



B Merikle

Transcript: Matrilineal Knowledge and the Magic of Liminal Space

Sarah Greenman:

Hello, and welcome to Collaborative Alchemy. My name is Sarah Greenman and I'm a Creative Alchemist, artist, storyteller, writer and facilitator. I believe that your creativity is a gift meant to be wielded with great love and joy. It is a bone-deep tool for justice, healing and revelatory collective liberation. Collaborative Alchemy is a series of conversations with artists, thought leaders, activists, farmers, educators, creatives and other polymaths where we tell our stories, expand our histories and hold space for new ways of being. Today, I'm talking with artist and activist, B Merikle. In their day job, they work as a nonprofit executive director, challenging anti-blackness everywhere that they hold space and lead groups. B's heart-centered work is profoundly informed by the women that came before them. And B intentionally seeds liberation in all that they do, with eyes focused on the coming harvest. B says that they believe deeply in the power of stark contrast, trauma and pleasure to create new black futures that free us all. So let's jump right into this conversation.

How important is intuition in your life?

B Merikle:

Oh, intuition, especially right now is just, it's the key. It's the key right now. I have always walked through life, one, being told by family, but now raising a child very similar in kind of space of like, of like I was an old soul and had been here before. And that feeling of old soulness for me, I think intuition best captures it. I was like, I feel like I've seen this before. I feel like I've done this before. I feel like I've experienced this before. And it was always this gut butterfly feeling of, this is not new. But then society was very much like, where's your empirical evidence to show us that this is the correct path or the correct thing.

So I had that really tapped down a lot in my life, until I started painting again. And Flora Bowley was a really big influence on me, and that I had been following her for a while, had purchased some of her books. But in 2018 October, I got to go to a workshop in her luscious studio. And just being able to, for a whole week, with my kids taken care of by my sister around the corner, just getting to intuitively know what the next thing was that I wanted to do, was the tapping into my intuition that I've never let go of since then. Especially since it was such a visceral form of intuition.

Sarah Greenman:

I love that it shows up physically for you. I love that you've already hooked this up for us, between intuition and painting. What does that feel like to you, somatically?

B Merikle:

I love how you asked it in the somatic space. How it manifests for me on the canvas is that when I'm painting, generally speaking, I like to paint with music on. And so I am a person that can get lost in the words, but generally for me, music is very much about the little undertones and undercurrents of a space. It's the dead space in between the notes that I really feel. And so on a canvas, I think I most physically learned this in Flora's workshop, but also had noticed that I intuitively do this, like when activating a canvas, just starting with these big luscious strokes and even little small staccato strokes based on like a drum line or something, in a piece, are things that just really, it's kind of hard to describe. But I feel like my heartbeat syncs up with the music.

And then I feel it all the way in my fingertips and I'll feel it in my toes. And it's like, I don't need a brush, just let me get some paint on my fingers and put it on a canvas kind of space, because I want to be that intimately connected to the mark making. And the intuition goes beyond that. Because as I'm listening to a piece of music, there are big spaces in music and small spaces. And so I can feel my body just flowing with that. Am I making big circles with my arms? Or am I making really small, tight and in a little corner marks? I wouldn't even know how to describe the marks, but fingerprints or scratches that just really get into the size of the music, so to speak.

And even when I'm not listening actively in my studio to music while I'm doing something, there's always a song of some sort that's playing in my head. And so that, in and of itself, will show up on the canvas as well.

Sarah Greenman:

It's interesting, when I look at your work, I have a really strong and overwhelming feeling of rhythm, because of the way that they're painted. It's like, you can hear your paintings.

B Merikle:

Yeah, I love that. I love that.

Sarah Greenman:

I love it. I was looking through some of your work, and it's so beautiful and dynamic. And I saw this hashtag that you use, use less white, or useless white, it's sometimes reads to me.

B Merikle:

Yeah.

Sarah Greenman:

And I love that. I would love if you would speak a little bit about that phrase, what it means to you and how it manifests in your paintings.

B Merikle:

Yeah, and I love that word, manifest. Because the first thing that it makes me think about when I think back to that hashtag, the actual phrasing, as I intended it, was use less white. And so in October of 2018, I went on this really lovely excursion to Cortez Island in British Columbia, Canada. There were about 25 of us that were coming together and had asked us to do this entry into our space together by doing bios of each other. So there were people I had seen bios of, that I was like, ooh, I totally have to get to Canada to meet these people. I don't care who's facilitating, I just need to go meet these people.

And one of those people turned out to be this really lovely, I think he was like 27, at the time, Colombian dude. Who had come to this space in almost the exact opposite space that I was in. So I was coming to this space because I was like, okay, my energies in my life are that I tend to come off pretty directly and in all sorts of words, that people would probably describe as more masculine than femme. And I was like, I want to go here with people I've never met before in my life, and really try to tap into my femme space. And this person had come, having been called in a couple of times by his community, around how he presented in masculine ways. And so wanted to tap more into his feminine energies and like, how do I sit in space? And how do I hold container and not just push in with my ideas all the time?

But we were so really greatly matched together, in that this person, in that time, in that space before all of the Black Lives Matter, particularly movements of last year, 2020, I was in this space of like, I do you love doing racial equity work, which I do, as my day job. But I was also feeling a bit drained and was feeling really exhausted and was like, maybe this isn't my calling. And this person helped me to tap into like, okay, well, what is your calling? And what would it mean if you actually embrace your blackness, instead of always tried to shape it into this space of like, can I be the nice Black person? Can I be the non-threatening Black person, all this other kind of stuff. So long story short, to say that use less white came up in that, I was like, well, when you talk about painting, which is something I really want to get back into, almost all the time, we're talking about how we find the light in a painting. And how do we use white to get to this space of energy and life and all this stuff.

And black is always thought of as dark and death in all this space. And my peer coach was like, well, why can't black be life? I mean, you're Black and you're life-giving, so why can't that be the space? Why can't you use less white? And I was like, that's a thing? I can use less white? My goal was to paint for 30 days straight, using no white on my palette. And I was like, first of all, paint 30 days straight, how am I going to make that happen? But also, no white? How does this happen? And that coincided right with coming back to Flora's workshop where she sends this lovely list of, this is what you're supposed to bring, and this is what we'll use and she's like, and bring your white. I was like, so, I want to be super open to everything you have to teach me in this workshop. But I'm also on this journey where I'm trying to use less white.

And she was just super lovely about like, you don't have to break up with that idea in order to come to the workshop, but also, bring it just in case. Because you might find that it's the one thing that you really, really crave and you don't want to be without something that you really crave just because you, on Monday, thought that this was what you craved and then on Friday you craved something else. And she was also like, I have some, so don't sweat it. And I ended up taking white, but then also in that expensive space at that workshop, just really getting educated on like, what is the purpose of white? And so when some people would, I don't know that I want to call it misread, but misread the hashtag and be like, useless white? I was like, yeah, it's kind of useless right now, I don't need it for what I'm trying to do.

But yeah, it was a really great impetus there and it showed up in probably the biggest body of my work to date, has been my acrylics that were very black heavy. And the blackness is every time that I was reaching for, like, okay, I want to blend into white and light and societal norms of like, I need to go this

direction with the paint. I was like, no, no, no, let's visually mark for ourselves that this is where you craved white, not necessarily on the canvas placement itself, but the heaviness of the thick, dark landscape that I asked people to enter to in my opinions, was an evaluation of my own hooks into whiteness. And not beyond just the white think piece, like that's been a journey of my own, of how do I unhook from, not white people who I love, I love lots of white people in my life. But the concept of whiteness, the concept of white as supreme, as the go-to, as the thing that we need to do.

I was like, what if I use less of what society is saying I need more of? And this has spilled over most recently into the construct of capitalism in and of itself.

Sarah Greenman:

It's so interesting to look at that body of work that you created, it's so ebullient and filled with luminosity. And it's clear that there isn't white. It's like an obvious absence. And I always hook it up with, it's not needed. We don't have to have it, it doesn't need to be a default in the art world, it doesn't need to be a default in my world. And like you say, that it's that construct of whiteness that we always are looking to it as first option. And it...

B Merikle:

Yeah, and it's really interesting, I've been in a space in my life where I've been, I feel like my re-entry, I don't want to say post-COVID, because I think it's worse than it's ever been right now. But my re-entry in this part of our life with the COVID experience has been opening up and letting more, I tend to be a no new friends kind of person. So that whole January experience was like, I'm intentionally going to find some new friends. But so coming out of COVID and being like, hey, we can open up a little bit, maybe just meet some people online, and they can be online friends. And that's cool. But recently, especially coming out of what everything last year and particularly last summer was, and being in this really reflective space as I've been in, I felt like as a Black person, my blackness was super turbo charged and awakened in delicious and beautiful ways that it hadn't been in a long time.

And so I know that I present differently in the world than I did ever before last summer. And so that whole space around the conscious choices that we can make. A lot of them are unconscious choices that we've made our whole lives. I can definitely point to spaces in my life where I feel like I've had to consciously choose, like, you don't have to be that black right now, or you don't have to wear your hair natural, or you don't have to wear the braids, just go ahead and straighten it. Or just go ahead and wear the suit, you don't need to wear the beautiful dress and the skirt that you want. And all these very conscious decisions on my part to choose to be less Black that I have felt like a lot of white folks in my life, haven't had the need, but even more so, the luxury to choose that white isn't the only option.

And a lot of the friends, I live in the Pacific Northwest, so most of the people I come into contact with are white folks. But a lot of the newer white people in my life, I've been testing this on with. I'm like, okay, so you say you're white, but are you choosing white? Or do you even know that there's an option not to choose white? And then I'll share examples of where I'm like, there are lots of times in any given day where I have a choice to make. And I don't know if I'm always feeling like it's, I get to choose or if I'm forced to choose, but I make choices every day about how black I am.

How many times a day do you make choices about how white you are? And more times than not, probably you don't even think that you have a choice. It's just the standard issue that you're going through life then, and you're not taking the time to think about, what if I chose that I wasn't going to do these things that center my whiteness? Especially now that I hang out in much more black spaces. I'm like, what does it look like for you to not center your whiteness, particularly in black spaces?

Sarah Greenman:

My goodness, it's interesting because when Jack and I, my partner and I, think about our whiteness, and the ways in which we move through white space as white people, it became super clear early on that we'd have to literally betray whiteness. We'd have to actively seek out seeing it, naming it in white space, with other white people. Like in what ways are we continuing to manifest whiteness as the norm, as the center of this conversation? In our parenting, in our relationship, in our community building.

B Merikle:

Like in my case, I've never grown up in an all-black community. But I did grow up in El Paso, Texas, which was primarily LatinX. And so I grew up with my mayor not being white, my doctor not being white, my teachers not being white. And so whiteness was not the norm for me. Blackness wasn't the norm either. But it was this very different cultural and ethnic experience than what a lot of people have grown up with, particularly in this country, where people often talk about race relations being very black and white. And I'm like, there're so many more nuanced layers to that, but being able to actively, concretely call out, what are white constructs versus what are indigenous constructs versus what are LatinX constructs, versus what are black constructs is a fascinating exercise to me.

Because I always think it's really interesting that we call it white privilege in regards to being able to choose not to engage with anything other than whiteness, because I think it's so sad, and that folks are missing out on so much. Because there is a whole world getting outside of even just the states, which again, back to October 2018, was the first time that I was deeply immersed with people who were immigrants and not of this country. And the reality is, it's probably not the first time that I actually lived it. But it was the first time I really noticed it. Because that was my privilege, being a US citizen right on a border, in a border town, before even the most terrific of border town activities are happening with babies in cages. But even back then, even living in a border town, I had the privilege of being born on a particular address, on a very narrow three-mile strip, that if I would have been born three miles over, I wouldn't have been born in this country.

And that privilege that I had, I've been grappling with a lot, in that I'm like, is it really a privilege to like not ever think about or have to worry about or even concern my life with what it means to have been born in a completely different country, and to have to navigate what it means to be born in another country? And so that, of course, cascaded, because I'm Sagittarius, so we're the philosophers of the zodiac. And that cascaded into the whole space of like, what is white privilege? Is it really a privilege to have never had a doctor who wasn't white? Then what are you missing out on in terms of, what I've gotten from my non-white doctors is a willingness to go outside of the standard, like you've got 20 minutes. And if you don't get it done really, really quickly, in 20 minutes, I don't have more time to sit here and talk with you.

And just, I mean, I'm a food lover. So just the food alone, I'm like, think of all the flavors you're missing out on in this world, by being like, oh, the only way to make soup is this way. I'm like, if you've never had *Menudo* though, and you've always thought of parts of those animals as trash. And you've never even been like, I'm so poor that I need to put this in my soup, you're missing out, you're missing out on all the flavor.

Sarah Greenman:

Absolutely. I think there's just this huge loss of humanity for white folk who don't have this open, multilateral understanding of what the spaces that they inhabit or could inhabit. And it's so narrow. And I love when Sonya Renee Taylor talks, when she talks about hierarchies of privileges, which I hear you

pointing out with your citizenship, that's one of the hierarchies of privilege. Or is it thinness, or is it able-bodiedness, or is it-

B Merikle:

All of them-

Sarah Greenman:

There's all these different hierarchies, and I'm just so interested in living in a much more juicy, multilateral way now.

B Merikle:

Yeah, it *is* juicier. I love that way of describing it. It's just so much juicier.

Sarah Greenman:

You have been working towards, for a long time, and dreaming into being this idea of a space called The Gerri. And I'd love to sort of make a little right hand turn and talk about your visions for what that is, and how it might come into being for you.

B Merikle:

Yeah. If people could see my giant smile right now, just thinking about The Gerri. So my mother's name was Gerri, Gerri Michelle. And she had me young, when she was 19. So we were really close friends throughout all of her life. She passed away in 2017, August 2017. Ironically, just as that big eclipse was coming across the country, and that we could see in the Pacific Northwest, she was in hospice care for about a week right before that. And on that exact day, she passed away 20 minutes before the Eclipse. And I am convinced she did it because she knew I would not step outside to go watch it if she were still alive, because I wanted to be there for her last breath.

Sarah Greenman:

I did not know that, that is incredible timing.

B Merikle:

She literally went out and blocked the sun for me, moved the moon to block the sun for me in her home going. And so that's the depths of the kind of relationship me and my mother, Gerri had. I've been fascinated for the longest time with the concept of home. I grew up living in a lot of different, I grew up in El Paso, Texas, but in the northeast part of El Paso, Texas. And the very few people who know El Paso will know that there are seven school districts in the town. Some really tiny ones on the west side, some really tiny ones on the east side. And then two main ones in the actual city of El Paso, [inaudible 00:21:06] El Paso School District. I bounced between those two main school districts because again, but for three miles, and where I lived, I either lived in one district or the other. And so up until high school, was not homeless.

We moved in the projects, we were in a trailer park, we were in an actual house in little suburbia life with my stepfather who was in the military, who also passed in December 2020. But we were all over this little small tract of Northeast El Paso, and I went to a lot of different schools. And I always felt most home when I was either hanging out somewhere, curled up under my grandmother in her garden somewhere or with my mom. And I didn't really get to spend a ton of time with my mom, because she

usually worked two or three jobs. And so between being latchkey kids, or hanging out with my grandmother around the block, and my stepfather was stationed out of country and all kinds of stuff, home was just this concept for me, that it was never really an actual house that we owned. Because my mother never owned a home, she rented wherever we were staying. And so that was part of it.

But then also, I was really blessed to have a long, three, almost four years with my mother who passed of cancer. And pretty early on into our experience because of medical apartheid, basically, and her lack of access to care, she was pretty terminal from the very beginning of being diagnosed. And we spent a lot of time living on hope and a prayer that maybe she would be the one or 2% who would make it, and just really living into every single moment that we got with her. Living in El Paso, there wasn't really great exceptional cancer care. So she ended up moving to Houston, more of the like moving into different medical apartments and experiencing, what is home and it's not a place, it's, to me, it's been a person. And then she moved up to my house and lived with me for the first year of my daughter's life.

And so like I said, I've always been chasing this notion of home. And she is always the first thing that comes up for me. And then before this last year, but the last two years at my previous employer, it was a dream job. I was paid to take people on sojourn to Montgomery, Alabama to the Equal Justice Institute, and the Peace and Justice Memorial, aka the Lynching Memorial. And I think a lot of people are like, that's macabre. Like, why would you want to go to something like that? I'm both on all ends of the Black-white spectrum of like, why do you want to go through that, but I've never felt so much home as being in my mother's mother's ancestral lands of Alabama.

And I don't know, most of my history, I don't know where we originate from in Africa, I don't know the full scope of where in the states we entered into enslavement, but this whole space of just feeling deep rest, every time I went to Alabama, like I knew that I had to take people to this experience. But I was also paid to be like, I'm going to take these people on day one. And on day two, I'm going to take them to this other place and then I'm going to have three days to rest and I can bring in the most delicious food and hire the greatest black caterer to come through. I can create these luscious playlists, I can get us set up in these beautiful Airbnb spaces. And it was just cultivating, again, this sense of home.

And every time I went, I would pick up just the clay, red clay dirt of Alabama and feel this striking sense of, you need to create a space where people can come for respite. And they can also come for knowledge and they can come for connection. And The Gerri itself, I've always wanted to go back home. And home to me has felt like El Paso for the longest time. I want to get back to the desert and desert thunderstorms and beautiful sunsets and road runners and coyotes. And that just feels home to me. And it was always home to my mother. And so El Paso has become synonymous with my mom for me. And The Gerri, naming a respite center after her, because she was always not just mine, I have two siblings as well. But she was one of nine children. And she's just an incredible person that everybody could count on. And so naming a respite center that is in a hot, deeply hot, restorative desert, magical place after my mother has been a dream for probably the last five years.

I always envisioned that it had to look a very specific way. Like you have to go buy a house that has at least four bedrooms and lots of space so that you can create other little bungalows, so that people can come and live in community and you can set up your homestead and all this other kind of stuff. But especially in the midst of COVID, where everybody who had an Airbnb was like, okay, what does it mean to have any kind of income? And my own desire to unhook from capitalism, and this space of like having people pay to come to a place, it's currently looked much more virtual. And how do I offer people respite in much smaller ways that, maybe they're not staying the night, but they're coming in for a hosted tea party, or they're coming in for, maybe it is an overnight. But it grows and contracts in ways that are less threatening to me, than before the catalyst circle.

I think in jumping into this current job, going through COVID, being intimately attached to the Catalyst Cohort and people like yourself, and so many of our other catalysts, who are just really adaptable to being able to make their dreams happen in ways that are best fit for the moment and time that we're in. As opposed to, this is my plan, and I can't believe the plan isn't working exactly as I said, has been this really delicious space of biting off much smaller fundraisers for The Gary, like the oracle deck and some other things that I have coming down the pike, has been far more in flow with who my mother was and her energy that's coming through that space. Who her mother was, and her energy of like, yes, come back to the desert, but also do what you can where you are.

I do still have the big dream of actually purchasing property out in West Texas and creating a respite space for people to come into, and just be able to take really awesome workshops from all the lovely artists, people I knew in my life. Come eat fantastic food that we've grown, come, bring your babies and let's all just sit around in circle together with our littles and really inter-generationally, create this space of loving connection and engagement with one another. Particularly for organizers and activists who almost never, one, can afford to get out of any space that they're in, but also, not just financially, but time-wise, it's always crushing that we got to go and do the next march and do the next thing. But also you need to take time for yourself.

And so I still very much am committed to fundraising this space, and being able to unhook the access to that space from capitalism, so that people who really need it can find their way there, while also honoring and really providing for the various different providers who would come through that space. Be it the artists who come through and share their magnificence with our community, to the people who cook with us, to the people who come and sprinkle water on our gardens. All of those folks deserve to have lives that they get to do the things they enjoy and bring them joy, while also being cared for and taken care of.

Sarah Greenman:

It's so interesting too, I hear you pointing at this idea, a roundabout of Oasis and that, that can happen in lots of different ways. And when I think about the ways in which you process, what respite and joy in the midst of chaos and trauma can look like, gosh, I get excited. I really believe in the beauty of the way you dream forward and I just, all the money, like I want to give all the money, all the time to-

B Merikle:

And that's the really beautiful thing. We've been conditioned in this society to believe, we have to do it all on our own, we have to figure it out on our own. I probably shouldn't name names, but in my daytime world, there are certain foundations based off of certain people's wealth, that it's like, you have to come up with the great proposal to go to this individual, very wealthy white person and give them a tax break. So that they can give away some funds. And that's the way you're successful. And what I've been grappling with a lot in this past year in particular, with lots of time to think to myself is that, and I'm sure I'm not the only person, but I've definitely been conditioned to find it difficult to ask for help, to find it difficult to accept help. To find it difficult to believe that there are people out there who are like, you have an amazing vision and I want to be part of that.

And there's different ways we can be a part of each other's visions, but some of us have financial resources that we're like, I would lay all kinds of money down on that. But I've been conditioned to believe in scarcity. And to believe that, oh, I'm struggling, they're struggling, there's no way. And to not even ask, not even offer, it's not even an ask, but not even offer the opportunity for people to be a part of building something different and magical and beautiful and special. Because we're all in this space where like, we don't deserve that. And it's been this really delicious unhooking. I think that that is a very,

again, I put really clear distinctions between like, white people are telling that and versus the concept of whiteness itself.

I think it's a very white concept-based concept to be like, scarcity is a thing. I'm like, in my ancestors' villages, scarcity was never a thing. If I'm eating, you're eating. Especially experienced this growing up in the projects. In the projects, I never had to feel a way about asking a neighbor for a cup of flour, or sugar or whatever. They weren't like, well, if you can't afford it, then I guess you don't need it, kind of thing. Whereas in my current neighborhood, where we have all the wealth in the world, for the most part, it's just a very different vibe about what we're doing to help each other out. And that's not lost on me at all.

Sarah Greenman:

This new era, this new time of being more comfortable with mutual aid is allowing us to re-remember our ancestral knowledge about how we share community in village space. Because I come from that in Scottish culture. I mean, I really know that when I look back at the people I came from, they're living in total communal space. They have to. And so I have that in my background as well. And I feel like we're kind of re-remembering right now, that we are all on this little blue dot together. And there's enough, there's enough, we could do it, we could do it. That's why I get really excited about the kinds of visions that you hold space for, like The Gerri.

And I want to sort of circle back to your trip that you took with folks to Montgomery, to Alabama. What I heard in your description was, yes, the trauma and the history that lives there, and the sort of reverberatory trauma of that. But slammed up right next to extreme joy and rest and respite. I it's like this huge source of nourishment. And that seems super alchemical to me, and it's what I love about the work that you're doing, because it has an alchemical element to it. It feels magical in its practicality.

B Merikle:

Yes, I really appreciate you seeing that. Because I do, at my last job, they used to always say, oh, you're the woo-woo one. And I was like, yes, I am... If you ask me to do an opener for the meeting, I'm going to read you poetry. If you ask me to do an icebreaker for us, we are going to do the experiencing thing. And people are like, oh, she's going to make us experience with each other again. I'm like, yes, I am. You're going to get out of your head for two seconds and you're going to get into your body. So I was that person. And to your point about the alchemical nature of that is that, as a Sagittarian, we're temperance. And so being able to slowly pour back and forth into each other and come up with whole new existence is, I completely believe that I'm on this earth to live into my full Sagittarian temperance ways.

And so I've grown more and more, and I still think I have such a journey to go. And I really look forward to it, but grown more and more to bringing in the magic into our spaces. And I've had the extreme privilege pleasure of sitting at the feet of adrienne maree brown in this really incredible workshop back in October of 2018. (That was just such an incredible month for me.) At the end of October, beginning of November, I went to Detroit, and I got to take my baby girl along with me too. And it was just magic, being amongst all the blackness, all the queerness. It was so incredible.

But one of the things that stuck with me from that learning space was that, adrienne was like, "The reason why I hold these workshops is because people expect us as Black folks, and particularly as queer Black folks to show up in spaces and be all magical. It's going to be magic, because a Black person's facilitating." And she's like, "I mean, sure, bring that too, but also, I'm going to give you some skills to make sure that you can show up and facilitate well." So hearing her talk about, you can show up with your magic, and it can coincide right next to like this, and I do think that magic is skill too. So don't hear

me saying that I don't. But to me, the way I internalized it was like, you can show up in your corporate suit. And you can be in front of that corporate group. And you can bring your magic to it too.

And so those Montgomery trips in particular, were the first time that I really realized that one of the... When I was in high school and was nerding out and was like, okay, I need to take the SAT, but I don't have any SAT prep money, my high school English teacher at the time was like, "All you need to know is the definition of the word juxtapose. And that's all, the rest is good." And I clearly needed to know more than that, but he was making a point as a white man in my life in a very brown space, brown and Black space, that he was like the one word that tripped me up from getting a perfect score on my SATs was this word juxtapose. I didn't know what it was, I hadn't come across it. And so then I got obsessed with learning the definition and everything.

And so ever since he told me that, I've always been fascinated with the juxtaposition, particularly of those liminal spaces, when we're transferring in between spaces. So I've always been a night owl, who certainly loves to be up right as the horizon is starting to make itself known again, not necessarily particularly for the sunrise itself, but just when the darkness is changing into light, that particular liminal space. And so with the Alabama trips, there is just so, so much literal heaviness. I don't know how many people who have been to Alabama who will listen to this, but the times of year we were going, it was humid, so the air was literally heavy.

We were going into an emotional space where the first couple of times I went, it was mixed race groups, then we actually created, based off of feedback, a black only group. But you're in Montgomery, Alabama, it's not just a black city. So even if you only take a black group of people with you, you're still going to bump into white folks when you go to the memorial kind of space. But all of that were things that I, again, not that I'm, I'm definitely not obsessed with death and heaviness and all that stuff, but I'm more comfortable than the average person. And being able to be like, let's feel into all of that. And let's like plan for the fact that, if you spend three hours at the Lynching Memorial, you're probably going to need at least three hours to recover from that. So let's not plan dinner for right after you get back from that. Let's have planned downtime.

And if you want to spend that downtime, which a lot of people did, sucked into spending more time at the memorial, or you want to spend that time walking the streets, or you want to spend that time taking a nap, whatever the case is, I'm not wanting to dictate to you what you need to do. But I do want to create the space for you to be able to experience both the joy and the, my word this year is miracle, and I didn't have it back then. But I think that is what I was really intent on creating the space for, because so many of us in the Black community who are descendants of the Middle Passage, have no idea where our people came from. Where they came through on this land. And so setting foot there, and being immersed in the experience of families coming on to this land, families being ripped from this land, families being sent all over, families going through just the trauma that was the slave trade in this country, is an emotional experience.

And different people experience emotions in different ways. But I also wanted to show people that it is a, pardon my language, but it's a literal goddamn miracle that most black people in this country who are descendants of the Middle Passage actually even exist. And I wanted to show people what that miracle meant embodied in real time. And so I was really intentional about like, okay, we're going to eat a certain kind of food when we're here. I'm not going to let you be on per diem and go get your McDonald's. I am going to bring in a caterer who is going to serve you amazing Caribbean cuisine. And you're going to start making the connection between like, why does someone in the Bahamas cook the same kind of food as someone in New Orleans as someone in Alabama? I am going to activate your brain to see that this label of "minority" and "less than" and "not worthy" and all these things, that people who were enslaved were labeled.

It is, I will say it again, a literal goddamn miracle that your people had people who had people who have you on this land. And that miracle was, I mean, I talk about God, but I mean it in lots of different ways than other people process it. But God seeded you to be here in so many different ways. From your food, to your names, to the way that you resisted when people came for you, when you tried to exercise your rights, like you were buried, but you were a seed. And look at how this harvest is coming up.

Sarah Greenman:

You have so beautifully encapsulated why I love your work. And that piece, the miracle of it and the harvest, I want to connect this to something too that I heard you say once in a conversation. You said that your mother wanted for you always to be making your art and to be engaged in a creative process or a creative conversation with yourself. And I think it's so interesting if you sort of thread that all the way back, as you just did, that your people have people who had people who had people who have you, I think it's so fascinating that at the end of that, in this moment, in this lineage, your mother wanted for you the gift of creativity as your birthright.

B Merikle:

And I think it's even to the point of generations. The last time I was in El Paso, which was COVID times 2020, July 2020, I was in El Paso. And my aunt, my mom's sister broke out all these photo albums with photos I had never ever seen of my mother's mother before. And they were... I have so many questions, so many questions. Some of them I know and can place like, oh, that was at my elementary school when I was in the third grade at the spelling bee. But there are so many beautifully luscious central photos of her that I'm like, was this after she had nine kids, or before? Because this looks like after she got rid of that trifling ass ex husband of hers, and that she hit the streets.

B Merikle:

And if she could hit the streets when she must have been like 40 at that time, and I was coming into my 40 and struggling with my relationship and was like, what am I even going to be after not being this person's wife? Is it too late to start over and be this whole new B, as opposed to Bernadette? And I'm sure, I believe universe makes everything happen for a reason. So I'm sure it wasn't just random that my aunt pulled out these particular albums with these photos of my mother's mother and then her mother. Yes, my mother definitely was the person who was like, I always want you to be creative and I really wish that I would have had more time with her, and more questions answered with her to understand like, were you once artistic and wanted to be an artist or something? And that's where this is coming from? I don't know that, that's a story I make up.

But seeing my grandmother's photos and how she was thoroughly enjoying life and had these brothers' necks twisting, it just connects so deeply to my other project where I was doing the central creativity 100 day challenge. And I was like, oh my goodness, this is my grandmother channel in herself all the way through me, in all of these spaces where I was exploring, what does it mean to be black and femme and sensuous and creative? And I was like, this is my grandmother.

Sarah Greenman:

Well and how beautiful that those photographs held that sort of liminal space, that sort of bridgework between your generations. And now you have created this incredible soul rising oracle deck as a tool for a better understanding liminal space. I would love, before we go, for you to talk a little bit about your Soul Rising Oracle Deck, which I have, and is so exciting to use and nourishing, and I love it.

B Merikle:

I love using it with your alchemy deck. I love collecting artists' decks. I love symbolism, I love color, I thrift most of my clothes and most of my jewelry or buy it directly from a maker, that I'm like, I know your story. And so story is super important to me in the space of, I bought this thrifted top, and I'm going to tell you the story of who it's been on and where it's been. And so that whole creating of the oracle deck, I didn't know it at the time, when we abruptly all moved to Zoom in, well, for me, it was April. Yeah, April. Because in Washington state, we were one of the first states, not the first state, but one of the first states to shut down and do stay home, stay healthy because we had some of the first outbreaks of COVID.

I'm an executive director at a nonprofit now, I took that job on... I had some transition space, but I didn't officially become executive director until March 30th, which was right in the middle of the week that the governor shut everything down. So stayed home and was like, I got to figure out this, clearly haven't completely figured it out, but got to figure out this whole Zoom thing. And be on a call basically back to back to back to back, all day long. And to say that I was not thriving in that space is an understatement. I had to quickly, as quick as I could, figure out how to rearrange my days, and even how I was engaging in Zoom calls, so that I didn't completely lose my mind just sitting there all day long, trying to hold in all my bio stuff.

So what I ended up doing was starting out watercolor painting. First I had some coloring books that I was like, okay, well I'll just use my watercolors to cover these books. But then my daughter, who was four at the time, would come in during her, I refuse to take a nap breaks, and be like, "Mommy, can I watercolor with you?" And so together, we would just cut up these pieces of watercolor paper. And we would shoot them back and forth with each other. And just, we weren't trying to paint a fish or a bird or anything. We're just abstractly putting color to paper. And it started with us doing that. And then I was like, wow, this is the most soothing relaxing space I've had, even though I'm like stressed that my daughter is here with me. And I'm trying to work and all this other kind of space. Like I could just turn off my camera and go to town painting.

And so then people picked up on that at work and were like, oh, you out here painting? Why don't we get to do that? I'm like, you can do it as much as you want. But I felt a little called out and called in. And so my night owl tendencies, as I started to get insomnia, started to kick in. And every night I was just like, okay, well, I'll just paint two halves of a piece of watercolor paper every night. And so was born a bunch of a series of watercolor paintings that I was like, oh, this is really cool. I bet I could share this with people. And a couple of people were like, well, could you just make it into a card deck? And I was like, oh, well, I could, but what would I put on them? I don't know tarot enough to make a tarot deck out of this, but an oracle deck, I could probably do that.

And so I was in another program getting free with Melinda Alexander and one of the activities she has us do is to shut everything down. Be off Instagram, be off of Pinterest, all the things that distract us from our own thoughts. And to use post-it notes to just create, what am I thinking? I can create my own memes and stuff like that. So was in a phase of that, pulled all of those out. Started putting the post-it notes to the different watercolor pieces and an oracle deck was born.

Sarah Greenman:

I think it's so perfect for somebody who is working inter-generationally with your own art, in terms of the concepts of it, to just actually physically do that with your daughter is genius. It's so, so good. It's so good.

Sarah Greenman:

B, I can't thank you enough for sitting down with me. It's such a sheer pleasure to talk with you.

B Merikle:

Thank you so much for the opportunity to have such a generative, beautiful, lush conversation with you. I love you so much.

Sarah Greenman:

I love you.

Sarah Greenman:

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