

Khadijah Ibrahiim

Season Butler

This afternoon, it's very much my pleasure to be joined by Khadijah Ibrahiim, an artist and poet who I admire very much and really one of the warmest people I know. Khadijah is joining me in the context of radical structures, which is a project looking at countercultures, circular economies, and strategies for creating an artistic sector. I'm gonna take that again. Khadijah is joining me in the context of Radical Structures, which is a project where we're looking at counter cultures, circular economies, and strategies for creating an arts and cultural sector where artists can truly thrive as workers and as people. Khadijah, it's really great to see you again. And welcome.

Khadijah Ibrahiim

Thank you, Season. And thank you for inviting me to be part of what I think is a very, very important and relevant discussion. So thank you very much.

Season Butler

Oh my gosh, my pleasure. I would love it if you could start out by just describing your practice a bit to our listeners.

Khadijah Ibrahiim

You know, well, most people may refer to me as Khadijah the poet, as Khadijah the mentor to young poets, [Leeds Young Authors](#). But actually, I, first and foremost, I like to introduce myself as Khadijah the individual, the woman. Who is a poet, who is an interdisciplinary artist, who really plays with art forms to reimagine poetry as performance, as live art. But I'm also the artistic director and founder of Leeds Young Authors.

Season Butler

And can you tell us a bit more about Leeds Young Authors because it's such a beautiful and inspiring initiative and seems to spring like directly from your heart.

Khadijah Ibrahiim

It really does spring from my heart, and I established Leeds Young Authors, in fact, as a name, named Leeds Young Authors back in 2003. But I was already working with young people in the 90s. And so as a poet and a writer, someone that was working around the concept of theater and performance, I established the group Leeds Young Authors to really be able to give young people in the chuck town community, mainly, but also the far reaching areas of Leeds and Yorkshire, an opportunity and the space to come and write. But also a safe space in which we could have these really open conversations, and how those conversations could become part and parcel of writing and performance. So that's what Leeds Young Authors is, it really does open its doors to young people of all backgrounds, regardless of where they're coming from. It doesn't matter about the area, it doesn't matter about the

gender, or sexual orientation, or race, or class. It's open to all young people. But also embraces older writers who are looking for the experience of working in the community, by giving back but also developing their experience of being writers, being facilitators. And so that's what Leeds Young Authors offers to the Leeds community.

Season Butler

I really love that it's such a space for meaningful togetherness and exchange across generations. And there's an author, Samuel Delaney, I'm going to paraphrase him, I don't have the quote solid in my head. But he says something like, life is at its most satisfying when there are spaces for meaningful interclass connection conducted in the spirit of goodwill. And I was really thinking about that, as you were describing what Leeds Young Authors is and the way people are in that space.

Khadijah Ibrahiim

Yeah, I love that. I love that, that kind of idea of goodwill. I got that spirit of goodwill from my parents, and my grandparents. And especially my parents who were activists in the city of Leeds. They came from Jamaica, my grandfather first in 1958, and then my grandmother in 1959, and my mother and father, between 1960 and 62. And so really, I grew up in an environment where these people were very radical about education, and about really giving something of themselves in the community. And so in the house, there was always meetings, community meetings, about change, about policies, you know, but more than anything was about equality, that everyone should have the right to that and the access to education. But also the way in which that household that I grew up in was an open door, it was very welcoming. And I just remember people staying at that house, in the 70s and in the 80s. And so I feel like I took something from that experience, especially from my grandparents, of giving back the importance of whatever you receive, you can share. Take a seat at the table, because there's plenty of food for all of us, and no one should ever go hungry. And that's what I believe in Leeds Young Authors, that young people should never feel the emptiness of not being able to have the ability to think and to create ideas. But they should be able to have that space to connect, and have those meaningful discussions. And those discussions that become part and parcel of performance.

Season Butler

I'm always saying we have to hear you speak. And I absolutely love hearing about this very kind of political care and the politics of care and community that seems to have been such a foundation for you growing up. And I'm going to return to your politics, and maybe trouble politics and care, especially when we think about ourselves as Black women trying to make artistic practice happen. But I'd love to know more about your own creative practice. And so could you tell us a bit about the early stages of your career, how you started out and what it was like being an emerging artist.

Khadijah Ibrahiim

Yeah. But I've had such an interesting and I think, very rich journey into art. And it started very, very young. The introduction to arts and culture came from that household that I was talking about. My mother sent my sister and I to tap and ballet school. And we also went to the School of Performing Arts. And so the introduction to thinking that art and culture could be an integral part of my life came at a very, very early age. I was doing contemporary dance, and very, very basic contemporary dance at a

school called Helles Middle, which was very, very well known in the city of Leeds. Helles Middle is responsible for creating the Northern School of Contemporary Dance. But also they were instrumental in the support of building some of those profound dancers that have come out of the city of Leeds, like David Hamilton, and Donald Edwards, and Fillmore James, who made the Phoenix Dance Company, the original founders. So I was part and parcel of that foundation of performance from a very young age. From the age of eight or nine, I was exploring movement and expression in the body.

And I took that into high school, a school called Intake High, and then into my sixth form, where I studied drama and performance, but also visual arts. So I had this richness of...I knew something was going to be artistic about myself, but I couldn't actually put that into words. I couldn't put that into an expression that looked like that could be a career.

So I remember from very young, my grandmother said to me, "What is it that you want to be?" I think I was probably about 12 or 13. You know, "What kind of work do you want to do? Where do you see yourself?" And I had no real answer for her. And I heard my older sister talking about law. So I thought "That sounds really good, I have no idea what law is but it sounds good." And it really impressed my parents. I said "Oh, I really want to do law!" because I really just wanted to impress. You know, when you're a child, you always want to impress the adults around you always want them to look at you in a real positive light. You never want to disappoint the people that are raising you. So you try to impress them with saying things that you really don't mean. You know, I had no real connection with law or anything like that.

But I could see that art was something that I really enjoyed. And I was really thankful at high school and in my sixth form years that I had a wonderful art teacher who could see something visually inside of me because I could draw. And I really loved all that expression of movement and drama, and drawing. And so I decided, with his support, that I would actually go to art school and I did visual arts, I did fashion. And I knew I loved all of that.

But there was something missing about that stage and performance and that expression. And there was also another side of me that kept journals from very young. And I would devise these plays in the street that I grew up with, with my five brothers and sisters, and I will tell them that you're in my play. And this is the character that you are. And I just really liked all those ideas. But it wasn't until much later on when I went to university, and I studied Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies, when I went on to study theater for my MA that I really felt I could invest in describing what it was that I wanted to do, finally.

Because I'd worked, I'd worked at Women's Aid, as an outreach worker supporting women who were subject to violence from known men, from known partners. And I'd done all of that. But each time I was working with these women, each time I was working in hostels, I brought poetry into the space, I brought performance into the space as a tool of well being. And so when I graduated from a university in 2001, with my MA, I made a firm decision that it was going to be theatre, it was going to be poetry, it was going to be all these layers of performance. So that was my early start. And I had no idea where to go, who to speak to. But I was very determined that the words that I was writing down on the page should find the stage to manifest itself.

Season Butler

And we're all so lucky that that came to pass. What were some of these early stages?

Khadijah Ibrahiim 23:03

Well, some of these other stages were really finding the confidence to go out there and see what was happening. And I went to Manchester, I went to London, I went...I just would read about the poetry scene, become familiar with poets that were out there already, people that were doing things. I was very much aware and inspired by some of those early poets like Linton Kwesi Johnson and Jean "Binta" Breeze. And that was easy enough to have that acquaintance because Linton Kwesi Johnson spent a lot of time in Leeds, and he used to stay at a friend's house, one of my good friends. He used to stay at their house. So the mother was good friends with him. And she was also a political activist, and she was one of Leeds' first black teachers. And she was very invested in equality and education, very similar to what my grandparents were doing. And she was very familiar with the work of my grandparents.

And so I was very acquainted with Linton and the way that he used poetry as a political tool, to really drive the message out. And I was so inspired. And then later on, I came across the work of Jean "Binta" Breeze. And I thought "Can you really write and perform in this nation language of the Caribbean, and put it on the page and perform it?" And so that was my early inspirations. So what I did is that I made a great effort to go to different cities and find out about the poetry scene and really insert myself into that poetry scene as a poet, and also someone that was enjoying theatre.

But also a part of me felt like an imposter because I hadn't actually performed any gigs or anything like that. I just knew I wanted to do this. And I'd done a lot of work in university around theatre, I'd done a lot of work working with women. And so I just had to take the brave step, and just get on the stage. But I will tell you, which is a bit of a secret, I really got nervous about the whole thing when I was offered to perform. Someone says, "Oh, you know, I think I've come across you before, you know. You're Khadijah!" And I was like, "Oh, wow. She's come across me before." And I thought, "How?" But anyway, you know, maybe she just saw me in these different venues, go into these different open mics, but I hadn't actually done anything on the stage. And I was offered a gig. And I got so nervous. And I asked my friend to do the gig for me. She was like, "Are you kidding?" I was like, "Yeah, just read my words."

Season Butler

Oh!

Khadijah Ibrahiim

And she did. She did it probably two times. She would introduce this work as Khadijah Ibrahiim, and then introduce herself as Martha read it on behalf of Khadijah Ibrahiim, who was actually in the audience at the side of the stage. And she did that twice for me. And then she turned around and said, "I'm not doing this again for you, you need to find that confidence to go out there and read your words. I love your words, Khadijah." And she really uplifted me to make me feel that I could actually do this. Not only could I just write, but I could actually perform. And I wasn't sure what that fear was because I'd

performed before in terms of dance, you know, and I'd been in school plays, and I'd done community things before on the stage. But I think the poetry and the words and the stage was something a little bit more different. And slightly more nerve wracking. But she really gave me that encouragement. And that's what I did. And then I've never looked back since.

Season Butler

Oh, my God, I love that. I feel so privileged to hear this story. And I can relate to your feeling like an imposter as well. I mean, when I started in performance, it was just a total lark. And I'd been wanting to perform for a long time, and then I just kind of started doing it. But it really was only in the context of having a really, really supportive context of people around me, a very supportive space where it felt like it would just...be okay.

Khadijah Ibrahiim

Exactly. And I think that's what it is, if you have the right team of people around you, the right set of artists that are there to encourage and uplift, then you feel like you can almost do anything. And because I received that, that really was the birth of Leeds Young Authors. I thought to myself, since I really wouldn't want young people to go through this journey alone, if I can give to them what was given to me at an earlier stage then by the time they reach that peak of going out there, they would have this immense confidence to grace the stage. And really know that their words had power and meaning, and that they could really be part of that community of artists, you know, that really do give and also enrich other people's lives with their words. But it's not just enough for me, Season. It's not just the poetry, it's that opportunity to create. Because I feel as an artist, if I'm not creating something, I feel like I'm not being myself. So that when I say that imposter syndrome, I realise I'm not an imposter at all, I'm just someone looking for the space that was never afforded to me back then as, you know, someone that said, "I want to be in theatre, I really want to perform," because those spaces didn't exist.

Season Butler

Yeah, it sounds like there's an element of some of your work, including Leeds Young Authors that's about giving over, not only skills, but a sort of ethics of being an artist that is very humane, and grounded in our humaneness and our needs. I was thinking that the imposter syndrome kind of says, "Who do you think you are?" And then someone like you finds their feet to the point where your response to that is, "Fuck it, let's find out."

Khadijah Ibrahiim

Let's find out, let's play, because that's what art's about, isn't it? I think that's what distinguishes artists from other people who do things, it's let's play, let's explore, let's really look at the way in which we can use these modes of creativity to embody narrative, to embody something that can speak to a wider community. I feel as artists, what we do is that we are observers of life. And we observe so many things. And in observing life, we become part of creating that narrative that can speak to a wider community. So we kind of break out of that, break out of that shell of that narrowness and make it into more wider, accessible art form. You know, I think that's what I'm trying to say there.

Season Butler

Yeah, yeah, for sure. So can you think of any, like early high points or sort of breakthrough moments in your early career?

Khadijah Ibrahiim

Yeah. I always feel that my career has been really slow. From the time I started, I feel like I'm always struggling to really get my foot through the door. And there's so many barriers that I feel like I've always got to overcome.

So there are moments where I can say, I've had some really great highlights, and some stand out more than others. And I think one of the things that stands out for me is back in 2009, there was a call out for artists to be part of the British Council's Talk South Africa. And I remember this email coming through to me, and I sent out to what I thought were more established poets at that time that had the likelihood of being able to, I don't know, secure a place and be part of that tour. **I'm still battling with myself in terms of worth, you know.** So I remember sending out to so many different people, but this email kept on coming back to me. People going, "This is something that you might be interested in Khadijah," about three or four times. And I'm sending it out send saying "This something that *you* might be interested in." And I thought, if somebody is saying to me, taking the time to send me an email, they've read it and they've thought maybe Khadijah could fit this, you know, she could be a fit for this thing here. Why not apply?

So I put in an application to the British Council. And what they would do is that they were creating as part of Sustained Theatre, they were creating a program of work that would take poets from the UK to South Africa, to do an exchange programme. And so poets from South Africa then would come to England. I made the application and that was in the December, and in the January I received an email saying I was successful. And then I received, in fact, I received a phone call that I was successful, and then the official email. And it turned out, even someone that I knew was part of Sustained Theatre. And he said that it was really, really difficult; they had hundreds of applications, and what he saw was some amazing names on there. But he also realised that these amazing names that were on there were coming from the south, and not really from the north, or the Midlands, and he really wanted to spread it very evenly as much as possible. And he was very much aware of my work. And he was aware of my work because, if you remember, I mentioned that I would go to Manchester a lot and see what was happening on the poetry scene there. And so that's how I met that person. And he started to really engage in my work and actually invite me to different events, different workshops. And so he said "We'll have Khadijah Ibrahiim on this programme." And that's how I got on the programme.

And so the highlight for me was going, knowing that somebody trusted that I could be part of this group called Verbalize and go to South Africa. The highlight was actually being in South Africa with these other amazing poets and being selected to go on Good Morning South Africa as the poet from the UK, to speak on behalf of poetry and the poetry scene in the UK. And I thought, "Wow, this is amazing." So it was a real highlight for me. And also just the way in which I felt this freedom to explore poetry in this wonderful landscape of South Africa, and really do this exchange of words and ideas with other South

African poets and really be inspired. And the two weeks that I spent there, I really felt that anything was possible. If I could be here in South Africa as a poet, then anything is possible to bring back to the UK.

And I mentioned that as a highlight because that relationship continued where the British Council really enjoyed what I was doing in South Africa, as part of that group, and invited me back as an individual to continue performing there, but also to bring some of those ideas of Leeds Young Authors to the townships and support some of those poets working with young people, and really developed this programme. So that relationship with South Africa lasted about three years where there was these wonderful exchanges where I would go back and poets from South Africa would come to Leeds and I would host them. And then we developed this idea of our young people meeting, but the young people wouldn't meet in Leeds, the young people would meet in the United States at this festival. So I think that was a double highlight of extending my work as a poet, but also as a director as well.

Season Butler

Brilliant, that's a really, really beautiful story. And in the next little bit of our interview, I want to think about the way that your career has progressed. And I really hear you when you say, *I feel like my career has been slow*. And this is something that I can definitely relate to in terms of having had false starts and ideas that didn't have any kind of confidence underneath them, so they couldn't build. And periods of ill health and periods of time when I needed to be spending my time earning money to pay bills, and that had to be the central focus. And it can feel sometimes so painful to feel like your practice is almost being withheld by other demands of life.

So I'll get off that slight digression. But I'm really interested in careers that don't just go from art school, to emerging artists, to sort of the young superstar flavour-of-the-month, into, like, established artists forevermore. But rather, I think a more typical experience are these starts-and-stops our careers with pauses and recalibrations. And I have had the sense from other conversations we've had that your career has been a bit like that. And so I'm wondering if that if you can take us through any of it.

Khadijah Ibrahiim 38:39

Yeah, I do feel that there's been pauses through my career. Some of those pauses have been times where I have not pressed the pause button. And I think I've only ever pressed the pause button probably once or twice in my life. But I think the pause button is often pressed when you're in spaces, or when spaces are not afforded to you, to really express yourself as an artist. So I think sometimes the difficulty a lot of the time, the difficulty can be location and environment.

And so the location sometimes can be a hindrance, but also gender. You know, there is this thing where most people don't want to talk about the issue of gender, and how people observe you, and then the issue of race. So being an African Caribbean woman in the north of England, those spaces become very limited. And often your voice is not either heard or not welcomed in spaces. And if your voice is not heard or you're not welcome in those spaces, it's difficult to be able to create work that needs to be seen.

I never stop creating work, I'm always creating work, whether it's in my home, or whether I find it another space to do that. But the pauses are almost that **you spend so much of your life, artistic life, trying to justify that you have the right to be in the space, or you have the right to have access to a space to be able to create.** And so there are often those difficulties that, not just myself, I know many of the people face those difficulties. But, speaking on behalf of myself, sometimes it's: *how do I feel part of that narrative of my life as an artist without feeling that I've been ignored? Or not heard, or being silenced, or being overlooked.* So sometimes there are those difficulties that you don't often find the space to talk about those things. Or if you do, it's very rare people, it's almost like trying to have the discussion around race and gender - people only have so much time to listen, and then after that, it's paused. We don't want to hear it anymore. Because there are other important things to discuss. That's how people feel.

But I think the most important thing that we should always be discussing, is the way we come together as humans, where we don't create those boundaries and those barriers. And so I think as an artist, I'm always climbing over those hurdles, or always trying to find a way to climb over the hurdles, always trying to find a way to remove the glass ceiling, so that I can create the work and show the work.

So sometimes those are the difficulties. But also, I'm a mother, as well; I have three children. And so that's when you press pause sometimes because you, you know, you take that time out to be a parent, to nurture your children, and to care for them. But also, **I've always found that balance that my children have grown up with me being an artist, watching me create ideas,** whether I'm writing in the office at home, whether I'm inviting people into the space to share poems. And so what happens is that when those pauses happen for you, that you don't pause yourself, that you find other avenues to create. And that space may be just in your home, where you invite a circle of friends and we share ideas. And we look at ways in which we can embody the art form, that we can also build confidence in ourselves. So, that when we do have those opportunities, that we're ready to pick up those opportunities and we have a body of work to take into a space.

So sometimes those are the difficulties that I often face. And then when you're facing some of those things, I think it's so important that we talk about health and well-being. Mental health and well-being; how these situations can actually physically and mentally affect us, where we may have moments, because I've had moments where I don't want to be seen. I just want to be in my space. And having dialogue with self. And the dialogue with myself is also about confidence to shake off what's happening. To shake off that negativity that I sometimes, not all the time but sometimes, feel when I go out into the wider world where you have the feel that you're being judged. And it's difficult to identify a particular time when you feel like you're being judged because they come to you as microaggressions. They come to you as a single word. They come to you as "you lot" or "you're not." You know, they come to in those terminologies where it's difficult to say, "Hang on a minute." That word or your thought pattern is actually having an affect on me mentally.

So I think throughout the years I've tried to, I guess, box things up and put them away as if they don't exist. But that's not a healthy way forward because I'm a Black woman. It's obvious, you know, when I walk into this space that I identify as female, I identify as Black. And that is part of the culture that I'm

happy to be part of. But also, it's a culture that is often being judged as well. And that's the difficulty, and the judgment is a historical judgment that some people don't subconsciously adhere to.

Season Butler

Yeah, and I feel like it's a judgment that, as I think you mentioned earlier, kind of constantly requires us to do the work of justifying why we're there. Which is, it's kind of sadistic, it seems sort of cruel, that we have to go through that as well as the labour of making work, the labour of constantly rebuilding our psyches and our self esteem in order to be able to show up, and then also, the work that just often falls on to Black women. There's that saying, *if you want something done, ask a busy person*, but I always think, "No, if you want something done, ask a Black woman."

Khadijah Ibrahiim

I don't know how we do it sometimes, you know. But also one of the things that we may do as Black females is carrying the heavy load.

Season Butler

Yes!

Khadijah Ibrahiim

Yeah. And I really don't buy into that strong Black female ideology. You know, I don't buy into it because I know there's times where I feel strong and there's times when I feel very, very weak, but people say "Get up and be strong." **And there's moments where I feel like, I don't want to be strong, actually, I'd like to feel quite, I'd like to be able to express at that moment in time that I feel vulnerable. Yeah, I feel afraid. I feel unsupported. I need hands to hold me and lift me. I'd like to be able to say that at times.**

But sometimes we can't, you know, because there are those invisible barriers that we're always trying to jump over, these hurdles. And the fact that I think that if we begin to look at being human, and we remove those barriers then we all understand that each of us has weaknesses and each of us have strengths. And some of us know how to build on those strengths. And **there are times when we need hands to hold us. And there's nothing wrong with that, you know.** So I really, you know, would love to be able to break down that ideology about Black women always been strong. There's a mental strength that we have, you know, because we don't have a choice sometimes. If we don't do it's not going to happen. If we don't, I don't know, if we don't get up and go to work, despite the environment that we find ourselves in that can make us feel quite isolated, then we're not going to get paid. It's difficult to prove microaggressions. It's difficult to prove how isolated you could feel in a crowded space. It's difficult to know that or to even explain when you walk into that space that you may be the only Black female of that body around the table. And that itself is quite challenging sometimes. Yeah.

Season Butler

I don't think it's a tension; I think it goes to the heart of the matter. And this is what I loved about the story that you told at the beginning, that you started out performing by asking your friend to speak for you, and there was something that made me feel like this is an affirmation that I have the right to vulnerability. I have the right to privacy, even though I perform. Even though my work is public facing,

when I need my privacy, I have the right to take it. And I love that that level of support, and that that finely calibrated supportive of, "Okay, I'm gonna hold you in this way. And now let's see if you can hold it," was such a part of your origin story. I just feel like that's really beautiful.

And we talked about politics as well at the top of the session, and I want to return to how you describe your politics, how you think of yourself as a political human.

Khadijah Ibrahiim

Do you know, I used to tell people, "I'm not into politics," because I viewed politics as something that you go and you vote for a prime minister that you don't like. And you didn't like the politics, so you ignore the politics of the country or the politics of society. But then I realised that's not possible. **Being political doesn't mean about where you place that vote on the day of an election.** I took it back to how my grandparents were very political. And what they were looking at, they were looking at the rights of education, that every young person, regardless of race, had the right to be in a classroom, and obtain quality education. In the 70s, that wasn't always the case. If you were a Black child in the classroom, you may have been placed at the back of the classroom, you may have been placed in the lowest grade, regardless to your ability. There was this assumption that you were not educated or that it was impossible to educate you because you came with all these downfalls that were placed upon you.

So I used to think that, you know, politics was something else. But then I realised, no, I'm political in the sense that I'm very much for gender rights and equality, and very much for women's rights and equality. In the early days I used to describe myself as a feminist. But then I started reading a lot of [bell hooks](#), and [Toni Morrison](#), you know, [Alice Walker](#), and they will call in this phrase *womanist*. And the reasons, the politics behind that in terms of being a female and being Black. And so I think a lot of my work is about how the female voice, the Black female voice, can be heard. How do we create those spaces to be heard, to be seen, to be appreciated? How do we shift the narrative and remove those notions of race and racism? How do we create this? I think that my work is about how I go into a liminal space and recreate performance that becomes a counterpoint of narrative, historical narrative. And that breaks down all these stereotypes, but also that looks at the vulnerability that we can face as being human.

And so I guess my politics lies within that. But also, I'm very much aware of some of the politics of some of those early political leaders like Malcolm X, and W.E.B. DuBois and the whole concept of *doubleness*. The idea that we live, as Black people, this doubleness in the context of our life. So there's something with me that was brought up in an African Caribbean household: the foods, the nation language, the idea of what it was to be female, at that time, in that household. And what we were doing in that house, or what I observed, what were the influences, and then coming out of that house and going into society, such as school, college, university, going into work, and realising that there was always this shift in my body, a shift in my stance, a shift in my language to explain or to fit in, to be accepted.

And then going back to this house of safety, this Caribbean house of safety, where the music was playing. The Caribbean food is being cooked, the spices, the laughter, you know, the dominoes being played, the rum being drunk, and the whole thing of how we celebrate life: marriages, funerals, all these

things. And I realised that this doubleness that I was living was very much part of how many people from various backgrounds may live. So speaking on behalf of myself, and the cultural background that I belong to, this African, this Caribbean culture, there was this doubleness that functions side-by-side within a wider society that often doesn't always accept your cultural values. And so my cultural values that were given to me was, and sometimes it's very basic things, you know, that we know that when we step into the home of somebody, you know, we'll wait to be invited. We step into the home, we may take off our shoes. We always bid them "Good morning", "good afternoon", "good evening", and we wait for them to tell us to take a seat. You know, with these things, these values that I was raised with that were really quite interesting. And that we didn't ask for a drink. And we didn't ask for any food until it was offered to you. I don't know how much of those values that I still keep with me. But there's a lot that trigger me at moments when I see things happening. And I think, "what would my grandmother say?", or my grandmother may revisit me in my consciousness and speak to me about maybe my own behaviour and how to pull that back and how to maintain respect and values.

So this is the doubleness that I feel that I live within this British society as a Black woman. I guess aspects of that is quite political in that sense. But also, I think everyone has a right to equality. So my work is about driving equality through my artistry. And if my art can speak about equality, if my art can speak about the sense of belonging, if my art can take me back to a time that I wasn't born, but it can take me back in history and really address some of those inequalities and I can bring them to the forefront today, then that's where I stand. And I think that's the political aspect of who I am.

Season Butler

I've never enjoyed hearing someone describe their politics so much before. I mean, I love that I asked you what your politics were, and I heard about hospitality. A story of hospitality, a story of recognition and reciprocity, the house of safety, and food, and music, and ancestors, and the right to live the full range of human experience. I'm so, so grateful.

Khadijah Ibrahiim

You're welcome.

Season Butler

So Khadijah, I'm wondering, what are you working on or involved with at the moment, anything that you can tell our listeners about?

Khadijah Ibrahiim

Yes, so for the last two to three years, I've been really exploring that sense of landscape. How bodies function in the landscape, looking at the aspects of folklore and traditions. The way in which we connect ourselves to the land, but also what we take from it, those ancestral practices. It was very, very broad when I started looking at these ancestral practices and landscape. And so what I did is I honed in and looked at the way in which I could explore the relationship of landscape as an investigation of belonging. Looking at healing, looking at spiritual purposes and practices as counterpoints for conventional modes of investigation and conversation.

So I honed right into that concept of the living and the dead. And that middle realm, that space in which conversations between the dead and the living what would these conversations be? So I call this work, this research Dead and Wake. And Dead and Wake is an investigation in which I start to look at, artistically, the practice of rituals and how it's associated with burial rites. So when the person passes away, a loved one, a friend, what are those burial rights that we afford to them, and therefore, what are the conversations that we begin to have with the living and the dead?

And so within Jamaican culture, which is what I started to focus on, there's a practice of Nine Nights, or 40 Days. And within this practice of Nine Nights and 40 Days, there are these wonderful conversations of manifestation and transformation of the dead, and the living having these conversations, but also the practice of burial rites. So I've been actually looking at how these burial rites transcend into folklore and conversations. How they've also been phased out over the years because of the shift of migration. So looking at the way in which my family migrated from the Caribbean to England, what were some of these traditions that they brought with them?

And I am first generation born in England from that generation of Windrush. So what did I know as burial rights, as I'm thinking about when my grandmother passed away, when my grandfather passed away, my mother is 81, who has these constant conversations about funerals? So I've really been exploring that narrative, but also within that narrative the richness of women being, I guess, sage women, healing women, women in which you would go to these healing yards to be able to get these prescriptions to heal yourself, or to prepare the dead. Or if the dead is not prepared in a particular way, maybe the spirit of that person will come to visit you. So you would have to probably go to the healing yard and have these conversations with these women who would create these prescriptions for you. So I've really been investigating how those prescriptions become part and parcel of the landscape. How we take these herbs and these plants and we create these prescriptions, and how these prescriptions have traveled from the African continent - some of them buried as seeds in the braids of the women's hair, or in their head wraps to be replanted. So that's what I've been exploring, seems very vast but I've really been exploring that as movement and stories and conversations.

Season Butler 1:07:48

That sounds so so excellent. It does sound, I wouldn't use the word vast, I would say it sounds epic.

Khadijah Ibrahiim 1:07:56

It's very wide. And I've had to, you know, it's been three years. So I've had really kind of take in sections. So the first section was looking at my family lineage, looking at some of those men and those women and then honing on the women, and finding out about some of their practices attached to my family. So going through family records, going through archives, going to Jamaica and really sifting through some of those archives found in the Spanish Town Archives in Kingston. But also how archives can be taken back to people who hold narratives, hold stories within their DNA, and how those stories can actually shape the archives and narratives to be retold again. So it started there and then I started looking at these burial rites, and then from there and now on how the landscape becomes part of us how we how we bury ourselves into the landscape or cremated into the landscape, and what we take from that as well.

Season Butler

This also reminds me of Guilaine Kinouani's notion of [homeness](#) as something that's sometimes withheld from Black people in Europe and in the Global North and that you know, sometimes there can be this sort of spiritual homelessness. You know, it's sort of you tell somebody where you're from and they go, "No, where are you really from?"

The notion of landscape that you're working with and what we give to it and what we take from it, and the way that we are connected to it really reminds me of this notion of homeness around race and space that's spiritual and psychological and also very, very political. And I don't want to take the conversation in too much of a profane direction. But I am really interested to hear from you something a little bit more nuts-and-bolts-y that gets to some of the purpose of the radical structures project. But I'm interested to hear what you think works well, and what you think works badly in the UK art sector.

Khadijah Ibrahiim

What do I think works well? Well, one of the things I think works well is that we have this real sense of arts and culture in the UK. And its place with value and importance. And I think that that's an important thing to recognise in Britain, that art is not something to be pushed to the side, art is something to be celebrating.

So I think that's a really great thing about Britain. Although I have seen art being pushed even further beyond its boundaries in other countries much more. And so I think Britain also has a lot to catch upon. The way in which it opens its gates to artists.

What I think doesn't work well? I think what doesn't work well, is the fact that **sometimes those selecting artists are not brave enough or brash enough, they're not braggadocious enough to really step out of the boundaries and sometimes take chances**, and look at artists of diverse backgrounds and really celebrate them. So when there's a breakthrough for an artist of a different cultural background, not just African and Caribbean, you know, they could come from the Indian subcontinent, China, wherever, and live in Britain or be born in Britain, and being part of this landscape of Britain is very, very difficult, even for them to be selected as the artists that could create this work. So I think it's changing and it's changing very, very slowly. I was so excited when, oh God, let me make sure I remember her name, because I have met her a couple of times, and I've been fascinated by her work. She won the Turner prize. Lubaina Himid.

Season Butler 1:12:52

Yes. Yeah. Lubaina Himid.

Khadijah Ibrahiim 1:12:53

Yeah. And, you know, being female, and I think I if I'm correct, I think she was the first woman of colour? Am I correct?

Season Butler 1:13:07

To win the Turner Prize?

Khadijah Ibrahiim 1:13:08

Yeah. I don't know, maybe I'm wrong.

Season Butler 1:13:10

No, I think you're right, that chimes with me, **but, you know, if we've got this one little fact wrong, I think we'll be all right.**

Khadijah Ibrahiim

Yeah, but also her age played into it as well. Her age had important factors, issues of a particular age, at the time. And I'd met her previously at a lecture and I'm so fascinated with that. And so you have those turning points, where you think, "Wow, that's amazing."

You know, Bernardine Evaristo also winning the Booker Prize, even though it was a joint win. Just knowing someone like Bernardine winning the Booker Prize really set the precedent at that time for a Black female, you know. And to receive that prize, you know, and to receive those accolades, but also someone who really invests in not just writers, but artists that can really push to the forefront, what is not happening at the moment and what should be happening. So I believe Bernardine really started to look at some of those published books that were out of print by Black writers and really putting them back into publication. Really championing artists that are writers that otherwise wouldn't be spoken of.

This is something I think Britain can do well when they do it. But it's only moments when they do it, and then there's a quiet period. I don't know if I've answered your question, because I'm thinking really quite deep about what does Britain do so well.

I think also what it does so well is give artists the freedom to express. I think that it does it very well, because I know the countries where you can't always have the freedom of expression as an artist. And I think of someone like one of my favourite writers in the world, [Nawal El Saadawi](#), who recently passed away. Egyptian novelist and activist, and exploring her work in the 90s, you know, and knowing that this was a woman that was fighting for women's rights. She was writing about Egyptian politics and culture, and feminism, and health, and well-being. And she's been very, very honest with it. And there were times when she was arrested and incarcerated for her views, for holding certain views. There's times when she had to leave Egypt.

And I remember reading a lot of her work. And one of my most favorite books is *Woman at Point Zero*. And reading that novel and being fascinated by her observation of the issues that women face in Egyptian or Arab culture. And another one, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, and then knowing that she was also incarcerated for writing so openly and speaking so openly. And I wondered, in my lifetime, if I would ever meet such an amazing writer, such an amazing scholar and activist. And I did you know, she came to England, she was in Manchester. And I received a message that someone says, "Oh, there's a talk tonight with Nawal El Saadawi." And I think I had a workshop and I dropped the workshop. I gave the workshop to somebody else, at really short notice. And I said, "If this is the time that I will meet one of my favourite authors, this would be it." You know, because there's something quite

wonderful and special when you're face-to-face with people that you admire, and you're having those conversations, because you can take those conversations, you can take those lectures, you can take their words, their publication, their artistry, and you can embed it into what you're doing as a sense of influence. You know, they're influencers, you know, and I just, yeah. I went off on a tangent again.

Season Butler

But I'm really glad you did. I'm really, really glad you did.

Khadijah Ibrahiim

Stop me at any given point. You're so polite.

Season Butler

I'm not polite, I'm involved, you know, and making notes and, you know, completely enrapt.

I like your attitude. And I like where I agree with many of your points about what the UK art sector does well. Do you think it does anything badly? You know, sort of, are there any ways in which the artistic establishment, the sector that kind of comes down to us from a government with a very specific political philosophy and agenda? Does anything about the sector let us down?

Khadijah Ibrahiim

Definitely. I mean, if we have this conversation, and we don't mention race or racism, then we're not being honest. As much as some people may be tired of hearing about it. They wish that they would just go away and pretend: "Let's go back to how we always was."

Well, we've always had racism, you know, we've just never really had those open platforms to talk honestly about it. And so definitely, you know, really removing those stereotypes based around who they think is worth investing in, what communities, what art is, where did they come from, what their gender is, you know. So we do suffer very, very badly with those sets of criterias that are based around hindering marginalised communities, marginalised artists. And so that I think, could be a talking point of honesty in which we can begin to build a different narrative, a more honest, open narrative. But also, it should decolonise the way in the government, the arts needs to decolonise the way that they've been working in the past and look at the way in which they can begin to reshape the future for all artists. So, at this moment in time, I would say, if I'm using that word "badly", I think I'm using that term "badly" in the sense that there's an aspect of ignorance and ignoring and overlooking. That's what they do quite badly is to ignore.

Season Butler

Yeah. And I think that yes, ignoring is a funny kind of activity, because you can pretend like it was an accident.

Khadijah Ibrahiim

Yeah.

Season Butler

But I think what you're describing is much more studious. Either a way of deliberately excluding people, or having it brought to someone's attention that they've excluded people and they can use this sort of ignorance as an excuse and not make any meaningful change and how things will be done in the future. So yeah, I mean, I think that, I think that you hit it pretty hard. And you made your point really beautifully.

Khadijah Ibrahiim

Yeah. And you know, there's this thing about: *it takes time*.

Season Butler

Oh, my God, it takes [frustrated screaming]

Khadijah Ibrahiim

Like whose time? And what time? Do we have to do a whole report to prove it? Because that's what happens: there has to be a whole report, they have to find someone who can write the report. But before writing the report, they have to find someone that can research it. You know, and if the evidence is there and then what happens is that we cover it with new terminologies and new words. Someone's "unconscious bias", you know, these fancy words. I do a lot of training around unconscious bias, you know, because if that's the terminology that makes people feel comfortable to engage, okay, let's use it. But actually, what unconscious bias is about is a collection of biases that hinder and actually denies a particular group of people, people that are marginalised people that are considered the minority, you know.

And so if we don't know, in 2021, what has been happening for hundreds of years, you know, if we're not prepared to shift these policies, what are we actually prepared to do? And when we're shifting these policies, there's moments where we think we're having these breakthroughs, and then it stops. Because something has happened where they've got one person - I'd like to see, ideally, that there's not just one person, one Black person, or one female, around the table. That we have this balance, you know, of gender and race around tables when we're having these discussions. That's what I'd like to see ideally. And then, at that point, only then do we start to see a shift, you know.

And I keep faith, because faith can move mountains. And I'm not talking about religious faith, I'm just talking faith in the sense that I keep hope that in my lifetime there will be a shift that takes us out of these institutions that hold steadfast, these old values that really could do with being decolonised and reshaped.

Season Butler

I absolutely agree. And I loved hearing you say this, and I do think that claiming the right to hope is politically quite radical. So thank you, Khadijah. So I'd like to ask you a final question, kind of imaginative question. What would a world in which artists are truly empowered look like?

Khadijah Ibrahiim

Oh, wow. The world in which artists are truly empowered is that the artist becomes the most important thing. The reason why I say this is the artist tells you what's going on in the world. The artist is the observer, the storyteller. I was reading something where someone talks about quoting Sylvia Wynter on being human. And you know, I don't know the full quotes. But the idea of homosapiens being human, this is what we are. But then there's another aspect of us that is *homo-narrans*. I think that's the word: N-A-R-R-A-N, coming from the word narratives. People who tell stories and they're there to do that, that is their job.

And so the artists, whether they're responding through the words, the spoken word, or they're responding through the visual aspects of work, or through movements, they respond to the world as they see it. Therefore, they are the first to tell you honestly what is happening in the world. They're almost like the medicine that you need, the news that you need. Nevermind News at 10; they are the news, they will tell you everything. And so therefore they must be placed as the important people. The academic is also important. But what the academic does, is that the academic responds to what is already happening, whereas the artist responds to the here and the now. They also have this sense of imagination that functions within the consciousness, that can take you into a place that you never even thought you could visit. This futuristic sense of being, similar to that of afrofuturism. You could be placed in the 60s, but with the work of maybe someone like Octavia Butler, or even Grace Jones, the way in which they responded to the here and now into the future, creating this futuristic language of expression through art, in which we, the listener, the participant, or the listener could participate and respond back. So therefore, the world for the artist should be that the artist should be placed almost first, above so many things, because they will tell you everything that you need to know. And also they will create this world of not just entertainment for entertainment's sake, but you get the sense of politics and truth and stories functioning side by side.

Season Butler

I can't think of a more beautiful way to close our conversation. Khadijah Ibrahiim, I am so so grateful that you took the time to be with me a bit today. And thank you tremendously.

Khadijah Ibrahiim

You're welcome, my darling. No problem. Thank you for having me. It's been lovely speaking to you.