magical special place that actually is unceded – it's the unceded territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit. And to be able to come together on this land and be able to do something that involves being part and one with all of our relations that are there is really, I think, really important and essential to be specifically doing it in that location. And then it's this art space, which has this creative legacy where so many great things have come out of. I used to love watching The Kids in the Hall and I loved “Shadowy men on the Shadowy Planet.” And they actually recorded many of their albums at Artscape Gibraltar Point and one of the studios there is called “Shadowland Studio,” named after this “Shadowy Man on the Shadowy Planet.” So really beautiful artistic history in that space. And I'm excited to be bringing together these folks with Jenna Reid, who is such an incredible mad artist, practitioner, creator, academic – just doing such amazing work in this world. And to be able to come together with our communities and say what can we make together over these next two weeks, I think is going to be really great. And again, just rooting it in this Black justice, disability justice, of Octavia Butler. And we will – we'll spend time together under the stars, taking root.

[Music: Uplifting choral voices, punctuated melodic string instrument, peppy electronic clapping sounds]

**EB:** I'm so looking forward to hearing more about that. And wishing you all the best. I think this is going to be, as you said, situated in the right space, right time, right way. And I was so inspired by the conversation we had with Jenna Reid, that I know listeners will have access to

as well. So amazing to have the two of you guys working together and then quite by accident, both together on the same season of our podcast. So things do just come together at times.

**SW:** Emergence.

**EB:** Exactly, exactly. Now, thinking a little bit more about Octavia Butler, I do know that her writing has been of great importance to your work. And I was wondering if you've been reading anything these days that has been resonating for you in this kind of global moment or in your own life and anything that you would like to share with our listeners?

**SW:** I've recently been a PhD student. And I graduated in 2021. And you know how it is, when you're in school, you do so much academic reading, so many chapters, so much stuff for your comps, it can be hard to find the time or the rhythm to pick up pleasure reading afterwards. So that's definitely, you know, been my reality. So it's been such a pleasure to get back to reading and to get back to reading things that kind of inspire me, and that sort of give me a little bit of hope and possibility. I've been reading both *We Will Not Cancel Us* by Adrienne Maree Brown and also her new book *Grievors*, which is fiction and tells a story about this Black town where only Black people can feel grief. And, really exciting to be reading Adrienne's new work. And I'm really looking forward to continuing to dive in. I'm reading...I read a lot slower now ever since I had COVID. And I also read a lot slower now ever since I did my PhD, just because I kind of got burnt out on reading. I used to read really quickly. But it is what it is, it's just a pleasure to get to be back at it. I'm also really looking forward to *There are Disabled People in the Future* [actual title: *The Future is Disabled*]. I got to pre-read that book because I was blurbing the book – the new book by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha. And that comes out this fall. And I can't wait to read it again. And to really sink my teeth into it. And to just get to experience this story. And then I've been working on an anthology of short stories about the future. And so I've been reading unpublished – as yet unpublished – stories that activists and systems change people and artists have written about the future. And that has been so exciting just to get to sort of read these dreams of what might be coming in the next 100 years. So it's been this little mix of, I guess, a lot of speculative fiction, but also, I think Leah's book is also this sort of tool: how do we make sure that there are disabled people in the future? And so it's a bit of a how-to as well and I've loved reading it.

**EB:** Oh, I am clearing my reading list. Thank you so much for sharing with us. Now, you've shared a little bit with us about the new play that you have underway at SummerWorks. And I believe that you also have a new creative project, *Tangled*, underway, which is a solo show. I'd love to hear more about these projects: how they came about, the motivation behind each.

**SW:** You know it's funny that I'm talking...“what's your advice to listeners?” “Oh, build care into your process.” And then I go out and do, like, way more projects in one month than is necessary. So yes, I definitely like to be busy. And I like to... I have so many ideas and so much that I want to do, I find myself doing project after project. So this summer has been a very busy one. But just so amazing. I mean, when you get to immerse yourself in your practice and, and just just be in it, just be creating, you know, I've done a lot of presentation lately, because I was

presenting my work at the Biennial and presenting my work at exhibitions across the country. But to be in creation mode, to be building and creating is really exciting. So I feel very, really, really thankful for the chance to be able to do that. And so yeah, I've been making this play *Does That Make Me Crazy?* which tells the story about a mixed race family, Black liberation, prison abolition, and centers around this trans character who is psychiatrized, and who slowly throughout the play advocates for Mad Justice, while at the same time decides to sort of let go and let the crazy out and be as crazy as he wants to be. And that play has been beautiful to get to work on. I'm working with Samson Bonkeabantu Brown, as the main character, and Amelia Ehrhardt, Lee Cunningham – a whole cast and crew of people. And it's been really great working on that. And then the show for *Tangled* is – so this is what I mean, you get to do many different mediums in your career and just go for all of them! Follow your heart into the directions that you're desiring to go to. So this play in the summer is obviously theatrical. And then in the fall, I'll be doing a solo show at Tangled, as yet untitled, which features an intergenerational multidimensional story, where when you first come into the gallery, you'll actually get to hear the audio of my grandmother at 95 reading aloud from a children's story that she wrote for us when we were kids called *The mouse and the magic mushroom*. And it tells the story about a little field mouse who has a particular adventure in his meadow or valley that he lives in. And then you'll move through a portal in the gallery and enter into the space that the mouse goes into once he eats the magic mushroom. And you'll get to see beautiful, large-scale portraits of multi-dimensional queer, trans, mad, deaf and disabled beings who are vibrant and colorful and it'll be these large-scale photographs that take up an entire wall of these sort of beautiful images. There's also going to be some artist multiples and takeaways that go along with a story that will be written on the wall of the gallery, that is this sort of multidimensional speculative future story about these beings that you get to encounter when you're in the gallery. So it's been great, I get to bring storytelling and visual art together and get to work in photography, which I don't often do as an end result. Often I use photography as a strategy to get towards drawing. But in this situation, I wanted to just play with the vibrancy, play with the colour, and have this really beautiful, vibrant story told through these photographs. So I got to photograph Tracy Tidgwell, Vanessa Reed, Sandy Hudson, Ajna Warehuff and some other folks as these multi-dimensional beings. So they're all organizers, activist, artists, in 2022, Tkaronto. And in this other world, they become these magical beings that exist in another dimension. And so that exhibition will be running in the fall. And I'm really looking forward to the story, to this idea that in other dimensions, there are deaf, mad, disabled people. In these other dimensions, there are fat people, there are Black people, there are young people, you know, there are trans people – that we all get to exist in all dimensions, in all of the multiverses that exist in this place that we live in, that we don't quite know, or are able to make sense of. So I'm really looking forward to doing that project. And it's been amazing working with Sean and the whole crew at Tangled. And I'm really excited about seeing these images large and in charge in the gallery space.

**EB:** Wow, thank you. I'm really interested in the ways that this project that you're talking about, Tangled, it seems like you're playing with space and time in a really immersive way. And it does remind me a little bit as well about having those activist bios strung up with the clothes pegs and the way that that brings people into this space and makes activist stories more accessible. Even with the clothespegs, it's reminiscent of something comforting to me, a home: a home story of

my small town, my mom hanging out the wash with her clothes pegs. So I was wondering if you might speak a little bit to how moving through space and how you conceptualize space in some of these larger installations, and the way that that impacts your projects or your conceptualizations of them?

**SW:** Yeah, I've really always been drawn to large-scale, I really have. I've always been drawn to large-scale. So the drawings are large, these photographs for Tangled are going to be very large, I don't do things small. I just...I've learned that about myself. I like to work...if you gave me a small piece of paper and said, "make a drawing," I would actually find it really challenging just because I'm used to drawing large. My dad recently passed away. He had Parkinson's for about 20 years and just died in February. And one of the things we used to always talk about was that he was like "Big, go big!" You know, he was so encouraging of my art practice and encouraged me to work big, I think because, you know, we were born in the 70s and the 80s art world, which he loved and was really immersed in. You know, there was a lot of these artists who worked really large, who he admired. And so he had always encouraged me to work big, and I just naturally...that just sort of works with the way that I draw and the way that I make work. I'm very interested in space. I'm very interested in how people move through space. I'm very interested in the experience of being in space and being around artworks. One of the biggest pet peeves that I have, which I think many listeners will probably have a bit of synergy with how little seating there usually is in art spaces. Maybe not in theaters, but in art galleries. There's very often not enough seating and for those of us who are mad, deaf and disabled, who are moving through these art spaces, it can be really difficult...it can feel like you're walking a durational performance just to make it through to the end of the gallery because there's no seating. So I've often tried to create intentional seating in the spaces that I've used and the spaces that I've created. So that the space is a crip space, it is a disabled space; there's seating, there's couches, there's comfortable spaces. In this exhibition that's happening at Tangled, I've got these seven magic mushroom stools that are in the room where you're listening and there'll be benches in the gallery. And so just really thinking about that, you know, you pass through this curtain of organza fringe, you know, to move through this portal into this other space. So really playing with the theatrical nature of space, but also this idea of crip space where there's always seating, where there's always space to lay down or rest. When I did the project *Antarctica*, at the Toronto Biennial, it was a play. And ostensibly, you know, you have this rule in theater where, you know, maybe you have theater in the round, or you have theater in front of the stage. And the stage is sort of static and set. That's not always the way that theater is, but that's often the way that theater is, and I wanted something different. So for *Antarctica*, you actually sat on stage, the audience sat on stage. Because the stage was this multidimensional immersive environment that I had created in the Biennial which had textiles and had these video works of icebergs falling into the sea, and had these shelves with lines and lines and lines of Antarctic rations. And then all of the...everything was white, because it was referencing white supremacy, but also the snow in Antarctica. And the audience, in order to come and see the play, they sat on these chairs and benches and beds that were located in and around the set. So you were sitting on the set, on the stage while the performance happened. So depending on which – and we did the play 53 times during the Biennial; so we played it three times a week – so depending on when you came, and where you sat, you heard more or less of

the story, or you focused in on particular scenes because they were happening right beside you, or maybe they were happening across the way from you, depending on where you were sitting. And so I really love that; this surreal idea of the actors in the audience being on the same plane, a level grade, all in the same area. So I really loved doing that. And I love playing with those conventions in theater. For *Mary Bird Land Freedom*, although it was a theatrical piece that was filmed – so it wasn't theater, per se – the filmed installation took place at the Small Arms Inspection Building in Mississauga, and I had these large-scale geodesic domes that had been created as the Antarctic homes that were created in *Mary Birdland Freedom*, when they go to find free territory in Antarctica, and the audience can sit in the dome, they can lie on these mats, and they can watch the story. So there's always this idea of crippling the space and making space for us to rest while we experience the work. And then this idea of going from portal to portal, dimension to dimension, plays out a lot in my art work. So I love the idea of space being something that can make you feel welcomed. And I want to make sure that particular audiences, in specificity, feel a sense of welcome in the space. And so transforming these environments to be crippled in particular ways, has been essential.

[Music: Upbeat fast-paced keyboard sounds ascending and descending, slow melodic wind instrument, resolves in a calming tone]

**EB:** Fascinating, fascinating. Well Syrus, I feel as I often do, so grateful and that I have so much more to learn from you and that I've learned so much from our conversation already today. So I really cannot thank you enough for being here with us and for the ways that you make so much of your work so visible in the world and really put the work in to share and to create these spaces where you're sharing with specific audiences, audiences that are often not considered under some of the return-to-work policies or are not considered in the day to day constraints of our sometimes quite ableist society. So really, from the bottom of my heart, thank you so much. I am wondering if there's anything else that we haven't touched on today that you're hoping to talk about or may have come up for you as we've been talking? Anything you'd like to return to?

**SW:** Yeah, I just would say thank you so much for these thoughtful questions and for the chance to reflect on this. It's been so great just to be in this conversation and just to get to... I mean we've sort of moved through 12 years of work and practice, and I'm very thankful for that. And I think... I really hope that we are changing the world. I think that we're moving towards mad justice, we're moving towards disability justice, we're moving towards deaf justice. And that that is tied up with environmental justice, and addressing climate change, and all of these things that we're... trans justice and Black justice... I think we're moving towards a different kind of future. And I hope that in this future that we make, this future where trans people get to live long enough to become elders, this future where all of the spaces are accessible, this future where deaf, mad, and disabled people get to live long, self-determined lives, that in these spaces, there's lots of room for artists to play. And so I'm hopeful that this conversation today has inspired you to, you know, pick up a brush or to tell a story, or to move your body in a new way. And to just experience following what you love to do. And creating work. We need more deaf, mad, and disabled storytellers, and artists and dancers and performers. And we need institutions and organizations to actually be committed to supporting these artists and their work.

So if you're somebody who's listening, who's working in an institution and in an organization, and you haven't shown the work, or done a major exhibition or installation of the work of a deaf, mad, or disabled artist, maybe going back to your organization saying, "why is that? And what can we do to change that to make that a bit different?" We're moving towards a better future. And that future is going to involve all of us getting to be involved in telling these stories. So, looking forward.

[Music: Ascending, bright, twinkly, uplifting, electronic]

Our guest today was Syrus Marcus Ware. You can find more of his work at [SyrusMarcusWare.Com](http://SyrusMarcusWare.Com). And hey, if you love poignant memes, you can follow Syrus on instagram at [@SyrusMarcus](https://www.instagram.com/SyrusMarcus). I highly recommend that you do. *On Being III* is researched, recorded and produced on the traditional, unceded and treaty lands of Indigenous peoples across what is now contemporary Canada where each of us on the show is grateful to live and work. Please visit our website to learn more about our relationships with the lands and the peoples who live on them. This show is produced by me, Emily Blyth, alongside Coco Nielsen, and executive produced by Emilia Nielsen. Prince Shima creates all of the music you hear on our show. You can find him on bandcamp [@PrinceShima](https://www.bandcamp.com/artist/prince-shima). If you liked this episode, check out more at [EmiliaNielsen.com](http://EmiliaNielsen.com) or wherever you listen to podcasts. And if you'd like to get in touch with us, please write to [OnBeingIIIPodcast@Gmail.Com](mailto:OnBeingIIIPodcast@Gmail.Com). We'd love to hear from you. And finally, a big thank you to SSHRC, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, who funds this work through an Insight Development Grant.

Until next time, let's create, converse, and crip the system together!

[Music rises in crescendo then fades out]

**[End of transcript]**

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