Opening Doors, Season 1, Episode 3

King Khazm: Where Art, Racism, and Disability Intersect

Narrator: Welcome to Opening Doors, a podcast about accessibility in arts and civic life brought to you by the Seattle Cultural Accessibility Consortium and Jack Straw Cultural Center. For our first season, we aim to amplify the voices of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color with disabilities, and to learn how race and disability impact their access to arts and culture. Here is your host, Elizabeth Ralston, founder of the Seattle Cultural Accessibility Consortium.

Elizabeth Ralston: I am here today with King Khazm. This multifaceted Japanese- American artist, producer, educator and community organizer, is a prominent figure in the Seattle Hip-Hop community and beyond. He has worked to engage and empower communities for the past 25 years and what has remained constant is his dedication to art and community service. Khazm serves as a board member of a paralysis support organization, The Here and Now Project, and the arts funding agency 4Culture. He is commissioner of the Seattle Commission for People with Disabilities and manager of the historic venue/community space, Washington Hall. In addition, he works as Executive Director for the record label Fresh Chopped Beats and the community organization, 206 Zulu. A spinal cord injury means that Khazm has initiated all his activist pursuits, performances, and lectures from his wheelchair.

Khazm's current pursuits in hip hop activism have led him toward a more comprehensive perspective of hip hop's role in society and we are grateful to have him talk to us today about his thoughts on how racism, equality, art, and life with a disability intersect. Welcome, I'm so glad to see you today!

King Khazm: Thank you so much for having me.

ER: Absolutely. So, let's dive right in! You told me that you are a fourth-generation Japanese American and that your family was incarcerated in Japanese internment camps during World War 2. Can you talk to me about how your family's experience has affected your perspective on life?

KK: Indeed. You know, the internment camps wasn't something that, my family talked much about. I'd say generally that- that goes for many Japanese American families, it's not something that was really discussed much 'till more recently- in recent years. You know, my grandparents are still alive and well in their mid to late 80's and they're just now starting to kind of delve into the- being open to those conversations. You know I'm not sure if it was, you know, deep rooted in guilt or- or shame or otherwise but you know, they just- they don't dwell too much on the past and are really rooted in just looking forward something that I was . . . instilled with you know, through my family's, I guess in hindsight, resilience.

KK: Being able to move forward, you know, despite the struggles and- and in whatever your current circumstance is that there's always something to aspire towards. A strong sense of, you know, family and community, I've learned through my family, being able to support each other. Looking back, I see that would be like the earliest show of what we call strength in numbers. Being able to come together, you know, for a greater cause and just- just supporting each other and you know, all of our pursuits. I think- the thing that really - was most embedded in me through my family was the creativity. You know, it's where I get a lot of my artistic passion from in a lot of different ways, you know, through the lineage of my great-grandparents, my grandparents, and the parents, you know, they've always had a very strong creative mind and, you know, really ranged the whole gamut from rock gardens in the

internment camps to driftwood that- that my great-grandfather would make really elaborate wood-wood furniture in different designs. Great-grandma would make, you know, Japanese dolls and it'd be, you know, calligraphy and scrolls that- that had not just symbolic you know, poetic phrases that- that had a lot of meaning but just the strokes themselves that carry a lot of depth and feeling. And I think that a lot of that just had transpired through me. You know, it's kind of unbeknownst to- I'm just kind of always been able to have the art, you know, and music as a- a way to kind of channel myself and I think that for a lot of artists, that's really how we're able to kind of make sense of this world as we move forward.

ER: Have you noticed any shifts in the conversation about racism through the generations and through different people of color communities? You know, what kind of shift have you noticed through the Black Lives Matter movement and within in your own circle as well?

KK: You know, I think kind of similar to how elders in my family, you know, they didn't talk much about the concentration camps, you know, we didn't talk in depth about prejudice, you know, racism or- or different problems of the world. They just. . . kind of exemplified, you know, the world that they wanted to live in and just kind of exhibited the attributes of strength, compassion, inclusion, optimism, but not through their words, but through their ways of actions in particular. And not that it was swept under the rug but it was just, I guess, addressed in a- in a different way. my generation and younger generation's work where . . . it's a lot more vocal. I- I kind of come from the south end of Seattle. You know, one of the most diverse zip codes in the country and you know here, we're surrounded by all kinds of people with different backgrounds: black, brown, Vietnamese, Chinese, you know- Ethiopian, Eritrean, Samoans, Natives and you know, it's such an amazing melting pot here and despite our, you know, cultural differences, you know- we all have similar backgrounds and similar aspirations, and desires, and basic needs, and hopes.

KK: A lot of us, you know, come from different poor working-class families, you know, sometimes marginalized, often underserved. but, very hard-working, resilient, family oriented and strong people, you know? So, for me, I come from the Golden Era of hip hop and, you know, this is a generation of young people who grew up on Afrocentricity, you know. Being proud of black heritage and culture and you know, this is the shift in kind of the ideology and just being proud of who you are- despite where you come from. you know, the music was like a soundtrack and ,you know, I grew up being very inspired by artists like you know, KRS- One, Public Enemy, and Poor Righteous Teachers, you know, and a lot of times, hip hop is looked at as like you know, the black CNN of the streets and being able to make the correlation, you know, of- of what was happening with young brothers and sisters in New York was very similar to what was happening in Los Angeles. And Houston and Chicago, and here in Seattle.

KK: So, we're all able to kind of look at . . . what's happening on the streets and- and seeing that, you know, we have a lot more in common than we do different and so, you know, hip hop was really one-one of the things that really kind of raised my consciousness in terms of learning about, you know, the social ills and different states that we're living. Being able to kind of address these issues, I grew up being also very inspired by the, you know, the legacy of the Black Panther Party and, you know, over the years been blessed to be able to learn from many of the leaders, and you know, in a lot of ways continue the footsteps. A lot of times, there's a misconception, you know, in terms of what the Black Panther Party stood for and you know, even today with the Black Lives Matter, what it means. It can often be misconstrued, and you know, really just black liberation and what that means and really, it's- it's not just

a fight for black people, it's a fight for humanity. And, we all need to do our part, you know, in unlearning prejudice and hatred and decolonizing our minds and you know, looking deep into our systemic infrastructure and how we can all be a part of the solution.

KK: You know, what is the change that we want to see and how are we gonna get there? You know, liberation and freedom can be vilified and sensationalized and so, it continues the cycle of perpetuating the oppression and you know, history works in cycles so, it's really a kind of a heightened state of awareness that we are in now and it's really important for everybody to, you know, do their part in raising consciousness and doing something about making a better tomorrow.

ER: Yes, and it seems like so many forms of art like hip hop, can really transcend those differences and bring people together to send out a message about solidarity, about justice, you know, and that brings me to my next point is, can you talk a bit about how your disability has influenced your art and made you an advocate for marginalized communities, especially when you're using hip hop and other art forms to really get the message out about racial injustice and disability justice?

KK: Well, as a child, you know, I was in a very serious car accident and it killed two people and fortunately, my mother and I survived. I suffered from a spinal cord injury that, you know, made me unable to walk. And you know I guess how that would shape me, I was growing up in the south end, you know, a lot of friends and peers were out, you know. Either playing sports in the park or, you know, running in the streets and getting into trouble. But for me, I was out home just in isolation, you know like, similar to today. And I would just, draw and paint for endless hours and use my creativity as a- a kind of a portal into my imagination and go into different worlds and realms and just- conjuring up any type of possibility. I would just imagine and, you know, for me like the art was a way to process what, you know, my feelings, my anger, my pain, my joy, you know everything. It was a- specially for somebody who wasn't really big on, you know, communicating, that was my way of communication.

KK: And in terms of how, you know, it's influenced me to be an advocate. I don't really see as a advocate, I'm just me, you know? I'm here to speak my truth and hopefully help others in the process. I share my stories, you know, through my art and my lyrics and you know, overtime it's- it's been not just therapy for myself, but you know, it's been able to connect with a lot of other people who are going through similar challenges and struggles and kind of just different experiences, you know. Music and art, you know, it touches upon the whole array of the human experience and so that's something that- that, you know, resonates with a lot of different people.

KK: I over the years have become like, kind of like what they call a big homie, you know, or a mentor to my peers and other folks in the hood and, you know, I've kind of slowly been able to see the power in that and being able to use it as a platform for good, you know, CNN. You know, we can settle our differences through art, we can see the big picture, we can work towards common goals, and you know like I said earlier, strength in numbers and being able to use these creative elements as ways to- to engage our minds and our bodies and our souls and how we can use that to- to bring forth greater good. And so, you know, life is art and art is life, you know. It's- it's cyclical and you know for me, my disability I guess, is just a part of life and I don't really- there's a lot of different intersections and- and what makes me me. And I don't necessarily differentiate or compartmentalize those different aspects. It's just me and who I am. You know, I've been very blessed, you know, in life and these challenges really have made me who I am in the best sense. I've been able to use those struggles, you know, to propel me forward

and been able to travel the world and connect with a lot of light minds, you know, that feel passionate about the arts as a platform for serving community, and just self-expression, and otherwise but yeah.

ER: You've had such an amazing life in terms of being able to do so many different things: traveling and being a mentor and performing and I really admire that about you. And, I think I would like to say that, one good thing that we have in common is not only our disabilities; you have a disability that's more visible and I have a disability that's more invisible but what we share in common is that feeling of isolation and also not feeling like people understand us. And so, we turn to some other channel to express ourselves and for you, it was art. For me, it was reading and writing.

ER: And my father was a professor, very scholarly. And so, we read a lot and we wrote. And so, for me, that was a way to express myself also and I'm a storyteller. And so, I love telling stories and amplifying other people's stories so, this is really quite timely.

ER: So you mentioned earlier about you being a mentor to people, let's talk about your work in that, especially around youth advocacy and hip hop. What's your philosophy of youth empowerment this is the next generation maybe that can save us! [laughs]

KK: Well, in order to know where we're going, we need to look where we been, you know, and vice versa. And it's a beautiful thing that, you know, you've had writing and literary aspects to help, you know, feed your mind and engage you. And, it's a beautiful thing when people have things to help them- help them through. For me, it was hip hop. And, you know, hip hop is a youth driven culture. The essence of hip hop, since the beginning, has been peace, unity, love, overcoming the negative to the positive. And it's- it's been that way since its inception, you know, in the early to mid 1970s.

KK: in, you know the Bronx, New York, where it was a world that was crumbling, literally, with benign neglect and a lot of the city planners and politicians that were neglecting the Bronx and it was burnt down and decrepit. And it was the young people who were the visionaries to- to have a sense of turning the negative to the positive and just working within the means. You know, they didn't have anything, you know, but they had each other. And they were able to express themselves, you know, what we call the elements of hip hop and do the dance and the visual art and the music and the fashion and all these different things that were, unique and just able to have a sense of self-determination with very little. I mean, nothing. You know, and hip hop was about raising consciousness. You know, it was about- initially it was about fun, you know, and being able to settle differences.

KK: It was a lot of gang tensions and got a lot of gang violence, but you know, through hip hop it was a way for people to look at and say like, we're all in the same gang. You know, and let's put our differences to the side and let's be about this hip-hop thing. And it was that vision, that really cultivated the foresight of strength of young people. And so not just hip hop, but if you look at many different movements, you know, there's a couple aspects that are centered by and one is young people, you know, who have the inspiration, the energy, the passion, to mobilize, even before thinking and not be hindered, you know, by traditions or how things have been done before. And just believing that the sky is the limit and that when you empower young minds, you know, you can empower a whole generation.

KK: And, you know, hip hop is a lot of- I guess you would say a lot of different movements. There's misconceptions about it. A lot of that in today's world has to do with, you know, the commodification of the culture, the exploitation of the- and the commercialization of it. But when you look at the root, it's

been about peace, unity, love and having fun. You take the word hip- hop, you know. Hip means to educate, right? And hop is to jump or to elevate. So, when you educate and then you're elevating, you know, that's really the root of what it is. And I appreciate any young person who speaks their truth, you know, no matter how hard things might be or how you might not want to hear it. But speaking the truth is- is powerful and for a lot of young brothers and sisters, you know, they just wanna be heard, you know.

KK: That's all they have and to be able to live your whole life and never be heard is defeating, you know. So, young people, is the future. To be able to invest in our young people is so important, you know, a lot of young people of today are becoming more and more aware and are being active in- in making change and we need to support that, you know. We need to provide more platforms for them and as, you know, cliché as it might sound, they're our future, you know? So, let's empower them and embrace them.

ER: And I just hope that young people today are not becoming more cynical, about the state of the world and politics and all that. So, I'm thankful that they have those platforms to express themselves, whether it's outrage or you know, expressing their truth. Do you feel that young artists with disabilities that you interact with have an easier or more difficult time navigating life challenges, you know, as compared to your own experience growing up and even now? Are there more resources? Are there more obstacles? What's it like, do you think?

KK: I'm not really here to validate or invalidate people's struggles, you know? We all have our own ups and downs, you know, and all of them matter, you know, different challenges. And no matter where you are, you know, no matter where you came from, people with different disabilities are going to have hurdles in life, you know, just like people without disabilities. And it's not where we come from that defines but it's like how- where we're going and how we're gonna get there that really kind of shows our character. But, you know, as someone who grew up not having, you know, a lot of these different resources in terms of like, navigating like without social media and searches and like Google, you know, I can't really imagine what life would be like, you know?

KK: I feel like, I was- I had to learn on my own, you know. I didn't really- wasn't really- a lot aware of a lot of different things. I mean, there were some things, you know, like Camp Casey, you know that was-

ER: Mm-hm.

KK: pretty exciting, you know, as a young person being able to connect with other disabled individuals and kind of share those bonds. But, you know, even today with all these technological advances, ironically young people can still feel lost, you know. Even with the instantaneous information at your fingerprints and-

ER: Yeah.

KK: so, you know, it's just tools. And tools can be used to hurt or to heal. It's- it's an interesting time, you know. I think it's- it's really about your personal support system, you know, who- you have family and friends and those you can depend on to help build you up and you know, not everybody has that, you know. So, it's a blessing if you have those people in your life. But you know, there's a lot more, I guess access to technology and resources and- you know in terms of being able to use technology as means for accessibility. It's a lot more advanced and I think that's a beautiful thing. But you know, again like that, it just depends on how it's used and the access. Some people don't have access to internet, so

people don’t have access to computers, you know. So, it’s- it kind of creates different barriers in this climate today.

ER: Yes, I am amazed at how far we have come when it comes to technology. I could not talk on the phone when I was younger, I always had to have help. And now, I can do almost everything by myself. So-

KK: Mm.

ER: But yes, there are barriers for people who don’t have access to technology, and I know that there are lots of great nonprofits out there that are working to change that.

KK: Absolutely.

ER: And I want to close with one last question, as a biracial and disabled man, can you tell me more about your experiences? How your experience with racism and discrimination has affected your access within the arts, both as a patron and as a performer?

KK: It’s just a way of life, you know. You learn to kind of navigate around- being conscious of your environment, you know, how you deal with people, how you move, where you go. . . Sometimes, you know, people don’t take you seriously, they feel like you’re incapable of being independent. Something as simple as you know, ordering food to like, you know, managing a business, you know. Sometimes, people will look at you and they’ll commend you for being so brave and coming out of the house, you know. . . You know, it’s something that exists but it’s - how do you communicate and undo those different trains of thought, you know, to be able to. . . to undo that. You know, it’s systemic and a lot of times, it’s about connecting with people, you know, and getting to see the humanity in people and- and learning from each other and having cultural exchange and- and being like, you know, different doesn’t make things better or worse. It’s just different but we all have similar needs and similar wants and- and hopes and aspirations.

KK: In terms of a, you know, as being an artist and a patron to different, you know, spaces and venues, we have a lot of work to do. You know, it’s a beautiful thing that we have the ADA, you know. I’ve been fortunate to go to many other countries and different places are- don’t have that. And so, we do have a lot of great, things and strides that we’ve made as a country in terms of accessibility and whatnot, but we have a lot of work to do. You know, touring is very- even just as an abled person is challenging but as a disabled person, I mean it’s really, it’s amplified in terms of like, the challenges of like getting around, you know, hotels, saying that they’re accessible but really aren’t. Getting off and on the planes and having enough time to, make the connecting flight and having damaged wheelchairs. I mean, you’d- you’d be kind of surprised on how regular it is to have a damaged wheelchair in the process of getting on an airplane.

KK: You know, venues that- that don’t have a way to get onto the stage, you know. That the green rooms backstage are down two flights of stairs. So, you know, it can be challenging but, you know, it’s a lot of logistics and a lot of planning and being able to overcome that.

KK: So the good fight never ends but that’s what life is here for. It’s to overcome, and to persevere.

ER You brought up some really good points about how, you know, with the 30th anniversary of the ADA coming up, you know, it’s helped in a lot of ways- makes us so hindered in other ways. We have a long

way to go and I'm really appreciative of your thoughtfulness and your honesty and telling your personal story. And I wanna thank you for spending the time with us, telling us about what that's been like and offering some amazing insights into the world of accessibility from a hip-hop artist's perspective. So, thank you so much for your time.

KK: Thank you so much, Elizabeth and thank you for all the great work you're doing in the community.

ER: Thank you.

Narrator: Opening Doors is produced by the Seattle Cultural Accessibility Consortium and Jack Straw Cultural Center. This podcast was made possible by The Awesome Foundation, Seattle Office of Arts and Culture, and individual contributors, with in-kind support from Jack Straw Cultural Center, Sound Theatre Company, Jennifer Rice Communications, and the SCAC steering committee. Music performed by William Chapman Nyaho, produced through the Jack Straw Artist Support Program. The mission of the Seattle Cultural Accessibility Consortium is to connect arts and cultural organizations with the information and resources to improve accessibility for people of all abilities. SCAC's fiscal sponsor is Shunpike. To learn more, go to seattlecac.org. Jack Straw Cultural Center, producer of the Blind Youth Audio Project since 1997, is committed to keeping art, culture, and heritage vital through sound. You can learn more at jackstraw.org.

Join us for our next episode, featuring an interview with ChrisTiana ObeySumner, the CEO of Epiphanies of Equity, a social equity consulting firm specializing in social change, intersectionality, anti-racism, and disability justice.

ChrisTiana: I cannot have a meltdown in the same way I could if I was say, a white cis man. Because if I had a meltdown as a white cis man, then people would just see me as "oh, this person is emotional" or "this person is upset" or- "this person is expressing themselves." If I'm emotional, then I'm a danger. I'm a threat, they should call 911.

Narrator: Hear the whole interview on the next episode of Opening Doors, available at soundcloud.com/OpeningDoorsPod and wherever you get your podcasts. Thanks for listening.