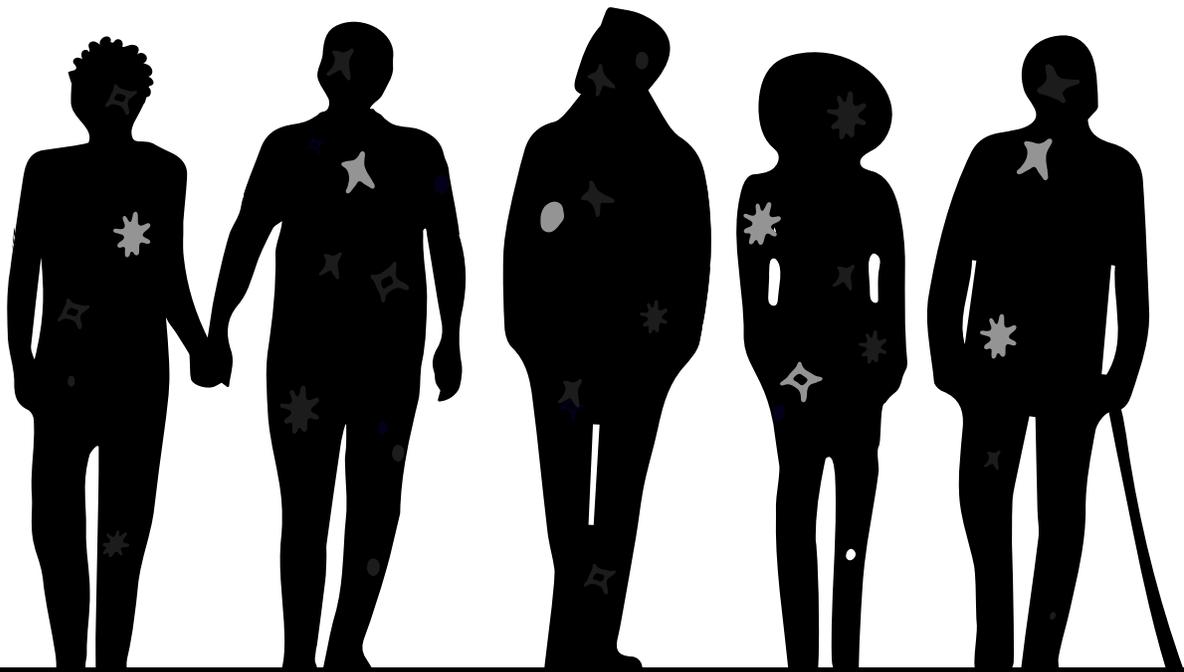


# THE COSMIC WE

Episode 1:  
Rediscovering Our Origins  
with Mikael Owunna



from the CENTER FOR ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

Mikael Owunna: I think it's so necessary, I mean, particularly right now, I think it's always necessary because we are so far been stripped and so far pushed away. I mean, even my family members in Nigeria, the research that I'm doing on Igbo mythologies, Dogon mythologies, but specifically even the Igbo ones, my Igbo family members to not know these myths. So even our families, literally who grew up in Nigeria, do not know our own stories of origin as a people. Oh, that makes me so excited because I know that I'm having an opportunity to share the stories of mythologies of my ancestors. And so, it really gives me a sense of mission and drive to keep producing the work and to keep finding new avenues through film, through additional media, to immerse audiences in these divine stories that we contain within ourselves. And that connect us to our ancestors and to the origin of the universe.

Donny Bryant: This podcast explores the mystery of relatedness as an organizing principle of the universe and of our lives.

Barbara Holmes: We're trying to catch a glimpse of connections beyond color, continent, country or kinship. And we're going to do this through science, mysticism, spirituality and the creative arts.

Donny Bryant: I'm Donny Bryant.

Barbara Holmes: I'm Barbara Holmes, and this is The Cosmic We.

Donny Bryant: Our guest today is Mikael Owunna, a self-described queer Nigerian, Swedish-American photographer and engineer based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Mikael was also a Fulbright Scholar and graduate of Duke University with dual degrees in biomedical engineering in photography. Mikael, welcome to the podcast.

Mikael Owunna: It's an honor and a pleasure, very much so.

Donny Bryant: Mikael, I'm fascinated by how your work explores various types of interconnections and intersections speaking to the unique area of identity formation. Today, just for a little bit, I want you to tell us a little bit about your story of finding your voice.

Mikael Owunna: While I was at Duke, I double majored in biomed engineering and history actually. And while I was studying history, the focus of my work was really around identity formation. So I did a number of research projects that were also connected to, I guess, also in a tangential way to my own personal experiences and struggles with identity. So the projects that I worked on while I was at Duke focused around, for example, the formation of the colored identity in South Africa, as a buffer class and caste system there. I also at the formation of an reformation of indigenous identity in the United States under the pressure of epidemic disease and genocidal violence and how those also reform different ethnic formations. Also, the formation of whiteness and white identities with white immigrants coming in and then becoming white, right? The Irish, the Italian, et cetera. So I was always really curious about that space while I was at Duke.

Mikael Owunna: And I was drawn to that specifically and also entered into photography due to the tension I was feeling between my queer identity and my African identity. And

so, when I was a freshman at Duke actually, we would go back to Nigeria every Christmas. And that Christmas we went back, my freshman year, I was put through a series of ceremonies due to my sexuality to kind of drive the gay out of me. And after that experience I fell into a spiral of a lot of anxiety and depression because I didn't feel like I had a right to exist. And I was also told that this is not our culture, right? And so, it was very much a journey for me to rediscover what it meant to be African, what is actual African culture? How has that reverted, mysticism, et cetera.

Mikael Owunna: And it began like a few months after that experience at the end of my freshman year, when I was headed to actually study at Oxford for a summer. And one of my friends said, "We should get a camera before we go." And I picked up a camera and I felt like I found my voice again. Things clicked and I began working as doing photography as a hobby, and then really grew into this career. So it was kind of all happening at the same time. A lot of the curiosity about identity, it connected to some of my historical research I was doing while at Duke and also my own personal experiences in coming into photography as a creative outlet for myself.

Barbara Holmes: When I first encountered your work, I lost my breath. I really hadn't understood how deeply I had absorbed negativity around black and brown bodies. And when I saw your work, I saw this celestial opening and unveiling. It was as if I could see an inner map of who we really were. And it was an exciting moment. And I know a lot of people have told you that, but when you are doing this work, what is it that you want us to see? What do you want the observer to see?

Mikael Owunna: Wow, that means so much, Barbara, because your work is so foundational and so incredible. As I was mentioning, actually right before this, your work has been cited by one of my key collaborators around my project. In his, Dr. Marcus Red, wrote an essay, Astro-Black Mythology about Sun Ra's conception of Astro-Black Mythology, right? And within that, which is also, I guess, connected into my response about what I hope viewers take away from the work, my Infinite Essence series, where there are these celestial black bodies that are glowing in the darkness. Within the context of Astro-Black Mythology, Sun Ra was positing a few different pieces, right? So Astro, we can think of astrology, our connection to astrological bodies. Black, right, so in terms of black we can think about the primordial blackness from which all life emerges, right?

Mikael Owunna: So this is the blackness of outer space at the very outset of existence, right? So this is blackness as this divine cosmic principle of the universe that transcends all life. Also, this kind of the blackness of the womb, the blackness of the deep ocean. So blackness has a generative force, and that also connects us also to ancient African histories and mythologies. Because within ancient Egypt, ancient Egyptians referred to themselves as, their nation as Kemet, meaning the Black Land. So thinking about again, blackness and this connection that also connects us to our ancestors and to the future. And so Astro, the cosmic peace, black, this primordial blackness and then mythology. Because I think in terms of even thinking about art and artistic practice, when we think about it from an indigenous African lens, art was not this separate piece.

Mikael Owunna: So people think, I was talking Skyping an engineer and an artist and people will

be like, “Oh, that’s so different.” But within African indigenous religions and societies and mysticism, mythology was a system of knowledge that was used to divine human consciousness by integrating art, science and religion. And so, they were all worked together to divine and expand our collective consciousness. And so, I hope that through my work, it’s kind of grounded in this practice of Astro-Black Mythology that connects us to the primordial blackness, that celestial origin. Blackness has a divine cosmic principle of the universe, and also helps divine and expand our collective consciousness.

Barbara Holmes: Wow.

Donny Bryant: I think, Mikael, what’s amazing to me as someone who is fairly new to your work, and what has inspired me is just, it allows one to reimagine what has previously been articulated as negative or dark or unvaluable, right, or something not to be appreciated. And you in a very creative way you re-imagine, as you talk about dark matter, right. Something that was something that you could not see, but it’s very real and present and valuable and significant. And one of the questions that I wanted to ask you is how has your you, you speak a little bit about your upbringing and how that informed, but what other experiences kind of help bring about this understanding of transcendence and how does your work, particularly your project, your more recent projects that you’re doing on the Infinite Essence and how some of that work, how does that present your journey? How does your journey influence that work of taking something that was previously seen as negative or not significant, but reimagine that in displaying how the universal essence of that particular thing is in fact valuable to the world?

Mikael Owunna: Yeah. So that’s a fantastic question. And for me, I see it actually being traced back to my previous body of work. So prior to work on Infinite Essence, I began Infinite Essence in 2016, working on it between 2016 and the present. So I’m still working on the project. Prior to that I would begin and I was actually was constantly working on a documentary series on LGBT African immigrants. And so, titled Limitless Africans, I traveled to 10 different countries across North America, Europe and the Caribbean, and I photographed and interviewed 50 LGBTQ African immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. And with that body of work, I was seeking to also kind of clinical build community amongst other LGBT Africans, trying to return back to that source that had brought me to photography in the first place, that tension between my queer identity, my African identity and trying to reclaim what it meant to be African and queer. Right?

Mikael Owunna: One of the pieces that happened along the way was the unveiling of pre-colonial African history. And in that context I began learning about, for example, the work of Malidoma Somé. And Malidoma Somé, of course, Dr. Barbara Holmes knows. He’s a, Malidoma Somé the spiritualist from Burkina Faso, he described in a article in the mid 1990s the role of gay people within traditional African societies as the gatekeepers to the spirit world. And so, within traditional African societies, people will not identify as being LGBTQ.

We're not vilified. We were the shamans, we were the mystics, we were the diviners, we were the healers and the warrior leaders who helped mitigate the gates between dimensions. And so, we were central in all of our societies until colonialism, both Christian, Islamic, colonialism and the transformation of our ideas of what it meant to be African.

Mikael Owunna: And so, that project for me introduced the space of thinking about myself and my work as gatekeeping and thinking about my role as an artist within that realm. So that started building my curiosity around African spirituality, indigenous knowledge systems and which then led into the Infinite Essence series. Because as I was thinking about the Infinite Essence series and trying to wrestle with these images, because I kept seeing all of these images of black people being shot and killed. And so, I wanted to think about how could I transfigure our bodies into the cosmic vessels that they are, and I grounded that with an African knowledge systems to do so. So that began with my previous body of work, kind of working with queer African identities, but then led into an exploration of additional knowledge systems that have then really transformed my own perspective about myself, my life, my practice and the work that I do.

Donny Bryant: Amazing.

Barbara Holmes: Yeah. I think one of the more important parts about Infinite Essence, as you said, it's tied to African mythologies and you name them and you spoke of Malidoma Somé. There is this story he tells of his grandfather dying in a white colonial hospital and they put the African whisk in his hand and they walk him home because they have to do all the funeral services. And so, for African-Americans who are trying to assimilate, there has been this desire to get rid of the mythology. We want to be like the colonists. We want to be able to say we achieved. We discarded that. And we've discarded something, I think, that is so important, that's captured. Along with photographs, his connections to mythology. So how do the mythologies of the Igbo people help with what you're doing?

Mikael Owunna: Yeah. I think it has been very, very important point. So I mean, it's been very transformational for me. So even when I was trying to begin the Infinite Essence work and understand the visual language for the series, I spent months actually testing many different processes. And so, I began by trying light painting, which is when you set up a camera on a long exposure and you run around with lights, people kind of do it at weddings where they do the sparklers and they write I love you and stuff. So I kind of do that through these energetic auras, but it didn't eliminate the bodies. I then tried projectors where I project onto the bodies, these nebula and oceanic forms, but then it blew out the bodies and the bodies were not just transformed. The entire space was transformed.

Mikael Owunna: And so, while I was trying to understand the visual language, I actually returned to the work of Chinua Achebe the Igbo novelist. And Chinua Achebe

in one of his essays, describe the role of one of the Igbo spiritual bodies because they're eight spiritual bodies. And so, one of the spiritual bodies that we contain is the chi. And while trying to describe what the chi is, which is very, very difficult to do. Chinua Achebe said that, "Or is our chi one ray of the infinite essence of the sun?" And so, that's actually where the source for the title came from. Because I sat with that and I was thinking about, okay, our chi, one of our spiritual bodies is connected to a celestial body. And from there, I was thinking about magic that was kind of captured within some video games that I've been watching like Final Fantasy.

Mikael Owunna: And I was looking at that, I was thinking about Chinua Achebe's work and then I literally heard a voice that was saying, "Put the sparkles onto the body." And from there I continued on that path. And so, it began with that. And then now, each of the pieces that I have reference specific myths from the Igbo in Nigeria and the Dogon in Mali which has such a well-documented cosmology. Because I think by connecting ourselves, again, and it turns out Astro-Black Mythology, by rooting ourselves in mythology, African mythologies, we connect ourselves to the origins of the universe. We connect ourselves beyond blackness as this really flat sociopolitical construct to blackness as a divine cosmic principle of the universe that creates all generates life.

Donny Bryant: Yeah, that's beautiful. I want to say, I'm glad you mentioned that. In doing some research particularly about African spirituality in the concept of the chi, I asked a colleague of mine here in Michigan and who is Igbo. And so, I said, "Hey, tell me a little bit about this in the African spirituality, a little bit about the chi?" And in a very simple terms he defined it as God within you, the divine reflected within you. And I thought that was just a very powerful interpretation of the concept and very applicable to your work, right, into what you're doing and how you're utilizing fluorescent lights to illuminate transcendence. And I'm not a video gamer, however I did a little research on Final Fantasy and I mean, your inspiration in that, I literally got the aha moment.

Donny Bryant: It made sense. And how Japanese video games and how they utilize light and illumination in sparkle, if you will, to give an essence of transcendence that something significant is in this moment right now. And to begin to see that, our identity, that there was something unique about us, not only individually but corporately and collectively and universally, that we are part of this greater story. I think your work really speaks to that. So I just want to just commend you on how you use a very creative way to present that reality to us.

Mikael Owunna: Yeah. And one thing connected, just really quickly, is that idea of also presenting divine mirrors of ourselves, right? Because as your friend and colleague mentioned, within African spiritual systems there is an understanding that we are all the divine and the divine is inside of us. It's not this separation, we are also the divine. And so, for example, I have not studied extensively the Yoruba system, but one thing that I've learnt a bit about is, for example, Oshun. And people describe Oshun always carrying a mirror with her. And in the kind of a modern context, people will think about this mirror as this symbol of vanity. But what Oshun is doing is Oshun is constantly looking at this mirror and reflecting on her image as a God, right?

Mikael Owunna: And if you think about that, constantly reflecting on our images as the divine, how

that transforms and affects the way in which we live our lives. And so, I think that's also part of what my work is working to do. Literally because even the images when they're printed, they're printed on these metal plates that are reflective. So people can also see themselves reflected in the work too, which is also part of that experience.

Donny Bryant: Yeah. Dr. B, can I just piggyback off what Mikael just said for a moment?

Barbara Holmes: Yeah, sure.

Donny Bryant: Because you know, man, I'm over here getting sweaty and excited, Mikael, as you're talking about, when you start mentioning the concept that we're all divine mirrors. Because I mean, in reality, for me, when you deal with kind of an interpretation of the gospel or Christianity, to me, the incarnation really what Christ reveals to all humanity is that true fact of our identity that we're all image bearers, that we're all reflectors. And if you really want to, for me, my understanding of the purpose of creation or humanity is to reflect, right, to mirror that divine image in the earth. So the concept of the kingdom of heaven is really the reality of all humanity, regardless of what you may believe, but every human being in our original goodness was created to reflect that divine image.

Donny Bryant: And I think your work brings back that truth, right, in a very creative way. And you do it in such a specific way, but what's true about your work is also true to me about everybody, right? There's a truth in your work that's applicable not just to dark bodies, but also to everybody. And I think that's kind of the next level. That's the cosmic connection, if you will, about what your work speaks to me. Man, I really think it's fascinating, but it is true about that in revelation of reflectors or mirrors. And I think that's a reality that I think it's true and an interpretation about the gospel that I don't believe is all well understood today because it's more about identity versus what you do.

Barbara Holmes: Yeah. And it also extends beyond Christianity because the world is full of people who believe in all kinds of things who are looking for fulfillment and seeing themselves whole. I mean, that's the whole point. I want to ask you a question about your work in Taiwan. I'm going to probably butcher the name of the school, but it was the school in Nanao. Aboriginal school.

Mikael Owunna: Yeah. Nanao.

Barbara Holmes: And you did a whole year curriculum. So people who are looking at your work, oh, that's great. It's art, it's photography. This had a really practical purpose. And as soon as I saw that, I thought to myself, minority and marginalized children all over this country can't see themselves in anything they're being taught. They can't see themselves, and you created a curriculum to help them to use what they know or what they should know or be taught and photography to unveil something that would allow them to survive as a minority in this country. Did you say a little bit about that curriculum?

Mikael Owunna: Yes. That's a really, because many people don't know about that part. That's my first photography project that I did right out of college. And actually in the context of

this conversation is really, really interesting because... I was a Fulbright scholar in Taiwan and I was there teaching English, but I also was really curious about, again, cultural engagement and I was teaching in a Taiwanese Aboriginal community. And so, just for context or people, Taiwan has an indigenous community that's about 2% of the population. They are the ancestors of all Polynesian people. So from Hawaii, to Indonesia, to Madagascar, they originated in Taiwan several thousand years ago. And so, they have kind of faced systemic discrimination, marginalization of their languages, their religions, their mythologies, are really endangered. I was positioned in one of these schools. And so, I was thinking about how could I, as a photographer, engage with the students in a creative way.

Mikael Owunna: And I'd been studying the pedagogy of literacy through photography. And there's a, coming from Duke, there was a professor at the center for documentary studies when the E-world, who done a lot of interesting work about teaching photography to students in different parts of the world as a way for them to engage questions with their identity. And so, I collaborated with Dr. Christine Yeh who was a professor at the University of San Francisco. Who'd also done work with Samoan communities, and she was doing research with the university Aboriginal students in Taiwan. And then, so Christina Yeh and then also two local teachers, Nancy Yeh and Jennifer Lee. And together we collaborate with the students, these first and second graders, teaching them first, the mythologies, right? Atayal mythologies. Because the myths are not really discussed, they're not taught within the context of the school.

Mikael Owunna: So she started by teaching them their mythologies, aspects of Atayal language. And from there, I then led the photography portion where I taught the students photography. Each of them were given disposable cameras and we're then able to document and tell their stories of that in their community. We then took the portraits that they produced, blew them up in larger format. And then they adorn them with mythological symbols from their culture. So for example, they adorned them with these diamonds around them. And all students kind of led. We kind of allowed them. We kind of taught them the framework and then they just took it and ran. So example, they adorned with diamonds around it, which represent the eyes of their ancestors watching over them.

Barbara Holmes: Wow.

Mikael Owunna: Also, they also adorn them with rainbow motifs. If you see some of the work that they produced, it's on my website, the rainbow motifs, that's also from their Atayal mythologies and that's the rainbow bridge that they walk across to join their ancestors when they pass away. So again, this is bridge to the ancestors that goes through space. That project was then compiled and then the students were then featured in a full floor exhibition at the National Taiwan Museum, exhibiting their work and sharing it with mandatory across spaces across Taiwan. They got to then come to the Capitol and they showcase as the lead artists. And so, that was just an incredible experience that, again, we began with mythology. And I think now, I'm thinking back, I think also informs a lot of the work in terms of my own approach kind of starting with mythology and then building on identity based projects around that.

- Barbara Holmes: Fantastic. You see any use for this in the curriculums across the United States?
- Mikael Owunna: I think definitely there is. I think it's definitely really needed because, right, I think when you start with actually teaching students their own indigenous mythologies and then building creative projects, whether then implementing it within their daily lives and really building it out, I mean, it was really transformational for me. And I know a lot of the students, I mean, then they were then featured even in the museum and their community with their work. So I think it does have a huge impact. Yeah.
- Donny Bryant: Mikael, what about the significance of photography or the power of imagery or images or the significance of seeing, right, connectedness or seeing yourself in imagery? Can you speak to how that plays a role in transformation?
- Mikael Owunna: Yeah. One of the things I think is really interesting about photography is that people really believe that photographs represent objective reality and objective truth. People think, oh, because this is photograph, this is real. And so, I think one of the things that is really powerful with the Infinite Essence series, for example, and I think with all of my work that I try to produce is that when people see the work, they don't believe it's a photograph. They say, oh, this is a nice digital art, or this is a nice painting. And then when I explain actually how it's a photograph. I hand paint the models bodies with the fluorescent paints, turn off the lights. I built an ultra bulb flash, ultra bulb flash illuminates the bodies. That then that's the rest of the bodies that's captured in the camera sensor, dah, dah, dah, dah.
- Mikael Owunna: And then you see kind of people have this moment where they look at the work and they see something different, right? Because then it shifts from being this really abstract understanding of the human body to this is a real human body, these are human beings. And when you see... And I think that's just kind of like even, I mean, I guess I'll give you a question for you too. Kind of when you understood the work as, when you started understanding this photograph versus seeing it as a painting or digital art, I feel like there's a shift there. And I think that also is what challenges our perceptions of what's real and what our image, our internal image of blackness means and represents. So I think that brings us back to that idea of the divine image, right? Because then that shifts us to then thinking about that cosmic divine image that's incarnated within us.
- Donny Bryant: Wonderful.
- Barbara Holmes: Yeah. And the only way really to limit us is to pretend that the four dimensions we have access to are the only dimensions that there are.
- Mikael Owunna: Yeah.
- Barbara Holmes: And Michio Kaku when others say there are 11. Which means there's plenty of room for the gedde to rise, for the mythologies to exist, for us to breathe into the capacities that we really have. We are so limited. And what I want, when I saw your work with Limitless Africans, was to understand that, yes, you were looking for the combination of queer and African, showing community. But what you did was showed us we also don't have limits. That we've limited ourselves. It's amazing, you also acted as your own

model. You did yourself.

Mikael Owunna: Oh, yeah.

Barbara Holmes: I remember reading that you said it's kind of hard to paint yourself.

Mikael Owunna: It is, if you can imagine.

Barbara Holmes: I have no doubt. And so, did you experience the same thing the models did or was it different for you because you know what's up?

Mikael Owunna: Oh my gosh, it was super different. It was so different. Yeah. So for the Infinite Essence series, there was a local show. Because I live in Pittsburgh and there was a local show here, Queering the Art of Self-Portraiture, and I'd been invited to be a part of the show. And so, I was like, "Okay, I'm going to do Infinite Essence here. I should probably do a self. I should make a self portrait for this thing." So it's like this whole production, takes a whole day. I set up a space. I used to put black felt everywhere to kind of make it a really black background. And then I kinda have to block off the space in case anybody's walking around, because I stripped down naked for the shoots.

Mikael Owunna: And so, I'm there. And then I have to, then I'm painting my body with fluorescent paints. So I'm taking it. I'm splattering paint, my heading, my head and turning back, wait, am I here? Looking in mirrors and all this stuff. So that took a whole lot of time. And then eventually then I set up my camera on a tripod and I just have it on a timer shooting out these ultraviolet flashes every maybe 30 seconds or something like that. And there was a few things that I noticed right away. First of all, from a sensorial experience, I mean, this is going to be kind of not as elevated, it was so cold. You're naked and it's dark and there's just this light coming. So that was the first I experienced. It was so cold." I was like, "Oh, my body felt so cold." And then I started, when my eyes would be closed, I started noticing that every time the flash would emit, I would see this glow emerge and then disappear. I was like, "Mmh." And so then, because you can't look directly at the flash.

Mikael Owunna: I kind of would angle myself away and I would look down, and I would then see my arm just eliminate and then disappear. And I started thinking about that space again of gatekeepers and portals. And it was, we talked about the chi, kind of the one ray of the infinite essence of the sun. I think, this divine image. And it was almost, I felt like I was, for that moment, because everything was black. It was completely dark. And then I would just kind of emerge and disappear. It was like walking into another dimension and then if you see it come and then it goes away, it disappears. And from that perspective, that began shifting my understanding of what the work meant. Because I know some of the models had told me that, for example, that they, some of them had cried seeing their images.

Mikael Owunna: Some of them had said how much it meant to them to see themselves as these celestial beings, but actually seeing it happen for myself was, that was really, I think that's when it started to really click for me what the work was actually doing. And on a spiritual level for myself too, began also accelerating my own research into understanding that aspect of interdimensional travel, studying African indigenous systems like the Igbo

system and the Dogon system to understand, what was going on there, right? Because I know our indigenous knowledge systems understand that and understand what this work is meant to do and how it is operating even through that fire of the flash emerging and creating this image and then disappearing and back into the blackness. And so, that's kind of what started for me, from that self portrait.

Donny Bryant: Wow.

Barbara Holmes: Wow. You also mentioned hearing from an African-American woman. A woman who's thick like most of us are. And saying how difficult it was to deal with her own body, until she saw that. And it really struck me because most of the time I've been trying to look like what I've seen, on the television, on the ads. And it wasn't until an African-American woman said to me, "Elephants don't eat anything but leafs, and they weight tons, stop it. You're Gullah. You're going to be thick, whatever." And to be able to see the beauty of self internally, not just what size you are, was just breathtaking.

Donny Bryant: Wow. I ever recall seeing the diversity in your models, and hearing your talk about your own experience as a model reminded me of one of your interviews. One of your models said that every black person should see themselves this way. It was a powerful statement how the model interpreted their experience and how that experience was transformative and transformational and how they saw themselves and their identity. And I started thinking it's like, wow, yeah, but everyone should see themselves that way, right. To be able to see, not only experience it as a model, but to experience it as someone who can appreciate the artwork. And I think that unique aspect of your work, a participant, but also someone who is appreciating, an observer of your work, can also experience that transformational reality and truth of your work too.

Donny Bryant: So there's an underlying story that really evangelizes, if you will, individuals who encounter the work. And I just find that to be so powerful, a powerful aspect of the imagery that you're doing. And it speaks to, really, identity. I mean, and that's kind of the interconnectedness of humanity is this journey to rediscover who we really are. Right. And so, much of our life is trying to uncover that. I think we go through our tribalistic identity formations, but there is a universal connection there too. And then your work really speaks to that at a higher level. And I just think that it kind of leads me to say, what's the next iteration of this work? What is this work going to look like 10 years from now? You know what I mean? Where do you see the work going?

Mikael Owunna: So I respond to a few different pieces, so I might kind of jump around a little bit. First of all starting with what Dr. Barbara Holmes was discussing. Was, yeah, one of the models for the project is named Uche who is a full figured curvy person. And Uche's image is really, really powerful. Uche was assigned female at birth, identifies as gender queer. And Annette, one of the responders for my article and NPR, a 60 year old black woman who emailed me and said that her whole 60 years she hated her body. And that for a fraction of a second, when she saw that image of Uche, she actually felt she could breathe. She had a moment of reprieve. And so, I feel like that's a really powerful symbol of what the work is capable of doing from that standpoint. The other piece that I wanted to actually share was actually one of the Dogon myths of origin, talking about these cosmic connections, et cetera. And so, in the Dogon system, one at

the beginning of the universe, all was one in the blackness of space.

Mikael Owunna: And one of the divinities, the Nommo Semi was sacrificed to atone for the deeds of his wicked twin. And as he sacrificed his blood forms all of the planets and the stars. And so, ritual sacrifice has this generative force that creates the physical universe. He's then resurrected by Amma the creator of God. And as he's resurrected, he turns with his arms and demonstrates his role as the guardian of space as the stars kind of spool forth from his body. And that divine figure then becomes the ancestor of all humanity. Right? And so, you think about that actually within the Dogon system, we're all descended from the gods, right? And so, that Nommo then descends to earth in a celestial arc from the constellation of Sirius, with all the plants and animals and the first eight ancestors of humanity. He steps on to earth and as he steps on to earth as the ancestor of all humanity, he brings water to the planet.

Mikael Owunna: And so, from that perspective, I think there's a few pieces. First, it's this celestial connection. Literally humanity from this Dogon indigenous system being described as divine creatures that descend from the constellation of Sirius to the planet, right? So again, there's literally this divine connection, this cosmic connection that's within our blood that's that's there. And which I think also is evoked in some of the images in the project. And I think is also central to these understandings of this divine nature that's rooted in blackness. And that that then is generated throughout humanity. The piece in terms of, okay, what is coming next? Actually, in the fall, in September, I am going to have a new series of Infinite Essence images being released in September. I'm going to have my first solo gallery show in New York City in Chelsea, in September.

Mikael Owunna: So anybody's around, it's going to be from September 17th. It's not been officially announced yet, but it's going to ask, what's coming very, very soon. So people follow me, they can figure it out. But it's going to be September 17th, October 30th, a full solo exhibition with a whole new suite of images that are dedicated specifically to Dogon myths of origins and Igbo myths of origin. And so, this new series is titled Cosmologies and we'll be coming out then. And it will also be accompanied by my first film, which will also be in the space. And so, it will be kind of infinite essence in motion, but dedicated to the [inaudible 00:37:57] Igbo myth of origin that's rooted in dance, sacrifice and resurrection. So there's going to be a film coming out and a new series in September. And then if people are not able to make it to that in New York, there will also be a solo show in Los Angeles in November, also about to be announced.

Donny Bryant: Wow.

Barbara Holmes: Breaking news. Fantastic.

Donny Bryant: Awesome.

Mikael Owunna: Yeah.

Donny Bryant: Amazing.

Barbara Holmes: Wow, that is wonderful. I think what I like about your spirit is that you're so

grounded. You know who you are, you know who you're hearing from. You're understanding what the ancestors are whispering into your ear. And there's this quote where you said, "Very few American liberals cared about my work and LGBTQ immigrants, when Obama was in office. And then when Trump was elected, everybody was whispering in your ear. "Oh, this is a very important work, very important work. Very needed, very needed." And you said, "Important to who?" [crosstalk 00:39:15].

Mikael Owunna: I did say that. I did.

Barbara Holmes: Important to who? These stories matter, no matter what, regardless of the white gays or the cis gays or whoever gays. It matters. And you know that, and because you know that I feel stronger about reclaiming it and in fighting all, brothers and sisters, to reclaim who they really are.

Donny Bryant: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. That's beautiful.

Barbara Holmes: What makes you so brave? What makes you-

Mikael Owunna: Oh my gosh. I was irritated then, I was irritated.

Barbara Holmes: I know you were. That's what I liked about it.

Mikael Owunna: I was so mad. I was like-

Barbara Holmes: Somebody had got on your last nerve.

Mikael Owunna: Oh my gosh, I just couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't. Wait, so what happened was that, when I started the Limitless African series, I started in 2013. So this is the Obama era. everyone's like, "oh, everything's great. Dah, dah, dah, dah." What is going on? So most of the attraction actually that I got around the series was in Canada. I started even having stuff in Europe. But America was just in this place, oh, everything... It's just very, very, very blinders on. Oh, we have Obama. It was ridiculous. And so, then Trump is elected and then I had to be traveling to Canada a lot, trying to build, do little shows here and do this stuff. And when Trump was elected then suddenly a lot more interests started developing in the work.

Mikael Owunna: And so, I think it really shows, and I think even with pop culture, how things move so quickly. So I think it requires that an understanding of the mission for the work and my mission, right. Because even with the Infinite Essence series, even if people like it right now, some people might be, "Oh, something else is hot." Two years from now, "Oh, I like this." And I think that's why the framework for Astro-Black Mythology has been so important for me because I understand by grounding my work in these celestial mythologies, that that is actually, it's a healing process for me. But it also is connected to our artistic practices that we've thought about for thousands of years, right. So even if these little trends and stuff are going like this, we're still looking at the pyramids. Right. We're still talking about grades and bop. It's a different level thinking about work and how that connects us to the divine, so.

- Barbara Holmes: The late woman is theologian. Her name is Katie Geneva Cannon. Said, “Everyone has to do the work that your soul must have.” Is this the work that your soul must have?
- Mikael Owunna: Absolutely. I’ve never heard that quote before, but absolutely. There have been times when it’s very challenging. It’s been very, very challenging, even becoming a full-time artist was such a transition, right. Because even when I began the Limitless African series, I had a full-time job. And I would still be like, okay, once a month I’m going to photograph, I’m traveling to see somebody. I was working in marketing. Very, very, very different roles and different paths that were open. I’ve always thought about kind of contemplate different careers. And one thing that somebody told me years ago when I was at Duke, was that, in every job there’s “drudgery.” She said, “Oh, 95% of every job is drudgery. And then 5% that you’d be like.” And I was like, “That sounds pretty bad.” I was [inaudible 00:42:59]. I don’t like that ratio. But now actually here it’s like, okay, actually, with a lot of my work, I have so much administration and so much all this stuff, but all of it makes me so excited.
- Mikael Owunna: All of it makes me so excited because I know that I’m having an opportunity to share the stories and mythologies of my ancestors. And I think it’s so necessary, I mean, particularly right now, I think it’s always necessary. I think because we are so far been stripped and so far pushed away. I mean, even my family members in Nigeria, the research that I’m doing on Ibgo mythologies, Dogon mythologies, but specifically even the Ibgo ones, my Ibgo family members to not know these myths. So even our families, literally who grew up in Nigeria, do not know our own stories of origin, as a people. And so, it really gives me a sense of mission and drive to keep producing the work and to keep finding new avenues through film, through additional media, to immerse audiences in these divine stories that we contain within ourselves and that connect us to our ancestors and to the origin of the universe. So I think that’s really what drives me and keeps me going.
- Barbara Holmes: Thank you, Mikael.
- Donny Bryant: Thank you, Mikael.
- Barbara Holmes: This has been a wonderful time.
- Mikael Owunna: It’s been an honor. Thank you so much.
- Barbara Holmes: Thanks for listening. And we’d like to leave you with a few reflections on the segment with Mikael Owunna.
- Donny Bryant: You know, Dr. B, in the interview, Mikael spoke very elegantly and eloquently about his origin stories, his discovery of his stories of origin within his family. And so much of, he articulated it, was connected to his discovery of his identity. But he mentioned how, as he began to have these conversations with his family, many of his family did not really know these stories of origin. And it made me really think about how many of us in our communities around this country, many of us do not know are our own stories of origin. And as he began to explore and talk about his particular gift to this world and what he does, it really brought to light how oftentimes these very

non-traditional ways of learning through art and through media and through music, through poetry, can have to be tools to help us discover our own particular stories of origin and ultimately our own identity.

Barbara Holmes: Yes. You're not going to learn about the magic within the star stuff, within from your colleges and universities. There has to be a moment of tracing back, of reclamation of story, of understanding who you are. I know that when our own family did the DNA and found ourselves clearly situated on the continent, we began the exploration of ritual, story, culture, the admixture of other ethnic groups. It grounds you, it settles you, it prepares you and allows you to do the work that you're here on earth to do. Often our differences with others is that we have not yet seen the magic within. So that's what I'm looking for. What is your story? Who were your indigenous elders? What stories that they tell? Where's the magic in your life?