Three Black Men
by Tami Simon

What follows is the syndicated transcript of a SoundsTrue Insights at the Edge podcast, with Tami Simon, Resmaa Menakem, Bayo Akomolafe and Orland Bishop. You can listen to the audio version of the conversation here.

Tami Simon: Hello, friends. My name’s Tami Simon, and I’m the founder of Sounds True. And I want to welcome you to the Sounds True podcast, Insights at the Edge.

In this episode of Insights at the Edge, my guests are Resmaa Menakem, he’s joining us from Minneapolis; Bayo Akomolafe, joining us from India; and Orland Bishop from Los Angeles. These are three Black men who have joined together, and we’re going to be hearing more about this, to create a special event series. It begins in Los Angeles, June 24 and 25, then later in September travels to Brazil, and then we find ourselves in December in Ghana. This is the African slave trade diaspora in reverse, and we’re going to hear a lot more about this, their inspiration, the origin of this very special Three Black Men tour. You can learn more about it at threeblackmen.com.

Now, let me tell you a little bit more about our three guests. Orland Bishop is a lineage holder in the African gnosis tradition. He’s the founder and director of Shade Tree Multicultural Foundation in Los Angeles, where he has pioneered approaches to urban truces and mentoring at-risk youth, using an approach that combines new ideas with traditional ways of knowledge.

We have with us Resmaa Menakem: a healer, author, psychotherapist, master coach who specializes in healing the effects of trauma and the relationship between trauma, white body supremacy, and racism in America. He teaches Somatic Abolitionism and is the author of the New York Times bestseller My Grandmother’s Hands.

And we have with us Bayo Akomolafe: poet, philosopher, psychologist, professor, and someone who is passionate about the preposterous, rooted with the Yoruba people in a more-than-human world. Bayo is a father, a grateful life partner, son, and brother. He’s the founder of the Emergence Network, and he’s a host of the online post-activist course We Will Dance with Mountains.

Resmaa, Bayo, Orland. Welcome.

Resmaa Menakem: Hey.
Tami Simon: Hey, hey, hey, hey.

Bayo Akomolafe: It’s very nice to be here. Thank you.

Resmaa Menakem: Very nice to be here.

Orland Bishop: Thank you. Happy to be here, Tami.

Bayo Akomolafe: Yes.

Tami Simon: Right here at the beginning, for people who are hearing about this Three Black Men tour for the very first time, share with us how the three of you came together and how this idea emerged.

Orland Bishop: Resmaa, you want to go?

Resmaa Menakem: Since Bayo’s the oldest, he should probably go.

Bayo Akomolafe: OK. I can only offer a partial story of how this came to be. I like to root this project in history, but also out of history, that there’s a sense in which our coming together is a, and I use the word in very specific ways, a “prophetic” assemblage. And by “prophetic,” I mean that I don’t mean to predict the future; I mean there are forces beyond the machinations of linear time that seem to have miraculously, I think that’s a good word to throw into the mix, miraculously assembled and convened us.

But if we were to speak about the historicity of our assemblage, then I would be offering gratitude to our dear sister Victoria Santos, who had a nudging to bring us together, to convene us to just have a conversation. I think it was around fried chicken, and we talk[ed] about fried chicken, but that led to something else.

Resmaa Menakem: Yes, that’s right. That’s right.

Bayo Akomolafe: And we realized we wanted to be with each other, and our scholarship
and our anticipants, our experiences, our intellectualism, our offerings found a home in each other’s work. So we’re here because of that and many more. Yeah.

Resmaa Menakem: Couldn’t have said that any better.

Tami Simon: You mentioned “prophetic” assemblage, and one of the things I feel very deeply in tuning in to the Three Black Men tour is this interesting convergence of past, present—being together right here, right now, being with you, all of us who are listening being with you this moment—and then the future, and how all three time zones are converging in this very interesting way. And I wonder if you could each speak about your experience of that, of the past, present, and future coexisting in your consciousness, how you experience that.

Resmaa Menakem: For me, I’ve been writing for a while now, and I’ve been writing and reading and sitting with people and documenting things and rereading and scribing and doing all that different type of stuff. And one of the things that has happened for me is that sometimes, especially with the material that I deal with all the time, the material around white supremacy, white body supremacy, brutality, trauma, that different type of stuff, you can get very jaded and tunnel vision about [INAUDIBLE].

And one of the things that extracted me to this was two things. The first one was that Victoria had had experience with each one of us three individually and had been mentioning both of these brothers to me for a while. And I believe she was doing the same thing with my two brothers. And so there had been this seeding that she saw or that she started doing, because she saw how we were coming at this from different places but rooted in some of the same type of ideas.

And so for me, this concept, what I’ve learned from work from now being and loving and being around my two brothers is this piece around the beginning, the past, the future, and the present really is nomenclature that we use in order for us to not be able to deal with the monstrous or the traumatic or be able to center ourselves in ritual. And so for me, this process for me has really helped me begin to understand that there’s other angles and other ways that I can learn from and be nurtured in and I don’t need to use what I’ve been using in order to move things and work with stuff.

Tami Simon: Resmaa, can I ask you, when you use the word “monstrous,” because I know in describing the Three Black Men tour, one of the billboards, if you will, is “A Conversation on Trauma, Ritual, and the Promise of the Monstrous.” And of course, that got my attention. You see the word “monstrous”—I saw monsters and everything, and I was like, “What’s going on? What’s the promise of the monstrous?”

Resmaa Menakem: Right, right. Well, I’m going to let Brother Bayo speak into that because he has a much better way of working with that than I do.
Bayo Akomolafe: I was looking forward to Brother Orland speaking, but I could say a thing or two about the monstrous.

In my conception of the monstrous, I think of it as a gash or a crack in the road that forbids continuity, right? Like a fissure, a rift, a metabolic rift that is not a place of inadequacy but is a place of generative spillage and excessiveness in which Wendell Berry would often say that the impeded stream is the one that sings. So this idea of an obstacle and impediment that proliferates errancy, a strain away from the familiar. That is the monstrous.

We often think of the monster, which is a cultural tool, a pervasive, multicultural technology. We use it, we use the monster in our stories to mark boundaries. “Don’t go here. This is where you stay.” But there comes a time when we are invited to those edges, to those liminal borders, and we need to stay there.

So we were speaking about prophecy a while ago. I don’t think of prophecy, like I said, as a prediction of the future; I think of prophecy as monstrous, as monstrosity. Prophecy is a reconvening of time altogether. It’s like a crossroads. It’s where the past and the present and future are no longer resourced in the ways that we think about time. And so they have to do something different. And so something spills from that place, and that is the source of exquisite novelty and cool becomings and new transformative potentials.

So the promise of the monstrous is an invitation for us to sit with trouble in those places that modernity would like to flatten and would like to efface. Modernity is the effacement of thresholds, that place where the city would like to press away and say, “No, just keep on walking. It’s a highway here.” The invitation is to stay there and to sit with it. Yeah, that’s the monster.

Tami Simon: One more question about that, and then I want to bring Orland in, especially in this question of the time zones, history, future, and where we are right now. But Bayo, I think of monsters as scary. Scary. So when you say to “sit with it,” I wonder if you can address that, this response inside, that you could have used a different image for stopping and contemplating, but monster sounds scary. So sitting with this thing that we’re afraid of, it brings up fear in us in some way.

Bayo Akomolafe: Yes. Let me put it this way. Now, we live in curated experiences that we mistake for everything else. We have a French philosopher; Deleuze would speak about assemblages. So we live in these assemblages or we live within these assemblages, assemblages that have heterogeneous networks of emotions and possibilities and bodies, technologies, textures. That’s what we call modernity. We exteriorize or we postpone or we push out other kinds of feelings, like fear and stuff like that. But the thing is, in order to produce different kinds of realities, we need to ally with new sensitivities, with new bodies, if you will. We cannot use the same materials, to put it in Einstein’s way, to fashion novelty.

So the monster is appropriately scary, but it’s only scary from the point of view of a
stable, modern, civilizational ethic. It’s scary to us because we have been habituated into the city, into the familiar, into noticing bodies, ableist environments, like, “This is what it means to be proper. This is what it means to be human.” And then something shocks that. It’s not inherently scary, but it shocks our senses, and this shock to the sense is the invitation to novelty, to newness, to transformation. That is why transformation is disabbling. We cannot walk. All the stories, the Afrodiasporic spiritualties, are about people transforming into the more than human, into birds, into something different. The 1803 Igbo Landing, they flew into birds. Fugitivity, the great dismal swamp. They hid their bodies, they put mud on their bodies to hide away from their masters.

All these things are about becoming monster. That’s the work. We need to align or ally our bodies with the more than human, with the more than familiar, and the scary. And maybe in doing that, we might happen upon new senses.

Tami Simon: Orland?

Orland Bishop: If I may add just one more point to this monstrous characterization. It has been observed and actually been shared that police officers in the United States, when they see a young Black man, they see a monster. They’ve actually said it, that it’s caused the death of these young people because they could not reconcile what the souls of a Black man carries as future. They prefer to kill that person than to allow the future to emerge with the living body. They’ve actually described it. They thought something scary was going to happen.

This is in the psyche, that future is actually scary, and people want to normalize reality to the degree in which we avoid dealing with the complexity that the human life is bringing into the world, particularly Black men.

The idea of calling these gatherings “Three Black Men” is to actually highlight the fear that if two or more of Black men gather, something is going to happen, and it’s not going to always happen in the best way for society. This is to correct, actually to create a pedagogy that if you can look at three Black men meeting, you would see the sacred. You see the complexity of history and future simultaneously converging, and it actually represents the kind of sacred hospitality that we want to demonstrate, that we can actually bring men together and it be peaceful, it be harmonious, it be musical. It could be tributary towards a higher aspiration, and the monster could be welcomed into the world so that the psychology of fear does not keep propagating this kind of violence against those whose souls are monstrous because we have to actually demonstrate a kind of miracle for this world, for the psyche that have suppressed and avoided seeing Black men clearly for who we are.

This is time that the veil be removed and the monster be let into society so that we reconcile not the monster, but the fear that we have allowed to inhabit our psyche for so long.

Most heroic journeys used to be monstrous. People used to risk death to be initiated, but to walk through the streets of America and be killed as an initiation is not just anymore. You can’t be on your way home and die. That is not acceptable because you carried a monster in your life. That is not any more allowed to happen. And we want to open up a
conversation about the soul and the future that a soul must host so that the repetition of this horrific mistake of projecting upon Black men the biggest fear is not going to allow us to get past this tragic circumstances.

Bayo Akomolafe: I’m just going to add something to that as well, to that altar of insights from my big brother. I grew up in the city in Lagos, Nigeria, and that meant I was cut off from some of the very rich African Yoruba traditions that I read about but I was too educated to experience. My education meant that I was closer to the United States than to my own context, but I was still alive to stories of the masquerade.

The masquerade is a monstrous figure. The masquerade is a refusal of coherence. There’s no way I could describe it except a refusal of coherence. And when the masquerade dances into the public, you don’t stand in the way of that. You don’t give it a high-five. You comport yourself in a way that acknowledges that something profound here is happening. The masquerade could whip you, the masquerade could beat you up, but you just let the masquerade beat, because everyone knows that you don’t kill the monster, because to kill the monster is to kill the way out, is to kill novelty, is to kill possibilities. You inhabit and ritualize and ceremonialize the monster’s passing. That’s what nobility does not know how to do. All we know how to do is to pathologize the monstrous, to get rid of it, to put it in an asylum, to say, “This is where it stays.”

But the thing here, as Brother Orland said, is how do we make space for that? Because until we do that, we’re stuck here.

Resmaa Menakem: Yes, exactly. I want to add a piece to that. When I hear my brothers talk about the monstrous and the fissures, and Brother Bayo said, I think earlier, and it moved this thing in my body when he said it. He said that, that, the slice, the you cannot proceed anymore, there must be a stoppage of recognition. And I think in terms of the work that I do with trauma, this idea of people coming to get help to get over something is solidified as healing in modernity. The better you can get over something, the healthier you are to be in modernity. Right?

And what Brothers Bayo and Orland are talking about is this idea of metabolism, understanding, importing, bending, pausing, working with, so you can see what emerges from your interaction with the monstrous. It is not a getting rid of, it is not an annihilation of it. It is an understanding of it. So you, in any understanding of it, you will have to bend in order to understand it, because modernity has made it so the way the alignment is to stand up straight and get with it and go right for it. And when we’re talking about the monstrous, that’s not how that works. The monstrous does not—working with the monstrous, giving room for the monstrous, it does not work by just having a stiff upper lip and moving through it.

Tami Simon: “Conversation on Trauma, Ritual, and the Promise of the Monstrous.” I wonder if you can say a little bit more about ritual and what creates a ritual space and what kinds of rituals help us “metabolize” trauma?
Orland Bishop: Yeah. There are different qualities to a ritual. Most rituals are centered around meeting the basic needs of people first, so societies organize themselves around being able to meet the needs for well-being. And then there are rituals that have to do with transitions, different stages of life, birth, death, marriage, societal agreements, rituals. And then there are the sacred ones, the ones that have to do with changing the threshold, meaning there are times when we outgrow what we have lived. When we outgrow—if we keep waiting for the next phase without allowing some space in consciousness to be open, this is kind of the injuratory threshold.

We know the personal levels, but in a societal ritual, when we delay things like truth, justice, equity, these things accumulate as deficits in our shared imagination for realities that we’re supposed to be co-creators of. And when reality appears finished to the degree in which we say there’s not enough to share, this is where ritual has to be considered. What is the ritual of creating abundance? What is the ritual of creating a space for deeper inquiry for our own capacities to care for those who are in need of our attention?

And so part of our focus in this ritual is the attention to aspects of society that we have marginalized, and we say we’ve pathologized to be the ones that we need to shut away. And this is the ritual about welcoming, reintegration, and guiding and walking with people towards their sacred truths, and finding out what are the needs along the way?

We are not saying we know everything. We know the nature of ritual is to look at the needs and see where it could be met, and there are different levels of competencies that we could support a person to find the way of ritualizing their life, which means that they must be in time with their soul and spirit and body because the will needs both and all of those things to be able to articulate its true purpose in the world.

And our conversation so far is really about even making relationships with each other. That’s a ritual that we just enjoy, sharing with each other our own journeys. But imagine the people who’ve never had someone give that kind of attention to them.

Resmaa Menakem: Or space or room.

Orland Bishop: Or space, yeah. Because they’ve been told something is wrong with them. And this is a ritual of inclusion. These gatherings [are] about including the areas of the collective journey and highlighting them all the way back to places where we were extricated and forced into forced labor for some other reality other than our own.

And so the area of ritual that I think we have already begun to point to, what is time showing us? What is time showing us? We know we are at a critical point in time. We cannot keep saying, “It’s not my responsibility.” And so we are ritualizing the collective call for everyone to play some part in the exercise of holding something, from the profane everyday need to the level of the sacred, which has to do with the survival of this whole planet. We are in a ritual, and it needs to be discerned to the level in which who plays the part to understand how to carry our time?
Resmaa Menakem: For me, the term “ritual,” if you just go with the term “ritual” without understanding that ritual has, that all terms have a communal ethos to them, they’re not just—you say “ritual,” and everybody nods as if you know what you’re talking about, but when we’re talking about ritual, we’re talking about it from a particular mooring. We’re not talking about ritual as in rote, which is a very close symmetric to ritual. We’re not talking about [INAUDIBLE]. When we are talking about ritual, we are still talking about the monstrous. We’re not talking about just giving people three Hail Marys. We’re talking about an exploration into places, the places that you’ve already been to and the places that you know well and the architecture that you know so well, you know that so well that there is no more room or growth in that area because you know it so well. The only room and growth is in the area that you refuse to tread.

All of the growth is in the places that you have been unwilling to go to. And when we say that, we are not saying, “You just need to get up and go do it.” We’re very clear that when we talk about ritual, we are talking about nibbles, nibbling. There’s more than enough forage, more than enough energetic nutrients, that when you nibble on it, you don’t need to gorge on this stuff. You can nibble on it, pull back and notice and allow your body time to begin to metabolize this stuff, that if you gorge on it, it will overwhelm you.

And so for us, ritual is really about holding a container that allows people to be walked with in a manner that they can begin to notice emergence, from a vibratory sense, from an image sense, from a meaning-making sense, from a behavioral and urge sense, from an affect and feeling and emotionality sense, from a sensate perspective, as well as an imaginative sense. Those are all intelligences that we have been cut off from in modernity. We can use things that were once maybe sacred that have been contorted and moved and used, and now the actual function of them is to bypass the monstrous. We use yoga to bypass the monstrous. We use religion to bypass the monstrous, and it becomes a rote thing. We just go right into it. We say, “Oh, you’re Christian? OK, bah, bah, bah, bah.” Right?

But what we’re talking about is how do you begin to build the stoppage, the bends, the pause in as ritual as opposed to, as Brother Bayo said, skimming over and keep going and there’s nothing to see here and there’s a highway to which people used to live there and it doesn't matter because we’re modern. That’s not what we’re talking about. We’re not talking about ritual in that way.

Bayo Akomolafe: I’m just learning, and I need to emphasize this, Tami, that this is our monstrous assemblage of brothers. It is not a finality. It is not a project of mastery. We are feeling to, we’re feeling our way, even through our own inquiry and questions. We’re touching each other, and we’re learning from each other, and we’re unlearning from each other. And so we’re inviting people into this space of co-learning together. And maybe that already speaks to the idea of ritual, as this participatory idea of how things come to matter.

When people speak about ritual, they probably speak about it as a once-in-a-lifetime thing, something that happens once in a while. But everything is ritual. We are constantly in ritual. There’s nothing outside of ritual. To eat is ritual, to go to the toilet is ritual. We are ritualizing and being ritualized, even when we don’t see the world in that way.

But I’m sitting with this question that Brother Orland, and this is why I spoke about co-learning here, asked. What happens when we outlive, we grow bigger than our lives, so
to speak? What happens then? What’s the ritual for that? And then I wrote that down just now, and I heard myself saying to myself that that’s where the crack is. That’s where something outside, so to speak, something parabolic passes and breaks the ritual. And then the invitation is, experiment here. This is the space of generosity and generativity and experiment. Resmaaa, you’re shaking, you’re into it?

Resmaa Menakem: That’s it, that’s it.

Bayo Akomolafe: Right? This is the space of generosity. This is where you experiment. This is where you play, because in the crack, the rituals are not there yet. This is where you play with stuff. And so this is an invitation to play. This is an invitation to experiment, to create, to cocreate together.

You asked about trauma a while ago. I could go on a whole spiel that my brothers would beat me up about later on when they see me, so I’m not going to go on that tangent. But there’s a beautiful story about the emergence and evolution of the concept of trauma and how it’s rooted in modern civilization and 19th century trains and the creation of time zones and accidents and insurance companies. It’s a very, very interesting story.

But trauma, I want to emphasize, is also ritual. Trauma is ritual. Trauma is how bodies are ritualized and stabilized within modernity. Trauma is not just an experience; it’s a politics here. There’s a sense in which modernity puts trauma in this family way, a cyclical family way where it creates the conditions for healing, and healing creates a condition for trauma, and trauma creates the conditions for healing. And then it’s just this algorithm of repetition. And now what we’re looking for is the crack, the bridge that breaks us out of that economy altogether of trauma and healing and trauma and healing and trauma. We want to break out altogether, and the only way to break out is to become monstrous. There you go.

Resmaa Menakem: Yeah, that’s it. That’s it.

There’s a piece that I want to just drop in here. I’ve been reading and being coached by a sister named Alixa García, and Sister Alixa, she’s actually going to be with us in LA, and she’s a wonderful artist and singer and poet and everything. And one of the things that they have been really—I’ve been just watching them and how they work with stuff—is they talked about this thing, these cells called the “imaginal cells.” The imaginal cells are these cells in creation, but particularly in caterpillars where if you took a caterpillar...

So one of the things that they said recently is the job of the caterpillar is to resist the emergence of the butterfly. The very job of the caterpillar is to resist the transformation, to hold on to what it knows until something cracks. If you, once that caterpillar goes into metamorphosis, if there is a point in time to where if you crack that cocoon open, all you would see is mush, muck, right? And the eye, the modernity eye, would look at that and go, “This is nothing. This muck has absolutely no value. Why would anybody even pay any attention to this muck?”

And that eye would be absolutely wrong about what’s actually happening in that cocoon,
because what was happening in that cocoon was both, what I call the precipice, was a point in time happening where there was both decay and nurturant and balance and equilibrium at the same time. And so often, the modernity tells you, “That shouldn’t happen. That’s not healthy, and you need healing, and you need to do more yoga or you need to go to a meeting.” That’s the way the modernity looks at that cocoon.

But what we know is that the imaginal cells are doing both creational things at the same time, decaying and tearing down and nurturing and metabolizing and creating equilibrium at the same time that the failure is happening, that the fallow is happening. And at some point, something else emerges. We see that cocoon as the monstrous. It is necessary, it is important, it has its own time. And to look from the outside, to look from the outside and not understand the Blackness within that is transforming, that is emerging, that is doing something, means that your modernity may look at that and just crack it open and see it as nothing.

And that’s what Brother Orland was saying. The Black man in this current structure is seen, the imaginal cells within him, is seen as nothing of value. That is not a problem for the Black man, the Black body; that is literally a problem for the structure. The structure is so powerful, it doesn’t have to look at why it needs to cut that open, why it needs to extinguish that body, why the function of the Black body is to either give service or die.

Tami Simon: I have a question here from inside the caterpillar that doesn’t want its job. “I don’t want to become a butterfly, gosh darn it. I’m not going to do it, and you can’t make me.” And yet, we find ourselves at times we have outlived something, whether it’s a structure or a set of ideas or the framework, and even hearing a conversation like this or coming to an event like the Three Black Men tour, whatever we’re coming with in our inner life that’s happening where we’re clearly in a transition, but we don’t feel we have the inner resource to move to that next—I mean, Bayo, you talked about it as generative and generous, and I thought, “Maybe,” but it could also be an inner crisis that doesn’t feel that way. It doesn’t feel generative and generous. “In fact, I don’t know if I’ve got it to make it through.”

And I’m wondering if you can talk to that person who’s in that space with whatever breakthrough; they’re in the breakdown part.

Resmaa Menakem: Can I step in for a second, brothers, just for a second? That idea of having, first off, of looking for a breakthrough, is actually anti-creation. When we’re talking about the Blackness, we’re talking about the caterpillar and resisting, what we’re talking about, that is part of creation. That’s not an inconvenience to creation; that is literally part of creation. We have been structured so that when that happens, we look for a way out. We look for, “That should not be happening to me.”

If I’m going to come to a place where Black men are talking about these pieces, I want to be in a place where I can handle it. You don’t get that. You don’t have the things communally and you don’t have the things individually to be able to whole these pieces, because that comes on the back end, not the front end. The pieces that you need in order to be able to actually contend with some of these pieces, you will not [INAUDIBLE] because the constructs don’t allow for you to have those pieces.
So what I say to people is, this is why we say the pieces around nibbling, around contain, around communal, because you will, if you are really about this life of becoming a transformation and understanding race and understanding trauma, understanding the monstrous, if that’s really what you’re about, there is no safety net. There’s only communing with other people as you go through it and noticing your fears and your limitations and how your virtues literally hide your limitations.

The resistance by the caterpillar is not something to be extinguished. The resistance is just part of what is needed in order for the bends to happen, in order for the questions to happen, in order for the caterpillar to say, “Could I just drop off of this damn branch? No, I’m going to hang on just for one more second. I’m going to nibble on this for one more second, and let’s see what emerges from that.” As human beings, we always want to come to something like this. We want to come and say, “I want to make sure I’m safe.” Well, you don’t get that. I don’t get that. That’s not the bargain of creation. The bargain of creation is to go into the Blackness, learn the pieces that you need to learn as you’re going through it, and see what emerges and do it with other bodies.

Orland Bishop: It might come truthful for some to say, “I don’t know how,” but there’s this other point one must relinquish the authority that you carry in the world, and to presume that you don’t know and you still want the authority to carry weapons, to carry whatever, it’s where we are calling the society into a question of what is just.

There are times when we come to this place, and it’s a place of humility to say, “I’ve outgrown the capacity to manage the positions of authority that I was given.” And it’s time to relinquish it with common sense, asking who could be in service now? Society must alternate leadership. When elders mature the capacity to carry, then we let them move into the position. But to want power without allowing the monstrous to guide you is dangerous for the person themselves and for the society that leadership then expresses itself.

We can look at the individual, but part of our work is to look at the society at large and say, “There are people who have been showing their talents, and there’s no occupation for it. There are people who have been protesting for some basic truths and rights for life, and there is no justice for it.” So part of the idea, if the society is going to be a butterfly, we have to actually have good judgment, good discernment, and good, in a certain way, relationships with trust to say, “Who could lead this forward?”

People who create, first create music, not anything else. And if we look at the historical creation of music in this country, we will see the butterfly. We will see the butterfly, what Black people have been giving, as sensitivity for the whole culture to trust the creative acts that have been maturing. And it’s not that it’s any overthrow of any power of authority in any case. It’s saying we could add to the beautification of the world. We can add to the humanization of the world from the feelings that sustain our lives. The feeling of this tension and was brought up, Resmaa was saying, to keep hanging on to some hope that maybe some other day, we’ll get a chance to fly.

The day can only be true if others are saying, “No more oppression. No more denying that it’s my right to govern or my right to enforce or my right to secure.” These are relational factors, and the butterfly as an analogy to the collective soul of a group of people, we all know that we could help each other be better. We know that. So why aren’t we doing it? Why aren’t we saying, “I need you to be able to be myself”? This is a critical step in the
tension between the chrysalis and the butterfly.

Resmaa Menakem: Yes, the tension.

Orland Bishop: The tension.

Resmaa Menakem: We don’t want the tension.

Orland Bishop: We don’t want the tension. It’s not just a natural—it’s a supernatural factor.

Resmaa Menakem: That’s exactly right.

Orland Bishop: Because human consciousness is actually hosting something far more creative than what we have already lived into. And this tension between past and future requires us, requires the human being of our time, and yes, welcoming all the inspirations from these other beings who show us how to be with nature and the future when they live out their life. Something dies, and then something is reborn.

Bayo Akomolafe: Thank you, brothers. I want to come at this, this way. Of course, joined from the strands of our conversation and using that beautiful figure of the disappearing caterpillar, if you will. And I think there is a term for the unproductive, non-instrumental goop or soup called imaginal cells.

And I think our problem, or rather, we fall into this habit of beginning analysis with the individual, and so it gets really sticky. We start with the individual and the individual’s salvation and the individual’s experience. The prime mover, if you will, is the individual. The fetish of modern civilization is the individual. The fetish of white modernity is the individual, the dissociated self. So the self that has been cut off from ritual, from movement. The movement that precedes the eye that moves is not part of the analysis.

But once we start to bring that into the equation, then you can understand how resistance is part of the material for novelty. You can start to understand how even our attempts to push it back is just exactly what the new condition needs to thrive. Because it’s not the individual acting; it’s an assemblage acting. It’s an ecology that is acting. It’s a field. It’s a territory that is breathing together with that situation.

I often tell the story of the Trickster that traveled with the slaves. Brother Orland knows this one well. Brother Resmaaa knows this one well, as well. The Yoruba Trickster God
issue—and I think, Tami, we’ve spoken about this some other time—travels with the slaves across the Atlantic in the slave ship. This is one of the stories we tell in Yorubaland, in Nigeria and West Africa, that even capture, even that colonial vessel of capture, had a stowaway reality, had a sneaky, unaccounted-for figure that was domiciled and hiding in it. That oppression is never completed all by itself. It’s never fully total.

You could come with your boots and with your flags and with your anthems and with your colonial surveillance technologies and stamp your presence, but even in that, you are creating the very conditions for your upset. You’re creating the very conditions for your own demise. So there’s no totalizing form of containment that is not already inhabited by the Trickster.

Resmaa Menakem: That’s it.

Bayo Akomolafe: Well, we’re living in times of leaders and heroes and all of that. But these are the themes I’m diffractively composing from, listening to my brothers here, that it seems that beyond the leader, beyond the seminal figure who has all answers, there’s a different need in this time. There’s a different need. There’s a shift of the gaze, a power shift, so to speak. And this is the moment for the Trickster to come in and upset those binaries and create something different. Yeah.


Tami Simon: This conversation will be happening in quite a bit more depth: two days in Los Angeles, June 24 and 25. That’s the beginning of the Three Black Men journey. You can join on the 24th for a Black men’s gathering from 10:00 to 5:00, and then on the 25th from 10:00 to 5:00, it’s open to everyone. And the event on the 25th will also be being livestreamed. You can learn more at threeblackmen.com.

And to hear a little bit more, tell me why you decided to structure it this way with one day for Black men and one day for the general public, and if you will, what this prophetic assemblage, the hope might be, if that’s a reasonable thing to put out, for each of these days?

Bayo Akomolafe: Resmaa, Orland, you want to go on this one?

Orland Bishop: The intention was actually a gift to say, if we are together, when the three of us met to host the space, we did not leave out our grandmothers, our mothers, our sisters, our friends. We didn’t leave out the world community that we have always appreciated how they contribute to who we are. But it was the same. If we are together, can we find the level of dynamism, this monstrous goal? Can we actually allow it to come
as close to us as possible by being ourselves?

The first day with Black men, it was really for us as well, because we have to inhabit something that is far more everyday challenging to be with in a society where, again, if two or more like us come together, there is some conspiracy for something, to trust that it could be that in some people’s minds, and yet we know the truth, and to give this same expression for Black men or men who identify with their bodies in a world in which they need to have this time. And it really is a gift; it really is a gift to ourselves and each other to ceremonially the fundamental agreement that puts us in a category of choice, to say, “We are going to choose this as our way to be with each other.” It’s not just a projection. We are saying we are choosing who we are and who we are to be for each other and let that feeling come in, and then we host the larger community.

Resmaa Menakem: For me, to answer this quickly, the day without the white gaze, G-A-Z-E, the day without the gaze of white [INAUDIBLE] looking at us is a day that we can be intimate with other Black men without that gaze being so prominent. And what does show up in the room in terms of internalized white gaze and alignment, we can work with it in our own instruction. So for me, it was about a level of intimacy. And then once we got that, once I got that nutrient, got nurtured by that, then I knew I would be better able to serve another group, a larger group, a group of other types of bodies. But I needed this first.

Bayo Akomolafe: And maybe I will add this. My spiritual intellectual traditions, the traditions that nurture me, which are still ongoing, compel me to say that I don’t even think—I cannot think of Blackness as reducible to identity. I don’t know how to do that. I’m of the Yoruba people. It was shocking for me to learn, not when I was young, when I was quite older, that the Yoruba people did not even christen themselves “Yoruba.” Yoruba, the name Yoruba, is not a Yoruba word. It’s from the stranger. The stranger came, “Oh, those are Yoruba.” And then we’re actually named by the stranger.

This is why I invite people to mispronounce my name. I call it a gift of mispronunciation, because we are constantly in exile and exile is not pathology to us. We’re diasporic. We’re a diasporic culture. We’re constantly traveling. Our work is to travel and disseminate. And this is the reason why the Ifa culture or the Ifa tradition is such a vibrant Afrodiasporic force in the world right now.

And this all leads me to say that there is a sense in which, and I’m speaking through the voices of C.L.R. James, Hortense Spillers, these Black scholars, Fred Moten, that Blackness is not about Black people. Blackness is about arrangements, arrangements or what Brother Orland might even call agreements, and what has been lost and the possibility for newness.

But there is a gift in convening, even within those cartographies that have been traced out. There is. Because how do you define a Black man? How do you define a Black man? But Orland might have something to say about it that might be different from what Resmaa says about it that will be different from what I have to say about it. If we’re going by visuality alone, I’m the Blackest of the three. I mean, these three. I’m pretty Black. I’m blackity Black. But these definitions and identities are roaming and migrant just as well. So there isn’t some pure concepts to arrive at, but that doesn’t mean that we cannot
And I have to say as well that in how I language whiteness, for instance, it’s not reducible to white bodies as well. I don’t reduce whiteness, because I think whiteness is an arrangement. It’s a posture. It’s a posturing. Nigeria is the largest conglomeration of Black bodies on the planet as in a nation state, Westphalian order. But we are very, very—well, I say all the time, to a comical effect, we’re pretty white because our posture is we need to look like New York, we need to look like London. How do we catch up? It’s a catch-up imperative. And it’s not unique to Nigeria. It’s invading the coast of Africa. We cannot see and identify ourselves and trust ourselves. And I’m not speaking universally, of course this isn’t universally true, but there is a pervasive sense in which we lean forward to the Eurocentric as salvific and messianic. In that sense, we are co-opted and we are enlisted in the reinforcement of white stabilities, white coloniality, a real estate project that enlists bodies in how it comes to matter.

So the white gaze to me is the gaze of the familiar, is the gaze of the neurotypical, is the violence of visuality that insists that this is how a body is, when bodies are tentacular and masquerade-like and doing more things than visuality can notice. Bodies are diasporic. My name is traveling far beyond your lips can articulate, so mispronounce away, but my name has traveled beyond the moment.

I don’t want to reduce it to reason, but we’re staying with that moment. When we convene Black men, however already troubling it is there with that moment, when we convene Black men, we’re staying with possibility, we’re staying even, and we’re imploding definitions. And then we come to a place where Blackness is a trope of generosity, of radical hospitality. And we’re saying, “Everyone come because you need to be here, because whiteness isn’t working for you as well, because you’re on top of this pyramid, and when you’re on top of a pyramid, it’s very lonely. There isn’t space to be around, but there’s space here in the cracks.”

Tami Simon: One thing, Orland, that you said that stuck with me, maybe you’ll find it surprising, was when you said the first creative act is making music. And I think I found that surprising, because during the whole first half of our conversation, I had the experience that I was listening to music, listening to the three of you talk together. I kind of felt, inside my body, this is what it feels like when I listen to really good music.

And the question that occurred to me is I’m curious how you each experience your sort of inner instrumentation, if you will, or vocalization or inner music, what that’s like for you as individuals who are now playing, creating music together, what that’s like for you?

Resmaa Menakem: I have had the experience from being with these brothers, and it’s interesting that you just couched it like that, because ever since I’ve been starting to meet with these brothers, one of the ancestors’ images that keeps popping up for me is Miles Davis. He keeps popping up, and it’s just a quick image of him onstage with the trumpet down. And ever since we’ve been talking and convening with each other, that image has been coming up.

And I believe that the vibratory languaging is that we are jazz. We are doing this jazz thing with each other, and I’m doing it with Coltrane and Thelonious Monk. You know what
I mean? And we are doing this thing, and we’re playing these pieces, and we’re playing. That’s the thing about good musicians and good artists and people who do things well. At some point, they find a way to play, get back to the play. The resistance of the caterpillar resisting butterfly is a form of play.

And so that’s what I kind of see. I see us as this kind of jazz trio that’s doing these things and then we look at each other and we pitch each other and I go, “Oh yeah, I like that shit. I like that shit, yeah. Oh, yeah.” You know what I mean? He’s like, “Oh, you like that? Let me do this.” That’s what I kind of see us doing, and this whole experience, this thing that we’re doing with each other in LA, that’s the way it is. That’s what it’s going to be. It’s going to be a jazz.

Orland Bishop: And that’s the arrival space, the jazz level, but there’s a progression. So from the Negro spirituals, as they were called, those labor songs in which they had to invoke from the earth a kind of sanctuary, to create sanctuary in the slave plantation, to create sanctuary in the spaces where there was so much violence. The only way it was to create a kind of guardian over the sense perception that you don’t live in the terror all the time. Music was the Trickster again, giving compassion to sense perception, teaching it how to survive, not to live within, and develop certain kinds of codes that then were transmitted in the music, building a consciousness field of relatedness so when somebody hear this song, they’re comforted.

And so there were comfort songs, and progressively a pedagogy in it that strengthens the will. Even the Civil Rights Movement had its songs to accompany the risks that they were taking, to prepare the psyche to have certain kinds of visions and determinations.

By the time we got to jazz, we were getting to the level of a kind of improvisation, the capacity to overcome the patterns of oppression that had to be learned and negotiated. But music is actually a prophetic space preparing the human perception to adapt, and who doesn’t like jazz? All souls, whether you’re Black or white, get the motivation of it, which is to step out, step out of the habit of predicting what may come next and just listen and create the listening as you listen, to create the anticipation of a certain kind of freedom, to appreciate something that the other one will—you prefer the other one to play it than you.

So this is jazz; you don’t compete. You create something and give it to someone else to add to it, and it moves. This is civilization in its potential becoming. And I think why these beings who have given us such great music are being felt now because they’re the elders of a culture. They’re the elders. They’re the ones who prepared the capacity to be a host for the creativity that will come from all of our struggles.

Bayo Akomolafe: This one overwhelms me because I don’t know how to—every time I write, I write with music, I think with music, so that it’s become impossible for me to think of myself as an author, as a separate eye that composes words. That’s a very neurotypical assemblage. What comes first, the singer or the song? Is it a singer that produces the song, or the song produces the singer?

In a very powerful sense, speaking about the musicality of this project, and this is how I want to see it, there is a sense in which this is rippling and simmering and bebopping and
bouncing with multiple beats and rhythms. I’m hearing hip-hop here. Hip-hop is here, and hip-hop is realistic, and hip-hop is LA. We went around to the origins of hip-hop to sports, and we’re marking territories, and we’re tracing out histories. That’s hip-hop, and hip-hop, I think everyone knows the history of that. It’s samba in Brazil. It’s the rhythmic refusal to be part of the surveillance state. How samba developed was in hideouts, sitting in Rio, and then the soldiers marched past and request Black bodies to show themselves, but yet they will be hidden in pequeña Africa, the little Africa, and they would compose these seditious, scandalous beats that came to be known as samba.

And this project is also Afrobeats. It’s Fela Aníkúlápó Kuti inviting people into the spiritual underground, saying, “Hey, I don’t want to be part of the human rights. I’m an animal.” Almost like take away your human rights. That’s one interpretation. Take away all your human rights. How dare you invite me into that space, as if you invented what it means to be human. These are the resonant and dissonant rhythms that are coming from this assembly and informing our movement together.

Tami Simon: Bayo Akomolafe, Orland Bishop, Resmaa Menakem, three Black men together in Los Angeles, June 24 and 25. The 25th event will be livestreamed and open to the public. You can learn more at threeblackmen.com.

Before we end, I just want to throw it back open and at you. Any final comments you’d like to share? Anything coming through?

Resmaa Menakem: I’m just anxious to get to LA. That’s the only thing I got.

Orland Bishop: The invitation is to bring humor to this as well. I want to emphasize the humorous part. We want to be able to, after this, really have a good laugh about the things that happen, not just to kind of—community ends with this kind of celebratory space. We really want to invoke the sensitivity towards not taking all of this so seriously that we leave out the fun of being human. It’s a reflection where friendship replaces all the power dynamics. There’s so many powers that we could all pursue and have and dream of, but when we leave a space as friends, it’s the most amazing gift.

And we’ve been cultivating our relationship. Every moment we get a chance to organize, we actually build on something that we know we all need from each other to be able to have that. And after some of the calls and time spent, there’s so much beauty to reflect on, and I need this from my brothers. I need this from my community.

Bayo Akomolafe: All I’ll say is let’s get it.

Resmaa Menakem: Let’s get it.
Bayo Akomolafe: Let’s eat.

Resmaa Menakem: That’s it, that’s it.

Bayo Akomolafe: Let’s joke. Resmaa, what’s it? The dozens, right?

Resmaa Menakem: Yeah. That’s it.

Bayo Akomolafe: There’s going to be a lot of—this is storytelling at the edge of demise.

Resmaa Menakem: That’s it. Yeah, that’s it.

Bayo Akomolafe: It’s at the edge as things flail and dissipate and flow into the ether. There is a kind of work that is present, that is embodied, that is both grounding and releasing and expansive, that this is an attempt to experiment with. And I cannot think of any other person I would rather do this with, any other persons I’d rather do this, with than my elder brothers. Emphasis on elder.

Resmaa Menakem: I knew he was going to do that. I knew he was going to do that again.

Bayo Akomolafe: Yeah, yep.

Orland Bishop: And I would just say as well, Tami, this kind of hospitality, this space, this forum is the example of the kind of relationships we want to, in a way, honor. It’s not just an interview. This is a hospitality that I think it’s time that we all share. So thank you as well for hosting us.

Bayo Akomolafe: Thank you, Tami. Thank you, Tami.

Resmaa Menakem: Yeah, thank you. Thank you for hosting us.
Tami Simon: Thank you. Thank all three of you for your deep hospitality and welcoming of me and the Sounds True audience. I have tremendous gratitude pouring out. Thank you.

Resmaa Menakem: Thank you.