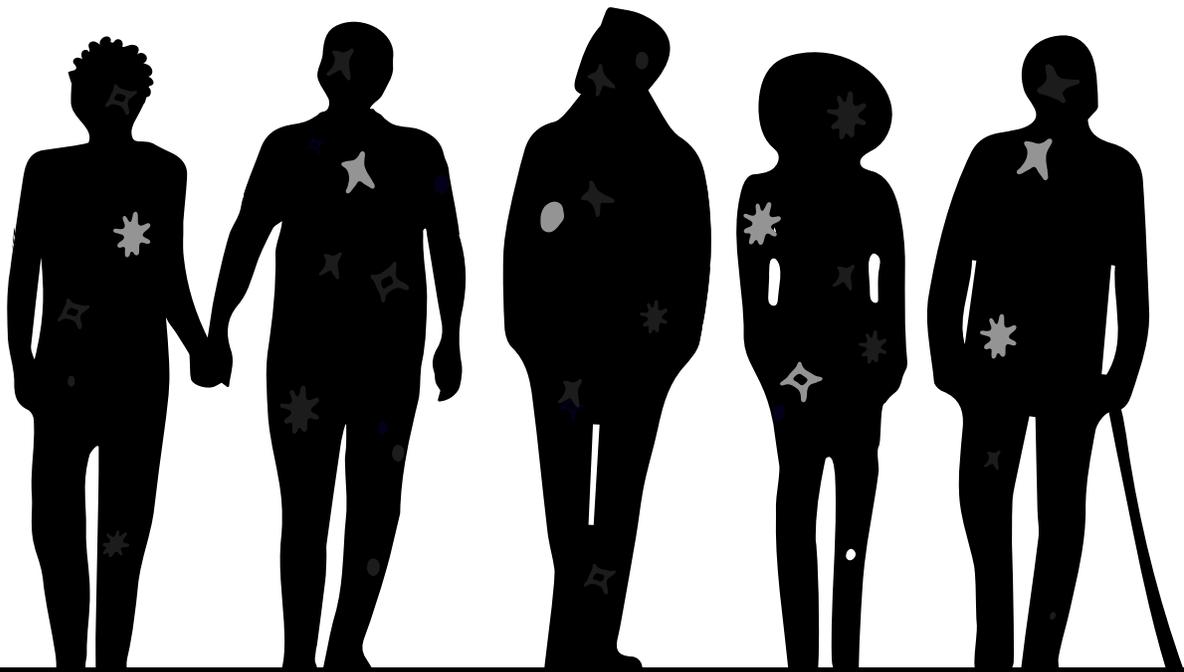


THE COSMIC WE

Episode 3:
You Are Loved
with Dr. Alexis Pauline Gumbs



from the CENTER FOR ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

- Alexis Gumbs: We are the undrowned. When we feel our feelings, when we breathe through the unbreathable, we are undrowning in that process, but absolutely our precedent, our kin in that are all of the marine mammals. But our ancestors who survived the transatlantic trade, and our kin, who are now surviving in all kinds of circumstances, the experience of crossing through water, and it is important.
- Barbara Holmes: This podcast explores the mystery of relatedness as an organizing principle of the universe, and of our lives.
- Donny Bryant: We are trying to catch a glimpse of connections beyond color, continent, country, or kinship through science, mysticism, spirituality and the creative arts. I'm Donny Bryant.
- Barbara Holmes: I'm Barbara Holmes, and this is The Cosmic We.
- Barbara Holmes: Alexis Pauline Gumbs is a queer, black troublemaker, and black feminists love evangelist and an aspirational cousin to all sentient beings. Her work in this lifetime is to facilitate infinite, unstoppable, ancestral love, in practice. Her poetic work is in response to needs of her cherished communities. And she has held space for multitudes in mourning and in movement. You graduated from Barnard in 2004, and you hold a PhD in English, African and African American Studies and Women and Gender Studies from Duke. Welcome again.
- Alexis Gumbs: Oh, it is such a joy to be here. Even though we are doing this virtually, I still feel I'm inside of you all's heart radius.
- Donny Bryant: Well, likewise, Alexis, we feel the love beaming over here too. So we just thank you for just being with us today. It's an honor. One of the things I'm really curious about, oftentimes, as I started to explore some of your work in poetry, there's a sense of adeptness and connectedness to the past, to the present. And it made me wonder, was there or what kind of spiritual influence that there may have been in your early formative years that kind of helped build a foundation for your passion and what you do today?
- Alexis Gumbs: Oh, wow, what a beautiful question. I do think there's something there that is beyond age, which is why I'm so excited that people of different ages can get into it. I think there's something vibrational happening, something aligned with how Dr. Holmes has written about string theory, the strings, the strings are being plucked, or maybe I'm just one of the strings being plucked, that's maybe what's happening. And so yes, there's definitely a spirituality to all of it. I was raised by people who believe very strongly in daily practice. When you asked about early influences, I thought about this plaque that my mother had on the wall, and she still has it, and it just says, you are loved. And it's so interesting, because I didn't consciously remember that plaque.
- Alexis Gumbs: And someone asked me what my purpose was and what I was here for, and I was like, I just want everyone to really know that they are loved. And then I was looking through old pictures. And I was like, oh, okay, message received. And I feel that there is an aspirational sound and physical space that my mother especially created for me from forever. She talks about speaking with me when she was holding me in her womb

and just saying, you're going to be someone who makes a great contribution to society. You're going to be someone who brings good things to this planet. And that matters. I think that that matters. There's a faith there that is profound, and that I'm so grateful for.

Alexis Gumbs: And my father also who, he would be emphatic about pointing out who became a poet after I became a poet, because I became a poet at a very young age, very soon after I learned how to read. But he would write us praise poems, for all of his children. And for my mom and for his mom, and just I actually think I started doing that first too, because I wrote a praise poem for him when I was very young. But there was something about the honoring of who we are, beyond the moment that we're in now, even though it's so exciting to be present with each other in this particular moment. But honoring that there's something eternal within each of us that is to be honored. So I would say that that's the grounding spirituality.

Alexis Gumbs: I also thought of something that my father would say, because the first church that I went to was an Episcopal Church in New Jersey. And I thought that was because my mom was born in England, and there was like an Anglican tie in. But when I actually asked about it, my dad was like, oh, no, we went there because of you. Because you had heard it. I just loved school, and I heard at school that some people went to Sunday school. And I was like, there's more school?

Barbara Holmes: You can't get enough school.

Alexis Gumbs: I don't remember this. Right, I just want some more school. And I was like, well, how come I don't get to go to a Sunday school? And they were like, well, we have to be at a church for you to have... So evidently, I was the impetus for them to join that church, which I didn't realize until I was an adult and asked about it. So I would say that my parents were more engaged in that spiritual, cosmic creative energy than very tied to organized religion, early in my childhood. And they were committed to it in a way that was specific, and that included daily practices, and that included rigorous affirmation. So it really did provide a structure for my being.

Barbara Holmes: I'm going to be asking you a number of questions about *Undrowned*, just simply because I am fascinated. I have read it twice already. And I'm going to read it many more times. So I'll ask you a bit about that. But when you say, you became a poet as a child, is this ancestral whispering? Is this mothers and other mothers in the community? Where's the resource, that deep well that, that comes from as a child?

Alexis Gumbs: There must have been some ancestor whispering, I know there is now. Whenever I write now, there's definitely ancestral whispering there. My parents do mention that they got me children's books of poetry by Sonia Sanchez, and by Nikki Giovanni, and by the great lovers of our people. But I do think that there was something, because I felt so called to it. And the way that I can describe it is there was something in the people. Because my first poems were all praise poems about people in my life. The sound, like my grandfather's voice. My father's eyes, the way that they looked. There were these things that I was like, this is so maybe impossible to describe, but there has to be some way. I felt that I needed to, I really needed to celebrate them beyond

just saying, I think your voice is really powerful. So I think that is a part of my calling.

Alexis Gumbs: And it was something that was irrepressible. I published my first little book, colored pencils and pieces of paper that I had taped about my grandfather and unicorns. And yeah, I think I just knew I had to do it. So I do think it's an assignment that I came with, or I heard very early on.

Barbara Holmes: Sitting with that for a moment, grandfathers and unicorns.

Alexis Gumbs: Yes. The magic in our lives, yeah.

Barbara Holmes: Right. Tell me a little bit about your grandmother, Lydia.

Alexis Gumbs: My grandmother, Lydia, Lydia Gumbs, originally, Lydia Gibbs, she's so many things to me. So she is my grandmother, which in itself is everything. She's the person who would make the voices for the bath puppets. She's the person who would encourage me to join the clean plate club, by eating my food. She's a tangible, nurturing person in my life. And she was this incredible community builder. She was this person who would see a need in her community and be like, we can fill it. And I can't even list all of the things that she founded in the different communities that were important to her, because it's like, the beautification club, there needs to be flowers. The mental health association, because we need our healing. She was the daughter and sister of people who passed away in mental institutions. And so she was somebody who was very passionate about the healing that we needed in our community.

Alexis Gumbs: And when she thought about her community, she was especially thinking about black folks and folks of Caribbean ancestry, which at the time, and maybe even still today, there was so much silence about mental health. And so she is all of those things. She designed the revolutionary Anguillian flag, which is three three dolphins. And I'm here in Anguilla, unexpectedly, I didn't realize I would be in Anguilla when we were having this conversation.

Barbara Holmes: Lucky you.

Alexis Gumbs: I am so blessed to be here. And she absolutely was a visionary. And for me, I think that she really opened an ancestral door for me. Because she was the first person who I loved, who transitioned and passed over to the other side. And there was no question for me that our conversation would continue. It was not a question of if, it was just a question of how. And I'm really grateful that I had poetry, and she was someone who really valued my poetry. She would say, this is my granddaughter, the poet. She would tell me like, you're going to win a Pulitzer Prize one day. She was like, if you don't know it, I know it. She held that kind of huge vision. And so it was poetry that I turned to. It was her physical artifacts that I turned to, her passports, her glasses, her mirrors. I usually, if I hadn't just gotten off the beach, I usually wear her turquoise necklace on my heart, because I actually created an ancestral practice, or else remembered an ancestral practice, in order to be diligent about our

relationship.

Alexis Gumbs: And the fact that it is something that is ongoing, and our communication is ongoing, and I think that those said practices are still the practices that are at the core of all of my work. And that make it possible for me to intentionally listen for the messages from Audrey Lorde, listen for the messages from our other ancestors who I didn't have a relationship with, close relationship like I had with my grandmother, in this realm, but who are absolutely... I'm listening for them, I'm just always listening.

Donny Bryant: Very quick, before we move on Alexis, you mentioned your grandmother. And I heard in one of your previous interviews, you spoke about your grandfather, and his role, and not only his role, but probably her role, of course, in the revolution there in Anguilla. Could you speak a little bit more about his influence? It sounds like your grandparents had such a tremendous influence in much of how you mirror love and mirror your voice and activism today? It seems like they played a major role in what they did historically there. Could you tell us a little bit more about your grandfather too?

Alexis Gumbs: Absolutely. And they did, they had such a huge influence on me. I would just come sit, I would come here to Anguilla and I would just sit with them and ask them a million questions, especially about the revolution. So my grandfather's role in the Anglian revolution was really that of a spokesperson in a way, for Anguilla. And so Anguilla, very small island, about 36 square miles seceded from the British Empire. And that was like, what? It was something that was unheard of. The New York Times represented as the mouse and the elephant, like just this complete different scales of power. But the thing is that, the Anguillian people believed that their power mattered, and they had a referendum, and they decided to secede. And it was my grandfather who spoke at the UN about Anguilla and what was going to happen from then on. Part of the consequences of that was that he was put by the British on a list of people to shoot on site, when they invaded Anguilla.

Alexis Gumbs: And the Anguillian revolution was in 1967, and its resolution is interesting, it has a lot of class implications. Because Anguilla is now, again, part of the British Empire. It's a British dependency. The major difference is that its direct dependency, as opposed to being part of this consortium of three islands, St. Kitts, Nevis, and Anguilla were grouped together, even though geographically they're not very close to each other in the Caribbean, just for expedience of the British government, basically, at that time. And I will say, for my grandparents, it was actually full freedom and autonomy that they believed in and were working towards, and they were not happy with the resolution. And the royal family visited Anguilla at some point, my grandfather literally didn't leave the house, so that it would not be mistaken that he was greeting the colonizers.

Alexis Gumbs: And so they both had a strong analysis of colonialism and what it meant. And that has very much influenced me, but even though now the Anguillian flag has the union jack in the corner, it also has the revolutionary seal of the

three dolphins that my grandmother designed. I will also say it's important that my grandfather helped found the library here in Anguilla. He supported the schools, he spent 18 years without coming back to Anguilla in the United States, just sending and sending and sending supplies. And then when he came back, he says he basically bought out a Barnes and Noble, and brought all the books to Anguilla. And that ended up being the first foundation of the library here. And there's still a portrait of him in the library there today, which I'm very proud to get to see.

Barbara Holmes: What an amazing legacy. You have his warrior spirit.

Alexis Gumbs: I think so.

Donny Bryant: As you describe, troublemaker, right?

Alexis Gumbs: Yes, I come by it honestly, that's right.

Barbara Holmes: Good trouble, as John Lewis would say.

Alexis Gumbs: Yes, yes.

Donny Bryant: There's a section in one of your poems, Remembering, from Dub.

Alexis Gumbs: Yeah.

Donny Bryant: And when I was reading it, I read it out loud. Many times when I'm reading, well, I read silently. But I decided intentionally, Alexis, to read some of your poetry out loud. And it literally resonated on a deeper level. And I would love to get your interpretation, your commentary on your work. And I want to read this section, if I can, really quickly.

Alexis Gumbs: I love that.

Donny Bryant: And it starts like this: some of us were here, because we were stuck. Some of us were here because we were stuck on believing other people needed us in order to get unstuck. Some of us were here for the water, just for the look of it, not for the need of it. Some of us were here for the pleasure, heightened by the pain of suffering, activated by the unavoidable repetition. Some of us were here for others of us, just to see them again in form, just to form them again in seeing them. Some of us were here for no reason. It was completely unreasonable for us to be here. Some of us were here for our own names, to reclaim them. Some of us were here to repay something that couldn't be repaid. Some of us were here to get laid, and get the rest of us here. Some of us couldn't be bothered. Some of us were here to be mothered and fathered, better than what happened or more.

Donny Bryant: Some of us we're not really here, but just seemed to be. We were the ones guarding the door. You came here because we called you. You called you, the you that was us, before.

Alexis Gumbs: Yes, thank you for reading that. And that's another honor. I love it when people read

the work out loud. I have an aunt here, my aunt who is a retired opera singer. And she says she sings it, that's how she relates to my work. And I'm like, wow, it is all vibrational. What would I say about that piece? I mean, the reason that that section is called Remembering is, I really felt that that entire experience was listening and remembering and remembering, why am I here? How did this happen? And it is a calling. There are so many different reasons and ways that we come into this realm. And we're part of all of it. So it's us calling us, to be here for some desire that we might name in different ways. To reclaim our names, as one of them. Just to be with the water, for the pleasure, for the connection to specific other energies. I mean, I think for most of us, it's all of those reasons.

Alexis Gumbs: But I think what I remembered while I was writing that, was that all of it is happening at the same time. So we are holding the door open for the energy that needs to come through. And we are the energy coming through. And the door is there open for us. I needed to remember that. And I do think that's another name for love, the open door, the energy coming through.

Donny Bryant: Wonderful. In your work, Dubs, in the beginning, you reference a lot about Sylvia Wynter's work as an influence. Could you speak a little bit more about how Sylvia as a Jamaican poet herself from the Caribbean, played a role? And speak a little bit, for those who don't even really understand the concept of dub, could you help interpret that and where that reference comes from, and how that applies to the re-mixing...

Alexis Gumbs: Yes, yes-

Donny Bryant: ... of the work.

Alexis Gumbs: Yeah Dub is for Sylvia Wynter. And that W at the beginning of her name, dub as a form, is many things. So dub poetry in Jamaica, and I have to shout out my own Jamaican ancestry. My mom is Jamaican and yeah, Jamaica is so important for so many reasons. And for sure, in the Arawak cosmology, very important place. And dub poetry is a transformative tradition, it is poetry that really emphasizes the possibility of vibrational transformation through sound. The sound is so important, which is why when you read my poems out loud, I'm like, yes, because the sound is so important. And it is in relationship with the sound of the drum. It's this bass sound that is important. And it's also important to the way that Jamaican musical traditions have proliferated through there being a dub, a particular rhythm, and then people making different choices on top of that, but having that same ground to stand on. So being profoundly in relationship.

Alexis Gumbs: And there are incredible folks throughout Jamaican diaspora who have come through dub poetic traditions, and who, I think about it as a whole aesthetic, there's dub theater, now, there's whole dub organizations. Like youth organizations in Toronto, for some reason, I'm actually forgetting the name of an incredible artist who I'm a big fan of, who has articulated these dub aesthetics so well. And for me, the way that I write would not necessarily be like, oh, this is dub poetry. Unless I decided to explicitly attach it to dub poetry, which I have decided to explicitly do. But it is rhythmic, it is about listening to each other. It is about the community accountable care for, how

do you feel? What happens when you engage this poetry, the collectivism of it. All of those things are why dub is so important to me and a huge inspiration for everything I do, but in particular, that work.

Alexis Gumbs: And then Sylvia Wynter is such an amazing person. And she's 97 years old, she is this profound being. So she is a writer of theater, of novels, of poetry, of the best, I would say, critical history of science that I had access to when I was in graduate school. And she, as I say, the introduction to dub, she learned all the languages of colonialism in order to really get at, what is the pattern of thought that made that possible to happen? And how can we have a different pattern of thought? How can we have a pattern of thought that is loving? And so I see it as so connected to the work that you all do.

Alexis Gumbs: And for me, she has inspired the way that I think about everything, the way that I think about thought, the way that I think about science. But what the repetitive practice and what the listening to Sylvia Wynter darkly did, for me and to me, was really get into the tangled stories that I have. That are stories, and that I have to be responsible for, because they're not the only way I could tell the story. The story of what it means to be an Anguillian granddaughter. There's infinite ways to tell that story. And Dub tries to reckon with that infinity, even though it's a finite number of pages, so it's not infinite. But it reckons with that infinity and what it's doing, to me.

Donny Bryant: Well, I mean, that's interesting. Because you do give insight, really building on the work of Sylvia Wynter, that these narratives, even our ancestral stories, or the stories of what has been, or the traditions that we are raised in, that maybe those stories are not the story. And maybe those stories can be re-imagined or reworked or reconsidered. And just that change in perspective, just that questioning opens up an infinite ground of possibility, of problem-solving, of reconciliation, of reflection. And as you say, reflecting love. It gives us the ability to look back even compassionately on things that may have injured us in ways that we may have had only one way of looking at it.

Alexis Gumbs: Yeah.

Donny Bryant: But just that reinterpretation is a powerful tool that we could have in our toolkit. So, yeah, I mean, it was just a fascinating way of taking a look at the work there.

Alexis Gumbs: Yeah, thank you. And I'll say, I think that part of the technology that I was learning by writing that, was that sometimes a story I have, that I'm attached to, is blocking me from listening. It's in the way of me being able to actually listen to something else that's there. And so there's a clearing that has to happen. And I remembered her name, D'bi.young Anitafrika, if people want to learn about contemporary dub ascetics, she is the person to look for. But if you look up dub theater, you'll find her name anyway. Because she has done so much for the culture.

Barbara Holmes: Your book, *Undrowned*, black feminist lessons from marine mammals, a series of meditations based on marine animals in an environment of rising ocean levels. Your book is part of Adrienne Maree Brown's, *Emergent Strategy* series. And this is what Adrienne Maree Brown says, I know you know what it is, but I want my audience to

hear this. She says, Alexis is leading us through oceans, inviting us to grab onto her fin, as she takes us deep, and teaches us how and when to breathe. How to handle the pressure of depth, and where to leap and catch the sun's light. Where were the seeds of Undrowned planted? And who are the undrowned?

Alexis Gumbs: Ooh, yes, yes, yes. I love that question. First of all, just love and gratitude to Adrienne, my dear beloved sister and comrade, I love her so much. And we've been in this together for more than 20 years, at this point. And she is the person who first introduced me to your work, Dr. Holmes, with the idea of the heart radius. And there were actually years where we would be in a space together, and I'd be like, "Adrienne, tell us again, tell us again what Dr. Holmes said about the heart radius." It shifted everything. That concept shifted everything. And so then I was so happy to read your work and continue to follow it. So thank you, Adrienne, because the seed of this moment is in the Adrienne sharing.

Alexis Gumbs: And the seeds of Undrowned, I think the true seed, I don't know, there's always a before before, when I think about the origin of anything. But also the origin of my own work. But I know that I started listening to whales, the sounds of whales. And I started to, I mean, there's an incredible story about how I got these guidebooks about marine mammals. And that's part of the origin story. But really, I think it was the experience of grief. When my father passed away, that was the impetus for me to need an ocean, a whole ocean of holding. And for me to learn something different about my breathing, and for me to learn how to be fully immersed in salt, because I was actually just crying that much.

Alexis Gumbs: And it's interesting that I talked about the impetus of my grandmother and the ancestral practice, and then the impetus of my father. It was important for me to understand that I could breathe through it. And that I could swim in it. And that there was something, there was actually another depth of being myself that was possible, if I would allow myself to feel what I was feeling, and not avoid it. And so, I looked and I was like, this is what marine mammals do, like they are in it, and they have lungs, just like I have lungs. And they need to breathe air, just like I need to breathe air. And yet they navigate this salt, and with grace and with beauty and with ferocity. And I just decided to become an apprentice. I was like, I need to learn this. I need to learn from this example of grace that is accessible to me, because I can see it, and I can read about it and I can be a witness.

Alexis Gumbs: So I would say that that was the seed, the decision that I had to feel what I was feeling, when I was feeling something that was totally overwhelming to me and beyond anything I had felt before. And then what happened was I went to the Pacific Ocean for a vacation. I stayed in a random hotel that worked with my miles and the frequent flyer points or something. And ended up being right next to the Aquarium of the Pacific, which was having a digital exhibition on whale sounds. And it was also next to the Queen Mary, which, it's really a tourist attraction, but it's a replica of this boat. It happens to be the boat that my grandmother, my maternal grandmother, migrated to the United States on. And so I was like, okay, you have this inkling that you're supposed to be engaging deeper with the ocean, and then now the universe is just like, well, don't ignore it. We're going to just put it right in front of your face and in as

many ways as we can.

Alexis Gumbs: And so who are the undrowned? We are the undrowned when we feel our feelings, when we breathe through the unbreathable, we are undrowning in that process. But absolutely our precedent, our kin in that, are all of the marine mammals. But our ancestors who survived the transatlantic trade, and our kin, who are now surviving and all kinds of circumstances, the experience of crossing through water. And it is important. I mention in Dub, Boda, who is my ancestor who survives the transatlantic trade, who came here to Anguilla. And it is something that I know, speaking of remembering, that our ancestors were accompanied in that journey. And that there was a companionship with the marine mammals, with the whales, who were in many cases hunted by these same ships. There was something that happened. And I strongly believe that there was something that happened in terms of breathing, and remembering our blowholes, people can't see it when they're listening, but I'm touching the top of my head, the crown chakra area. The ones who did not complete that journey, our ancestors who became part of the ocean, are absolutely a part of it.

Alexis Gumbs: And our ancestors who did complete that journey, must have had to learn something different about breathing, in order to continue breathing past that point. That's what I know. And knowing that is horrifying, it's heartbreaking. It is also how I know I can be stronger than I think I can be. It is also a source of strength, for me. And it is also something that contributes to how deeply I believe in us, the descendants of the people who survived that, and our kin, all beings who are kin. Because we all have a relationship to that experience. That is an example, a profound example of what it means to breathe. And I believe that every breath that's taken by every animal, by every plant, every breath that is taken on this planet is connected to that breathing.

Barbara Holmes: And so deeply resounds with where we are today. Because in most of the executions of African Americans in the streets by police officers, many of them have said, I can't breathe. And so this meditation that you have written, just gives us an opportunity to think about breathing in another way.

Alexis Gumbs: Yes.

Barbara Holmes: In a deeper way, in a more loving way, in a more self sustaining way, in a more spiritual. So I mean, that's just breathtaking. I want to ask you about the gray whale story, because it ties in to what you just said, and it's such a stunning story. Could you share with our listeners what you write about the gray whales.

Alexis Gumbs: Gray whales are world shapers. The only large whale to feed on sediment on the bottom of the ocean. They leave massive trails on the underwater surface of the earth. They dig up nutrients that feed whole ecosystems and they have been missing from the Atlantic Ocean since the end of the transatlantic slave trade. What happened? Marine biologists say it is still a mystery, why the Atlantic population of gray whales went extinct? Is it possible that whalers on enslaving ships killed gray whales and didn't report it? Was there already a smaller population of gray whales than they had thought? Miscalculation and under documentation are the theories so far, and no one mentions the timing of the transatlantic slave trade, as relevant to the extinction of

Atlantic gray whales, but me. And maybe others like me, who can't help but think of slavery, and our kin.

Alexis Gumbs: I'll stop there, because I don't want to take all the time. But there's this question of whether this is a refusal on the part of the gray whales, of whether there is a solidarity there. But what we know for sure, is because these are filter feeders who are at the bottom of the ocean, processing the sediment into energy for the entire ecosystem, part of that sediment that they processed, are in fact, the bones of the people who died and were thrown overboard, or who jumped overboard during the transatlantic slave trade. So we know that there's an intimate relationship, whether the things that I might project onto it about solidarity and choice are relevant, they may or may not be. But physically, there is a relationship that is there. And I also mention that recently, and it actually has happened again, since the book was published, gray whales have been cited again in the Atlantic.

Alexis Gumbs: And scientists are still like, what is it? Are they Pacific gray whales that are changing their migration patterns? Was it a change in migration pattern to begin with? I mean, it's all in the realm of theory at this point. But there's something there. If a huge animal like this can disappear from the whole Atlantic Ocean, or at least be undetectable in the whole Atlantic Ocean, and then return, what does that mean? What does that mean for all of us who have been displaced? What does it mean for indigenous reclamation of land masses? What does it mean for anything, that we, in our individual lives, feel like is impossible or gone or lost forever?

Donny Bryant: There's a sense of that which is impossible can be made possible. There's a sense that narratives that were once believed to be firm and unchangeable, those narratives have the potential to be changed or renewed. Well, thank you for that. I think there's, for me, Alexis, so much of that work, your piece there, it really helps those of us who may have been foreign to that concept. That there was this cosmic connection, this intimacy. It creates a consciousness and an awareness that we need one another. And when you speak about the breath, it gave me a sense of just the essence of life. And to become more aware of that.

Donny Bryant: You're giving us more grounding, to be able to sense that in everything in life, and not just in our own small sphere of influence. So thank you for that.

Alexis Gumbs: Thank you-

Barbara Holmes: It also reminded me that transformation requires community.

Alexis Gumbs: Yes.

Barbara Holmes: As the filter feeders are transforming the purportedly lost folk into mermaids and into themselves, and that they return during the year of returns in 2019.

Alexis Gumbs: Absolutely.

Barbara Holmes: There's something there, Alexis.

- Alexis Gumbs: There is something there, I agree. I agree. There's so much there.
- Barbara Holmes: Yes. And it's wonderful that you invite us to explore that with you. I want to ask you about listening darkly. You talk about listening darkly. And that ties into the practices, for me anyway, that you use yourself. What does it mean to listen darkly.
- Alexis Gumbs: Oh, I love that. And that's such a profound question coming from you, especially. Someone who has taught me so much about the dark and the generativity of it. My practices start in the dark. So I wake up when it's still dark and listen, that's the easiest way to describe what is my daily practice. Wake up in the dark and listen. So I am listening darkly, to darkness. I think that the darkness, I mean, the way you write about it, the way that Audrey Lorde writes about, I am Black because I come from the earth's inside. And that deep, dark, erotic knowing that she invites us into also, is it. I'm listening in a way that is about tapping into that nurturing, and that possibility and potential.
- Alexis Gumbs: I also feel listening darkly, I mean, it's interesting, because right now, I'm in the midst of, who knows what will come of this, but I'm in the midst of looking at the sky more specifically, and learning about the sky stories and constellation names. And looking at the sky practices, [inaudible 00:40:50] people from this region where I am right now, in Anguilla, and through the Caribbean and South America. And the other thing that has to happen for me to listen darkly, is I'm listening through so much. I'm listening through loss, I'm listening through documentation and interpretation by colonizing naturalists who collect the stories, and then they've had to be reclaimed by the scholars who I'm reading now, to research about them.
- Alexis Gumbs: And I think when I heard you just say, listening darkly, I thought about that too, I'm listening for, It's almost as if the recorded history, and this is similar to what happened with me with the guidebooks and the research about the marine mammals, It's as if the recorded history are the stars. And I have to one, get past their brilliance, but also, really look at what is in between. And what is holding it together. And what is it in response to. And what is not explicitly there for me to track, as a researcher, that I have to hear. And so then how do I hear that? It's that deeper listening, listening darkly, that allows me to answer the question, what am I supposed to learn from these ancestors who did not leave a reliable record for me, except that they did.
- Barbara Holmes: I get it.
- Alexis Gumbs: Except that it's there, it's just not there. And as you have taught us so much about, it's not there in the enlightenment forms, it's not there in the linear "facts", but it is very much there. And I'm listening for it. And I do think that the repetition is important for that. I think that there are certain things that you can Google. And then there are certain things that you have to listen every day, you have to wait. You have to just be confused. You have to, like all of those things. And that's how I listen. I listen every day, I listen not having any idea. I even often write, not knowing what I'm going to learn, from what I wrote, until later. All of that, to me, resonates with what you say about listening darkly.

Barbara Holmes: Yeah, I mean, I think about Harriet Tubman, and they always say she was following the North Star for direction and getting from one place to another. But more likely than not, she was listening darkly. She'd had a head injury, she used to pass out and come to with a new path. She was listening darkly. And many of us have been educated by colonizers, to forget all of that.

Alexis Gumbs: Yes.

Barbara Holmes: And the true path to self, and the genuine within us is through listening.

Alexis Gumbs: Absolutely.

Barbara Holmes: Listening.

Alexis Gumbs: Absolutely. I love that you that you bring Harriet Tubman, because I've actually been also thinking about her today. If she was simply just navigating well, like a good navigator, that's not the same as being untrackable. That's not the same as being untraceable. That doesn't give you a way to do impossible things. It was impossible. It was impossible what she was doing all the time.

Barbara Holmes: Absolutely-

Alexis Gumbs: And that means that it was unpredictable. It was nonlinear. That means that, exactly as you just said, she had to trust that deeper knowing. And I do feel that her head injury, I do feel that her trust in her own dreams, I do feel that that was absolutely a part of it. She had faith in that.

Donny Bryant: Yeah-

Barbara Holmes: Yes, yes, wow. As we're closing out our just amazing conversation, there's something you say in Undrowned. What I'd like you to do is, if you were able to address the next generation coming up, what would you tell them? Given what they're going to encounter, given the strength of their past, what would you say to the next generation?

Alexis Gumbs: Really, I would say what my mother said to me, you are loved, you are loved. And the door is held open for you, all the energy that you are bringing through. And I know that there's already a generation below me articulate enough to say that they feel really, the message that they're getting from what previous generations have done around the environment, have done economically, have done socially is actually making them feel the opposite of that; not loved, not invited, not embraced. It's important, therefore, that we say as many times as we can, and we also prove the bravery of our action, about how honest we push ourselves to be with our own selves and with each other, that they are loved. The energy that they are bringing through, whatever it is, it is like all that happened, all that ever, ever, ever happened, happened so that they could bring that energy through.

Barbara Holmes: Ashay.

Alexis Gumbs: Ashay, there's just multitudes of love. That's all there is.

- Barbara Holmes: We are so thankful for your great gift that you are sharing. You are inspiring me and many generations. Thank you so much, Alexis.
- Donny Bryant: Thank you, Alexis.
- Alexis Gumbs: You're such an inspiration to me. Thank you so much for allowing me to be part of this miracle.
- Barbara Holmes: Thank you.
- Donny Bryant: Thanks for listening. We want to leave you with a few reflections from our interview with Dr. Alexis Pauline Gumbs.
- Barbara Holmes: Yeah. In this podcast, what we're trying to do is find the cosmic community, the unity, the community as one. And what Dr. Gumbs does, is she relates to the inability of BIPOC, or black and brown bodies to breathe in current circumstances, where there are repetitions of police violence. And so the mantra has become, I can't breathe. And what Alexis does is she says, maybe we need to do an apprenticeship with marine mammals who do know how to breathe through unbreathable circumstances. Through salt, through death, through loss, a baptism of tears, a baptism of breath.
- Donny Bryant: Yes, Dr. B, she does make that connection with marine mammals. And she makes a correlation with the undrowned, of the ancestral slaves from the transatlantic slave trade. And she makes a correlation, and she says that we are kin with the ancestors who survived, in addition to being kin with marine mammals. And not only are we kin to those who experienced brokenness and loss, yet have survived, but to bring breath full circle, we are also kin to those who experience life. So the breathing is not only a breathing of excel, of grief and pain, but it's also a transformational breathing, a transformational experience, of being able to continue to live out truth, to live out love and to reflect the fullness of life.
- Barbara Holmes: So also remember that whether you feel it or not, you are loved. That's a cosmic reality. If no one's told you today or ever, you are loved.