

Episode 2: “Uh Huh, But How Do It Free Us?”¹ One Poet’s Story on the Power of the Arts and Social Justice (Part 2, Act 3: The Facilitation)

Open with “No More Empty Glasses” (for continuity with Episode One).

“...I think these spaces are really important. I believe in them or I wouldn't be facilitating in them. Most of the time, folks want to be there, even if they might be clumsy or something, but sometimes there are people who are just like not wanting to hear what other people are saying. It might not even be about me, it might be just about what a colleague's experience is, or even a definition like microaggression. That's something that a lot of white people have problems understanding.”

Voiceover: Welcome back to Interrupt the Narrative! If you listened to episode 1, you know that the voice we just heard was that of [Ama Codjoe](#): a poet, artist, educator, and anti-oppression facilitator who dropped all kinds of knowledge on how to do the work of anti-racism in earnest—with integrity.

In episode 1...

- **Ama taught us that facilitators rooted in social justice, work in partnership with organizations, that they are well-read, and that they never stop learning.**
- **About the organization, Ama helped us realize that some level of consensus must be reached for organizations to be ready to engage this work in earnest and for the long haul.**

Musical Transition [“Midnight”]

Here, in episode 2 of ““Uh Huh, But How Do It Free Us?” One Poet’s Story on the Power of the Arts and Social Justice” (the conclusion to episode 1 where we focused on the facilitator and the organization), we focus *exclusively* on the facilitation of anti-oppression work that is marked by integrity, relationality, and a decidedly anti-capitalist orientation.

Act Three: The Facilitation. [the bell-ring, from [artlist.io](#)]

Voiceover: This final act reads like a roadmap through the mind of this master social justice facilitator. Meeting people where they are, taking things a step at a time, and creating spaces where people can really listen to one another is at the heart of Ama’s facilitation. She painted such a vibrant picture that I could almost imagine being there:

Pam ([00:29:58](#)): Yes. Oh, indeed. I just want to be a fly in the wall in one of your facilitations, I'm like, "Let me be there." Do a little Samantha Stevens and said, "[inaudible 00:30:06], be there. Oh, my gosh, this is

¹ Note: The first line of the title that reads, “Uh Huh, But How Do It Free Us” is credited to Sonia Sanchez and the play she wrote in 1975. These words capture the essence of the first two podcast episodes but in reality, they also capture the essence of this podcast in its entirety because if the work of social justice and liberation doesn’t free us, we shouldn’t be doing it. Thank you, Sonia Sanchez, for your brilliance and body of work.

amazing." And that is, again, I thank you so much for that answer, and for really giving me a deep view through your words about how you approach this, thinking about, you're giving me your epistemological positioning in this work, and that is so important. I have another reflection question, meaning I feel like you've begun answering this and you kind of woven it throughout beautifully, but if you could just speak just a little bit about the connections between your work as an artist, as a writer and then your social justice work, not that they're separate, but just the ways that you negotiate those identities and those bodies of work.

Ama ([00:30:51](#)):

Yeah. So, I'm a writer and a poet, and I think almost as long, I've been an educator and someone who is like a caregiver in a lot of ways. And I don't know, in some ways, of course, they're all me, but in the way that they function in my life, it's really like taking turns. So, I spend time facilitating and I think of that as a kind of care. I give a lot to those spaces. I believe that organizations and I guess, people consequently can transform. And then I just really focus on writing, and usually that's in the form of a residency or a writing retreat. It's a lot of silence, a lot of deep time, I like to call it where I'm not actually putting other people's kind of wants and desires in front of mine. I'm really just like there at the desk with a blank page.

Voiceover: It makes sense that Ama's poet-identity emerges prominently in her facilitation. Something that Ama has taught me through our interviews is the symbiotic relationship between the arts and social justice.

I guess the story that I can pull out would be around this bag, this [privilege bag activity](#), that I learned from [Rachael Ibrahim](#), who is also a facilitator and trainer. Essentially, you have a bunch of objects in a see-through Ziploc or a plastic bag. It actually doesn't matter what's in there but for the sake of raising some stakes, usually a coveted item would be like a \$20 bill or a piece of chocolate...You're going to put one or two coveted objects in there. Then a bunch of just random things like a paper clip or a rubber band or a piece of paper or teabag. You show everyone in the circle what's in the bag, so this is in-person. It basically has enough for almost everyone except for the last person to take one object.

The game really in the end is about demonstrating what privilege means, because the way that the first person gets to pick what they want is random. I just kind of choose the person and that's the first person who gets to take something out of the bag, and then they pass it around and then the last person is left with nothing, and that's how privilege works. It is unearned.

Voiceover: The games Ama invites organizations to play highlight the power hoarding and either-or thinking that are part-and-parcel of white supremacy culture² (as noted in the work of [Tema Okun](#)). And

² Okun, T. (2020). White Supremacy Culture. dRworks . www.dismantlingracism.org

given Ama's expertise, she is able to help her participants come face-to-face with the role privilege plays in their organizations.

Ama (00:14:44): So, did the person who got to go first do anything special to get it? And the answer is no, right? So, it's a way of really defining what privilege is, which I mentioned before, unearned access to power and resources. So, that person didn't do anything. And this idea that we have that like, "It's my right to have my kids in the best school, and it's my right to live in a safe neighborhood, and other people be damned," is really a falsehood. No, you didn't do anything. When you knock on the door to get your apartment and the super lets you in and doesn't discriminate against you because you're white, that's your white privilege. You didn't do anything for that. So, we talk about privilege. We talk about power. We talk about like, who had power in the game?

Ama (00:15:43):

And a lot of people say the person who got to go first, and then I keep asking the question, and this is the thing about arts leaders, someone will say, "You, you had the power." And that's the answer, "Yeah, I had the power. I got to choose what was in the bag. I set the rules, you followed them."

Voiceover: Ama is sure to disabuse her workshop participants of the notion that racial and other inequities are PERPETRATED by individuals alone; the deeper issue is that of structural inequalities that reproduce the interlocking oppressions:

Ama (00:16:06):

So, that kind of aha like, "Oh, wow, there's a structure in place that we just kind of went along with. We could have done it differently." And then we talk about that like, "What's what are alternatives?" And it's an open question, it's not like I have, "And these are the answers." We talk about what could have happened or we could have talked about what we all wanted. We could have tried to share, we could have done this, we could have done that. There are other alternatives in the system that we exist in. And so, I love playing that game. I love playing with arts people. It's a really good experiential example of some of the things that I think are really important to understand the meaning of, as we try to think about first describing and analyzing what the problem is, and then describing, and imagining and dreaming of what might be another possibility.

Pam (00:17:09):

Oh, so interesting. What a vibrant picture you were painting for me as the listener taking myself into one of those moments when you're facilitating that activity. And it seems like you're indicating that the dynamic, the energy, the level of perhaps engagement and even understanding, again, correct me if I'm wrong here varies depending on the type of organization, and that you find that generally speaking, that those in the field of the arts are able to dream and think about these things differently. Is that the case?

Ama (00:17:49):

Yeah. Which is why I think arts education is so important. It's a kind of a demonstration of a belief that a lot of us have around the power of arts. And I think, yeah, there's a ceiling to who I can work with in that way, right? I'm not the best fit for, let's say corporate America in general, that's just not going to be... We wouldn't be well-matched, and that doesn't mean that they don't have work to do, but it's not going to be a good fit, I don't think. And I think when I get into kind of organizations that are more hierarchical, that's where I've seen when I ask a question like who has power? They don't know, they can't answer the

question. And it was really interesting to me to be like, "Oh, wow, these are people who are really invested in following rules, and not like..." I'm not blaming them, but they're so embedded in something they can't really see out of it.

Voiceover: When anti-racist facilitation is done with the level of integrity that Ama brings, some people_and organizations are *bound* to resist change.

Pam: Can you tell me about a time when doing this work when someone possibly pushed back, maybe rejecting what you were asking them to confront about the racism in their organizations and or that with which they may have been complicit. And if that moment happened, ever, how you responded, can you just tell me a bit more?

Ama ([00:20:34](#)):

Sure. I think it's interesting. I used to say at least once a year, there would be someone who really just didn't want to be there and kind of was resistant the whole time. So, it doesn't happen often, but I will say in these very, very little ways that I think people are not necessarily aware of. One, that there are a lot of [microaggressions](#) that happen towards me in my work, and I think... Well, I guess, there's so much to say. I also just want to say, I think the work that was happening, I think there's so much cultural work that's been going on. So, you have [Ta-Nehisi Coates' "The Case for Reparations,"](#) and then [Between the World and Me](#), that people were really... There was a very wide readership for that book.

Ama ([00:21:44](#)):

And then you have folks who really have been leading these kinds of conversations and dialogues for years. And I think that work actually led... I guess, it really inspired the moment that we lived through last summer in terms of people who were not involved in any kind of movement actually becoming participants, and mostly that means white people. So, my point in saying this is I think these spaces are really important. I believe in them or I wouldn't be facilitating in them. Most of the time, folks want to be there, even if they might be clumsy or something, but sometimes there are people who are just like not wanting to hear what other people are saying. It might not even be about me, it might be just about what a colleague's experience is, or even a definition like microaggression. That's something that a lot of white people have problems understanding.

Pam: Ama understands that, at the end of the day, meeting people where they are means that everyone isn't going to end up at the same place...

I am not trying to get everybody from A to Z in the course of my workshop. That's not my goal. I want to meet people where they are and hopefully they can take away and actually act upon some of the things that we've experienced and learned together.

I think if we can slow down and listen and have a bit more grace for one another, by the end of the consultancy, what I found...Because I'm creating spaces where people are listening to one another, like that's one of the main goals is just being present and listening, that there's a bit more compassion for either side of that dialectic.

Voiceover: Facing the reality of bias and racism within their organizations, and themselves, can bring on a level of dissonance that throws them for a loop:

Ama ([00:23:01](#)):

And so, that kind of dissonance, or harm or conflict, I generally make an agenda that makes room for everyone, which means you're really just not going to have the microphone for a long time. So, you may try to take the conversation off track, and by off track, I mean centering yourself, centering your own history and putting it in opposition to what's being shared in this space. But generally, my way of dealing with that is to thank you and move on, which I think is actually pretty troubling to people who are used to everything, then turning to whatever they've said.

Voiceover: It's in moments like these where the relational side of the facilitation comes into play. It's a balance of having compassion for someone's experience, but also not allowing it to derail the important work being done by the group.

Ama ([00:24:08](#)): Yeah, you could be having a lot of feelings, a lot of resistance. You may even be crying, but I will encourage people to take care of themselves, and I will move on with my agenda, because we're all here, all of us trying to learn, you know what I mean?

Pam ([00:24:31](#)): Yeah.

Ama ([00:24:32](#)):

It's a skill in terms of understanding or through so many hours of experience, really trying to figure out where a person's coming from and clocking that. And honestly, that happens in the introductions, Pam. If you had say, this is how I would like us to do introductions, name, if you want to share the pronouns you use, you could share the name of the indigenous land that you're on and then something else. And then a person doesn't do that, but instead talks about like growing up and the black friends that they had, then we already know. You know what I mean? So, yeah, I don't tarry there, I guess is the short answer, because I think the purpose is beyond that one person. And usually, the majority of the group is really invested and engaged in trying to actually do some work, and that's why we came together. So, you can come in and lean the same way and that's fine. That's totally your choice.

Voiceover: "I don't tarry there" echoed in my ears and in my soul. It's a pithy phrase that gives aspiring anti-racist facilitators a valuable piece of advice: knowing when to linger and knowing when to move on when engaging with workshop participants. Ama had *more* wisdom to share on this front:

Pam ([00:25:48](#)):

Oh, absolutely. The fact that you say... It sounds like you're saying you stay calm, and you say these things that don't feed into the energy and the moment that they may be giving, like you say, "Thank you." You tell them to take care of themselves. And then for yourself, you said that you say, "I don't tarry there." And those seem to be really clear statements that are made by those actions and those words that would signal to that person who may be on the cusp of, or in the full-blown micro on the way to a macroaggressive moment. I'm just getting these images of the ways that that might play out in a

workshop. And I may come back and ask you if there is like a moment amidst the myriad ones that you've facilitated have been a part of where you can recall a specific thank you moment, where you were just thinking, "Okay, thank you."

Ama ([00:26:49](#)):

That's like my move. And it's not to say whatever the idea is, I might also address either directly after or a little bit after more generally, but I am addressing the thing that the person said. But I guess, I'm saying what's not going to happen. What's not going to happen is it's going to be a back and forth between me and you or you and someone else. I am very protective of... In conversation specifically around racism, very protective of the people of color in this space. Sometimes a white person will try to ask a follow up question or disagree with someone else's experience who is a person of color, that does not happen, I shut it down. If you want to direct something to me, you're welcome to, but I think there's so much labor involved.

Ama ([00:27:48](#)):

And this is mostly we're talking about in workspaces that a person who already is likely doing so much just day-to-day does not need to take on in the context of this workshop, right? So, I am professional, I'm getting a check for this, I will take that labor on in this moment. You're definitely not going to harm somebody while I'm right here. It's just not going to happen. It's not exactly a specific example, but I am saying there are boundaries and I just don't feed into a kind of need to be centered, because I think that that is often a response, like wanting to be... If you are raised as a white person in the United States, you are centered in most of American life. You are reflected in the mainstream. You're reflected in kind of the media that's produced.

Voiceover: In addition to games highlighting the role privilege plays in the systemic nature of racism, Ama integrates role-plays into the workshops so that those with whom she works don't just talk the talk but walk the walk of unpacking racism.

Ama ([00:41:43](#)):

We may feel way more comfortable, again, intellectualizing, there's a kind of distance that can be created when we can just say, "But what about this, and maybe this?" But what if you actually put yourself in the position and try it. It's hard. That's the point, it's hard. We actually are more prepared than that we actually put it in our bodies. We're more prepared to say something, because so many times, something happens and we just can't find the right words in the moment.

Pam ([00:37:43](#)):

Indeed deep work that would require moments of restoration to be able to come back and to keep doing it in earnest. For sure. And in a bulletin that I located online describing a workshop you facilitated, I read that you were helping your participants "interrupt justice through role play" in developing action plans. Could you paint a picture for me and the listeners of the types or a type of a role play that you design for your workshop goers?

Ama ([00:38:14](#)):

Sure. Yeah. Role play is important. I think it's important to embody again, the transformation that we first have to imagine, we have to imagine, it's possible, but then to actually practice it. And that's very much in line with [Augusto Boal and Theatre of the Oppressed](#). And Augusto Boal says, "Theater is practice for the revolution." And so, I talk about that, because some people can feel self-conscious or like silly about

acting something out and they would rather intellectualize and talk about the thing versus actually doing it. But I really emphasize the importance of doing it. So, you're putting it in your body, you're putting it in your mouth, and you're sometimes not doing it well, like you're failing. So, a good example is often I will give scenarios, and one that is very appropriate for, let's say a non-profit space is you have a funder coming and you have, let's say 17-year-old alum who's Haitian.

Ama ([00:39:34](#)):

And the funder comes to visit the program, and the funder says, "Wow, X organization is so marvelous and you must be so grateful, because you didn't come from a lot," and blah, blah, blah. And then throw in there like, "And thank you so much for talking about the organization, you are so articulate." So, it's a portion of something that often happens. It's very relatable. A white funder, even though I don't usually say the race in the scenarios really condescending and kind of not understanding how they're insulting this young person and where they come from, and kind of painting this deficit-based picture of who they are in relationship to this amazing non-profit that's just so incredible.

Voiceover: Ama speaks truth to power and encourages organizations to engage in honest, [courageous conversations...](#)

Ama ([00:40:42](#)):

What do you do if you're standing there? And this is one of your alum or this is your former student, how do you interrupt that? And again, it's not like, and then I say, "Here are the answers." It's really a conversation that people have with one another, "What are the different options?" And then, "Okay, let's play it back." And so, one person's going to be a funder, one person's going to be a young person, one person's going to be you, the administrator or teaching artist, and try to find the words in the moment, and then get coached up, and then maybe switch roles. So, many different kinds of scenarios, but that's one example.

Pam ([00:41:27](#)):

Yes. The powerful role of role playing, stepping into the roles so that we can actually work them out, because just talking about it isn't sufficient, right?

Ama ([00:41:37](#)):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Ama ([00:41:38](#)):

And sometimes talking about it is a way not to do it.

Pam ([00:41:42](#)):

Ooh, facts.

Voiceover: Ama guides her participants to engage in courageous conversations³. As explained by Singleton & Linton, two key guiding principles when having courageous conversations include (a) speak

³ Singleton, G. & Linton, C. (2006). *Courageous conversations about race: A field guide for achieving equity in schools*. Corwin Press.

your truth and (b) experience discomfort . In short, you got _to keep it pushing, to grow into an anti-racist organization; **full-stop**.

Pam ([00:59:40](#)):...I feel like there's a powerful message there to those engaging in this work with you, which is we have to keep pushing. We have to keep asking. We're not going to have some ultimate truth. It's about the work that we do every day. There's not going to be the one workshop that's going to be the workshop of all workshops you never have to go again.

Ama ([01:00:20](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. And also, that I'm not the one with the answers. I have my experience and I will gently correct something if it's not accurate, something that's said by someone else, but really it is about how do we engage in community with one another? And how do we ask and respond to enduring question? Just like a good educator. So, yeah, it's clear. I make that very clear to whoever asks me to work with them that I'm not... Yeah, I have no interest in being the [cleanup woman](#).

Pam ([01:01:16](#)):

Well said. Oh, that could be the title to a book, right? I have no interest in being the cleanup woman, right? It's like-

Ama ([01:01:26](#)):

Yeah. Or your Magical Negro.

Pam ([01:01:29](#)):

... That's right, or your Magical Negro, let's link up with [Raoul Peck](#) and be like, "Okay, here's the next one." I'm loving this. I'm loving this.

Voiceover: Ama reminds us what's most important in the fight for social justice: investment in lasting change and not losing sight of what brings us joy...

Ama: This is not about the one time workshop. This is more about months long investment in having monthly, lets say, conversations or sessions that are about building culture, building trust and also learning together and, again, that that requires a vulnerability that is actually really useful in a work setting to help bring people together and, again, to make that foundation for the work to actually go.

...I think I would say...I mean, if I'm positioning this as a conversation with someone who might be thinking about starting their own consultancy, I would say to think about what brings you joy think about what you don't want to do, and try to make it so that you're doing more of the first and less of the latter.

Voiceover: I invite all of us to heed Ama's words about remembering what brings us joy in the fight for liberation. Joy will sustain us in this work.

"Absolutely Cool" from [artlist.io](#)

Epilogue

We return to the question posed at the top of the episode: “Can short-term equity and diversity trainings mitigate micro and macro-aggressions that are prevalent in nearly every institution in society?”

1. The short answer is “no.” Ama’s interview data demonstrated that short-term equity and diversity trainings possess neither the substance nor the vision to mitigate micro- and macro-aggressions.
2. Recall [Sonia Sanchez’s question \(i.e., “Uh huh, but how do it free us?”\)](#). The work of social justice has to have liberation at its core and as its goal. Not only does the 2-day, add-water-and-stir JEDI training fail to mitigate micro- and macro-aggressions but it fails spectacularly at freeing us. Let’s keep it plain: neither the 2-day nor any finite equity trainings have the components required to undo racist mindsets and dismantle oppressive systems. Dismantling and transformation take years and a lifetime commitment.
3. Ama’s rich experience as a social justice, anti-oppression facilitator taught us that there are key ingredients that are vital to doing this work in earnest: integrity, relationships, and an anti-capitalist focus. Moving in integrity, cultivating relationships, and challenging racial capitalism takes investments of time and energy—not to mention a willingness to sacrifice comfort and ease when in search of the truth.

[Transition: song/sound: “Midnight” (from [artlist.io](#))]

At the end of most episodes of Interrupt the Narrative, I’m going to share a text that I’m reading. I read not simply to grow my knowledge, but to expand my consciousness and be better able to take part in the fight for liberation. Currently, I’m reading [The Young Lords by Johanna Fernandez](#). This text expands my understanding of what it takes to organize and get involved in social movements. As an aspiring abolitionist educator, I can’t do this work in earnest without dedicating time to movement building and organizing. And what are y’all watching to grow your critical consciousness? As for me, I watch [Black Power Media](#), I follow [Jacquie Lugman’s](#) work, and [In Class with Carr](#) (featuring [Dr. Greg Carr](#) and [Karen Hunter](#), on Saturdays). These programs, and these movement builders and revolutionary scholars, give me food for thought whenever I consume their content. They incite me to take action. I’m curious: what are y’all reading? Follow me on twitter (my handle is @pjones_)! Let me know what you’re reading and how *you’re* interrupting the narrative on JEDI. And if you liked this episode, consider giving us a positive review on itunes!

Until next time, be well, stay safe, and remember that we’ve gotta’ love one another.

Fade Out: “Gotta Love” (from [artist.io](https://www.artist.io))]