

Transcript:**Network Talk: Auto-censorship & Institutional Racism****Dr. Lorenzo Baber and Chaédria LaBouvier****Recorded: 06/24/2020****Smitha Khorana (00:00:00):**

For those of you who don't know us yet, Data & Society is an independent research institute studying the social implications of data and automation. We produce original research and regularly convene multidisciplinary thinkers to challenge the power and purpose of technology in society. You can learn more about us through our website at datasociety.net. We will be spending the next hour together, so, let's get ourselves grounded. We start our programs with the digital land acknowledgement. Data & Society is located in what we now refer to as New York City, a network of rivers and islands in the Atlantic Northeast home to the ancestral, unceded territory of the Leni-Lenape people. Land acknowledgements are symbolic acts of truth telling that recognize the dispossession of native land but often fail to name how the land was legally ceased. These were deliberate, data-driven decisions taken under the genocidal logic of white settler expansion.

In recognition of this history, we uplift the resilient spirit of indigenous peoples across Turtle Island and acknowledge a commitment to dismantle the ongoing legacies of techno-settler colonialism and all its material implications on our digital worlds. I'd like to now introduce the program for today. From the hashtag #BlackInTheIvory, to debates about newsroom diversity, we are witnessing a newly public conversation on the complexity of the lived experience of institutional racism. Professionals of color are asked to contribute reporting, research, curatorial insight, and cultural analysis at the highest levels in our newsrooms, universities, cultural institutions, and academic institutions, while simultaneously experiencing institutional racism by being undermined, underpaid, and silenced. As a newsroom outreach lead at a research institute, I wanted to convene a conversation as a nascent form of research about the breadth, scope, and mechanisms of structural racism. My guests tonight are Dr. Lorenzo Baber, associate professor at the

School of Education at Loyola University and Chaédria LaBouvier, independent curator, art historian, and journalist. We're thrilled to have you both here.

I'm going to read a short bio for the two of you, and then we'll start with our program. Dr. Lorenzo Baber is the Associate Professor in the School of Education at Loyola University, Chicago. His primary research agenda focuses on the impact of socioeconomic background and ethnicity on identity development and academic outcomes for postsecondary students. He is particularly interested in investigating the persistent educational achievement gap between minority and majority students at predominantly white institutions.

LaBouvier is an American curator and journalist. In 2019, LaBouvier became the first Black person, woman, and the first curator of Cuban descent, to curate an exhibition for the Guggenheim Museum in New York, for their exhibition "Basquiat's 'Defacement': The Untold Story."

She is also the first Black author of a Guggenheim catalog, and at 33 years old, the youngest independent curator to organize an exhibition in the museum's 80-year history. So, I wanted to bring you both together in conversation because you represent different worlds: the sciences and the arts; and yet we are dealing with a problem. Both of these worlds have been noted for their inaccessibility by people of color and entrenched institutional racism for decades. But today, at this particular moment, we are here to discuss what happens to individuals, in particular, when they're caught up in these dynamics. And specifically looking at the mechanism of auto-censorship or self-censorship and how that plays out. So, I'm going to start by asking you both to share some of your own experiences and we'll begin with Dr. Baber and then we'll move on to Chaédria. And so, the first 10, 15 minutes will be about your work and your perspective. And then we'll move into a more conceptual discussion about some of the intricacies of these experiences, and also some of the guidance and tips you would give to the many people who are dealing with these conflicts and these obstacles in their professional lives.

Dr. Baber, you're a second generation academic and the way that I found you is that you wrote this great Twitter thread a few weeks ago, as this hashtag kind of went viral, about the advice that your parents gave you about how to succeed in academia. And it was so striking.

I wanted you to share a little bit about this experience as being a second generation academic, what your parents told you, and how that advice holds true or whether you would recommend something else in this moment.

Dr. Lorenzo Baber (00:04:50):

Great. Thank you. Thanks for the opportunity to be here. I'm honored to share this space with everyone. As was mentioned, I'm a second generation Black academic. I'm the oldest son of a Marxist anthropologist and a social studies educator who eventually became a dean at a college of education. And so, my experiences with the Academy and with the kind of close encounters with whiteness in the Academy has been pretty much since birth. We spent time in California, Alabama, Indiana, and North Carolina, which I claim is my hometown, Greensboro. Having that experience obviously didn't necessarily protect me from forms of whiteness. I always give a great example in class, or an example in class when I was in third grade. So, my middle name is DuBois. So, when I was in third grade, we had a lesson on names.

We were talking about our full names, which is already kind of an interesting lesson for those of us who don't have names that extend out to our ancestral homes. But I remember in third grade, my teacher saying that when she found out that my middle name was DuBois, she said, "Oh, your parents are communists." And like a third grader would know what a communist is. I don't know why she would say that, but I knew that the way she said it, the vile way that she said it, that was bad. And I remember going home and being mad at my parents for naming me after a communist, even though I had no idea what a communist was. And of course, obviously, that was a very Eurocentric, white supremacist view of Du Bois, who was actually one of the greatest academics period, with no other definition that has ever been produced.

I think this speaks to the larger point about white supremacy and it's kind of intent to remove our sense of self-worth in our culture, and our history, and our family, and kind of embedded into this other system where we are required to acknowledge and adhere to this racialized hierarchy in our society. And so that's an example of how I came into this work and how I was motivated to continue to look at educational systems in particular because

they were the perfect place, seemingly meritocratic, standardized structures. They really actually concealed dominations of whiteness. So, when I saw the hashtag with #BlackInTheAcademy and #ShutDownAcademia and #ShutDownSTEM, it just reminded me how education systems are not a reflection of systematic racism, but actually are active contributors to white supremacy. And we can talk a little bit more about kind of the historical legacies when you think about the colonial colleges, all the way to what we're seeing now with the consternation around renaming buildings and taking down statues that are clearly of white supremacists from earlier generations.

Smitha Khorana (00:08:15):

Thank you for that. So, Dr. Baber your work focuses on equity and equity in STEM education, focusing on disparities and educational outcomes between white and Black students. Can you tell us a little bit about this research and also the research around predominantly white institutions where this terminology came from, and what a predominantly white institution is?

Dr. Lorenzo Baber (00:08:36):

Yeah, so that's a good question. So, a lot of my research is around thinking about ways in which, in my case, higher education, post-secondary education, colleges and universities reproduce systematic inequalities through concealing whiteness and white supremacy as the root of these institutional structures. A lot of my work is around how we have to move from kind of a deficit perspective for students of color and this idea that their lack of success is individual-focused or rooted in their particular culture XYZ, and really thinking about the ways in which white supremacy, whiteness is embedded in the policies, practices of institutions shape opportunities, or lack of opportunities, for students of color. So that's a little bit about what I do, and then I focus on a couple of different contexts, community colleges and STEM education.

Smitha Khorana (00:09:43):

What does your research reveal about the experiences of Black students in these predominantly white institutions?

Dr. Lorenzo Baber (00:09:49):

So, I'll focus on STEM in particular, but there's a lot of work around structural diversity, so composition diversity and that being kind of the avenue for equity. There's this idea that, okay we will be culturally pluralistic in our intent to bring in students of color, but we still won't (A.) Give them the tools to succeed, and (B.) We won't actually turn the criticism to our structures. We still focus on the individualistic nature. And what that does is that if an individual does succeed, then it's pointed as a "see, we're not racist, because Lorenzo got his PhD at Penn State, right?" Like you can see, we're not, we're not racist when in reality I was successful, in spite of, not because of, the systematic inequality or the systems that exist.

And so, thinking about that in different contexts is where a lot of my work, and a lot of colleagues that I rely on, work with. And so, another area we think about is how white supremacy reproduces itself. Moving from forms of violent racial domination and then reconsidering the ways in which it reforms into racial subordination either by practice, or by law, with Jim Crow laws, assimilation, which was the next form of white supremacy. Okay, we're going to let students of color into these colleges, traditionally white colleges and universities, and, I'll talk a little bit about PWI versus TWIs in a second. Colorblind liberalism, which has kind of next iteration – we're going to take Dr. King's speech and kind of recapture it in this colorblind ideology.

And of course, now the latest is post-racialism, which was spurred in 2008 when Obama became president. It's like, okay, now we're post-racial, we have a Black president, right? Things that I was talking about with before in terms of using one example, as a way of suggesting that racism is gone, is behind us. So, the point about PWIs, predominantly white institutions, has been kind of the normative of vernacular that's been used in, in the field, thinking about institutions that are majority white and historically white in terms of the ways in which they were crafted and, and the ways in which they develop the homogeneous culture. I think we're kind of moving away from PWIs because it has a quantitative definition. So, the idea that it's not just numbers, right? If you reduce the number of white students and increase the number of students of color, you're no longer a predominantly white institution, the tradition still exists of whiteness and white supremacy. And so, thinking about ways in which we kind of shift from PWIs to TWIs. In particular in

California, where you see a lot of institutions who have become more diverse, but they've become diverse because the demographics have changed, right? That's not because they've actually been proactive in increasing their diversity or thinking through the ways in which they can dismantle whiteness and white supremacy at their institution.

Smitha Khorana (00:13:09):

So, we're going to speak more about how these mechanisms contribute to auto-censorship or self-censorship. But before that, I have one more question for you. You said in that tweet thread that one of the pieces of advice that your parents gave you was, I'm going to quote you on this, "Never fall in love with the Academy. It will never love you back no matter what your title says. Invest your love and energy in people, and the collaborations that result." Can you elaborate on this specifically on what do you mean when you say it will never love you back or when your parents said that?

Dr. Lorenzo Baber (00:13:42):

Yeah, so I got a little trouble with that, with some people. But to be clear, you can create cultures of love at an institution. But the institution itself as a social institution is incapable of loving individuals, right? In fact, social institutions are designed to protect themselves against transformation. They are designed to withstand winds of resistance by maintaining their roots. And so, when you think about the roots of social institutions, particularly education, you think about individualism, you think about competitiveness, you think about materialism. We have examples of all of those, right. Individualism, thinking about the ways in which we grade or evaluate students at the K-12 level. And then thinking about college and even thinking about tenure, right? So, first author publications, as a measure of quality over collaborative publications or competitiveness. My son is now going through first grade and he's talking about, "Oh, I need to get to reading level F because my friend's at reading level F" you know, creating that kind of competitive atmosphere, by the way, I don't know the difference between reading level D and F, there's nothing, it's just these designations that have been established.

Dr. Lorenzo Baber (00:14:56):

And so that's what I mean, the institutions can't love us back because that's the opposite of our culture. We are a collectivist culture. We don't subscribe to individualistic or competitiveness or materialism. There are other forms of our culture that aren't acknowledged. And so, it's either, and I think we'll talk about this later, it's either kind of resist that, or be co-opted by that, to succeed, and be successful, and to be elevated. And so, I think that's what I mean by institutions cannot love you back. Now, again, you can create pockets of love and resistance within an institution. And maybe an institution leader will say, "Hey, we'd love for you to scale that up, and we'll give you support," maybe, right? But eventually your head will go against these other, these roots, right? Eventually the degree to which you can scale those up, will really be limited by the roots of these institutions. At best you may be able to craft, like we do in our program, in our department, and then formal institutions in my college where we can craft these many social groups. But it's grounded in our love for each other, not necessarily our love for the institution itself.

Smitha Khorana (00:16:15):

Great. Thanks so much Professor Baber. So now we're going to move on to Chaédria. And I want to start by saying congratulations to you because the idea for this event started, in part, because we saw this Twitter thread and came to learn of something that you've been very vocal about for months now. And it was your experience as the first Black curator at the Guggenheim where you curated a show on Basquiat and you had a really difficult, and kind of horrible experience, in certain ways. And I don't want to put words into your mouth. So, I'm going to leave it to you to tell us about this experience. But we started this program about two weeks ago, and this week the curatorial department at the Guggenheim sent a letter denouncing the racist legacy of the institution and demanding investigation into the way that you were treated as a curator, and wanting sort of radical changes at this institution. And you have been seminal to this process. And so, you're sort of the person of the hour right now, and we're lucky that you're able to join us, and made the time to be here. I want to just hand it over to you and let you share what you feel is appropriate about this experience from the beginning, to where we are now, what you anticipate is to come, and what it has been like to be that person in this role?

Chaédria LaBouvier (00:17:42):

I am still, as we discussed and as I said online, I'm still finding the words to say, what I want to say, and how I want to say them. And it's certainly not for lack of things to say, it's more so I try to be very thoughtful, and intentional, and deliberate with most with everything. You know, maybe not parking tickets, but you know, I try to believe that rigor is a form of love. And I think that part of your job as a scholar is to be, especially when you're specializing in experiences, or disciplines, or history that have not been given the workout that they should have because they were thought to not be important. You have to be really, really rigorous because they deserve that.

Chaédria LaBouvier (00:18:50):

And I think for me, when I started the Basquiat research for the show, which was about at this point, like four, four and a half years ago, but that was built on top of Basquiat research that I started when I was 18 years old. And I was very lucky that I grew up with three Basquiat drawings above the sofa before he became what he became, which is the global symbol of so much. And I mean the material was always there. So, I was very lucky that I knew when I went to college that I wanted to know more about him and Keith Haring, because I had grown up with that. But when I started, there was no field for Basquiat and Keith Haring, and it's still nascent. What I mean by that is those fields are lacking a lot.

They're lacking critical foundational, as Angela Davis would say "germinal research." So, the exhibition that I did is considered a foundational piece to Basquiat scholarship and Keith Haring, and also eighties art history, and political art, or artistic political response in the late 20th century. It overlaps a few verticals, so to speak. And there are still things that I'm learning about this chapter because, you look at politically the artists that were responding, and they show up again, like less than three years later in the AIDS crisis. That has also been a part of my work as well. In living with COVID, and living in a plague, it's been really interesting to personally revisit some of that research knowing the larger view of it.

So, I say that all to say that I started at eighteen doing that foundational research without knowing that that's what it would become. It was just something I was interested in, and I

went to a school where I could start that. But I didn't know what it would be. And then when I went to grad school for film, I have my MFA in screenwriting, and my research is in costume design actually, I was always doing art research. So, I was working at museums and working for artists' estates. I didn't feel that I needed to choose per se, but I didn't know what it was going to be. It was both like I was doing film internships, and then I was doing art internships as well. I made the decision to not do a PhD because I have strong feelings about what the Academy represents. And I have always wanted, or felt, that my work belongs to the people, and the politics of the people should be represented even in how I do scholastic work. And so, the idea of a PhD on top of already doing foundational work, I was already doing PhD level work, and because again, these artists are not in the Academy, because the Academy didn't think that they were worth... the Academy did not think that it was important to create scholars of their work. So, there are, you know, at the time, there was no one that I could go and study with on the West coast, who was a Basquiat scholar or a Keith Haring scholar. You know, that's what they do - day in, day out. I certainly don't want to take away the work that professors, art history, art historians who are in universities, who've done that work. But in terms of, this is what they do day in, day out - they weren't there. So, I couldn't justify that.

Smitha Khorana (00:23:36):

So Chaédria, I'm going to interrupt you for a second. Just for our audience members who are not familiar with your story, I want to reel back a little bit and just ask you. So, you put on this great show for Basquiat and you were invited to come to the Guggenheim and exhibit that work that you had been working on for years. And as you're describing, there was not necessarily a place in the Academy to study these really essential themes. So, you managed to do it on your own because you had that background, what happened next?

Chaédria LaBouvier (00:24:05):

So fast forward to 2016, and I was always doing research and doing organizing, and journalism and all that. And I've been working on the revolution because I've worked on it before. So, I did a show at Williams, which is my alma mater in case I didn't say that earlier, for undergrad. I stripped it away and just did one painting of "Defacement," which became the center of the larger show that I did at the Guggenheim. And the idea was to strip away

and just focus on that painting because I felt that there was so much in that painting and I really wanted people to focus on that. And then, you know, it caught the attention of the New York art world because I was making very bold statements about a very popular artist, and I wasn't wrong.

Chaédria LaBouvier (00:25:08):

I certainly didn't invent the one painting exhibition model, but it's not a popular model that you see a lot. I was inspired by Jackie Kennedy who brought the Mona Lisa to the National Portrait Gallery, I think in 62, 62 or 63, don't quote me on the year. I can't remember, but I really liked that model because it forced people to focus on the work. So I said, "Oh, that'd be really cool to do that with Basquiat." And then from there it went. And then Nancy Spector, who was at the Brooklyn at the time, either I reached out to her, she reached out to me, because we knew each other through different networks. She's also a Williams' alumna.

And I said, yes this is a painting that depicts the murder of the perhaps the most notorious case of police brutality in New York City after the civil rights movement. It is what happened to Michael Stewart that absolutely has changed the history of New York City. He is actually a very big reason why the chokehold was banned in 1993 as a part of the settlement of the MTA police, which is now like the NYPD patrol New York subways, but the MTA used to have their police patrol. And so, Michael Stewart is a big reason as to why that doesn't exist anymore. So, there are a lot of, this is a huge part of New York history, especially in the moment that we're in. So fast forward doing the show. And one of the things that I negotiated was to keep my copyright and that was deeply important to me.

I had funded the research and I knew I had discovered a very big chapter of art history, even though there were people at the time that didn't believe that. And it was also important for me to maintain the control that I needed to have to do this the right way. So, I was in touch with Michael Stewart's family, I made sure that I communicated with them along the way. It was very important that not only was the scholarship right, but that I did this the right way.

And usually that doesn't happen curatorially, hegemony and colonialism, the idea of being a steward of something for years, and then signing over those rights to an empire, literally didn't make sense to me. And then it became a power struggle in a lot of ways, because there was a lot of control that contractually, or even just morally, that I had as the creator of this. And I think, you know, as Lorenzo knows, when you find something that is very... I think as scholars and as historians, it's not that your work isn't important, but I think you get moments like this that happened once in a career sometimes. When you discover something essential, it doesn't happen in everyone's career. It certainly, most people don't get it at, you know, 29 or 30, which is kind of where I started.

Smitha Khorana (00:29:07):

So, Chaédria, I'm going to interrupt for a second. So, you put on this phenomenal show and it got rave reviews in publications, in art, from art critics, and you've documented on Twitter and in a lot of other places, all the challenges, many of which seemed completely unnecessary, that you faced with this institution. So, we're not at this session, we don't want to go back and relitigate it because we think people can do that. But I want to ask you a little bit about one of the seminal events that was part of this experience that you've spoken about. And it's, you had a closing panel for the show on the weekend of November 5th for the exhibition that you curated, that you brought to the Guggenheim, and you were not invited to be on that panel. And you chose to go to the panel anyway, stand up, speak out and confront the institution.

And this is something. And I think after this, we'll bring Dr. Baber back in because I want to hear what both of you have to say about what it means to speak out, when you can speak out, what is the risk assessment for doing so? I think that the word brave is often overused and can almost be begin to seem trite, but when I saw that video, it was incredibly brave. And I want to hear a little bit more about what that felt like. Was it terrifying? Was it, did it feel like the right thing to do? Was it a risk assessment? And what were the consequences after? And I know that this is something where you're living through in real time and the pandemic, and the way these issues have come to the fore has changed outcomes and are changing outcomes. And so, I want to ask Professor Baber and you both about that as well, what we can look to going forward. But before we, I don't want to neglect to give you that

chance to just speak a little bit about this experience, because it's so important. And especially given the fact that you were the first Black curator, I know there was a co-curator before you, and that's gotten some attention, but you're the first person, you were very young. And what was that like?

Chaédria LaBouvier (00:31:02):

It was as intense as you would think it was, because I started, I moved into the offices. I was like 32. That's incredibly young to be helming a show like that. And I had to learn very quickly, I was doing that kind of show. One of the world's most popular artists at a flagship institution, in New York, a flagship institution of a global empire at 32. But with the panel... because there was sort of, kind of an outrage, like a week before the panel, I just knew I had to go, I knew that. That wasn't something that I wanted to do. No one wants to be in that position. It's not fun, but I knew that I had to do it because when people, when that happens, it's a message. It's not just about putting you in your place. It's also giving other people the permission to treat you like that. And I grew up in a home and in a community in which human dignity is deeply important. It was a point in place where I could not say that my praxis is radical and that human dignity is at the center of what I do, and then I couldn't even defend my own. I felt like it would have compromised my own work to not have said something because I would have been afraid. If you're afraid, then how effective are you? So that was kind of the thought process.

Smitha Khorana (00:32:53):

Absolutely. Thank you so much for that. So, I'm going to turn to Dr. Baber now. And I'm wondering, we have this example of if Chaédria's experience at this institution, speaking out and speaking truth to power. What would you recommend for young students who are just starting out and their experiences in the Academy? And what are, what are the risks and what are the experiences that are unique to academia in terms of institutional racism and the need to self-censor. And I'm just going to bring in for our audience members who maybe aren't necessarily familiar with this concept of auto-censorship, a very standard definition. So self-censorship occurs when individuals deliberately manipulate their expression out of fear, or deference to the sensibilities or preferences, actual or perceived of others, without overt pressure from any specific party, or institution, or authority. And so,

again, the reason we're having this discussion is to start to outline all of the invisible pressures that individuals deal with in these institutions. So, I'd love to hear about your experiences and also the experiences of your students.

Dr. Lorenzo Baber (00:33:55):

So, one of the things I write about is kind of the cost benefit approach to diversity that institutions tend to focus on. And I think what we're seeing right now, we're seeing kind of this analysis lending itself more to the benefit side, like the benefit of making statements, right? It's almost like an isomorphic commodification of, you know, Black Lives Matter and everybody making, all the institutions, making anti-racist statements, and valuing these things because right now is where the benefit is placed, if that makes sense. So, the question will become what is whiteness willing to give up on its own? And then to your point, what can we do to push whiteness towards a more revolutionary radical stance to re-imagining, to uproot as I used the metaphor earlier, uproot these institutions and reimagine them.

And you're already seeing, what I love is the students coming together. And I think the one thing that institutions cannot actively fight against is collective resistance. And I think that is where you're saying, they all rely on self-interest. They rely on people not speaking up when it's not their turn. And now people and places that they're not supposed to speak up with. We've heard these things before, right. When people say, "Oh you know, now's not the time," you've heard this. "I understand, but let me get back to you," or "you have to understand this is a complicated process," right? Which we all know is a delay tactic, right? It's a delay tactic that tries to outpace this movement. And I think, what I hope, is that students are not buying that because I'm Gen X, I'll admit I'm the oldest person on this panel.

I grew up in the time of the nineties, "Fight the Power," Rodney King, and we got commodified. We got commodified in terms of performance, performability, respectability politics. We thought that was the avenue. And we got there, right. Obama became president and we're like, okay, we did it. We did it within the parameters of what they told us we were supposed to do. And then look what happened. Eight years of a pseudo presidency, right? Didn't even get to replace the last Supreme Court justice, got sued all the time, wore a tan

suit and people thought he was crazy. Right? And then of course, what's the antithesis? Trump. I mean, this is the same thing with reconstruction back in the 1870s.

You emancipate the slaves, you have this reconstruction period, and then whiteness comes back with a vengeance and expects us to fold. And we do not. And you're already seeing the shifts back. So now, all of a sudden, we're having a debate about statues. "Oh, I don't know, maybe it's not the right time," or "we should have a conversation," "So we're going to put up together a panel to determine..." I mean, it's like, they're racist. You act like there weren't people who were running the abolitionists, their product, their time, they like to say. Hello? There were anti-racists in the 1800s when these statutes were being built, or naming these buildings. I mean, at my former institution, at Iowa State, there's actually a debate about Catt Hall, who is a documented racist. And they named this building in the nineties.

It's not even an old name. So even the reimagining the relationship between universities and police, that's a no, nobody's saying "whoa, whoa, whoa." You know, so all of a sudden anti-racism, Black Lives Matter. You can put it in words, but when we actually ask you to put into actions, where is it? Right. And so, they're relying on scare tactics. They're relying on kind of outpacing. And I don't think this is because, I don't think this is going to work this time. It worked with my generation, but it will not work now because people are standing up when it's not their turn. And that's the way to resist that doesn't isolate people. Because they don't feel like they have to auto-censor themselves when we're all together. They want the sticks to be separate, and you bundle those sticks together and tie them up.

There's nothing you can do about that. And they're going to try to break this up. Don't worry about it. They're going to try to break up the sticks and say, well, you know, there's different types of Blackness, intersectionality, all these things. We have to keep the stick together. We have to understand that now was our turn, Black Lives Matter, but you know, this is also Pride Month. There are other forms of oppression that are related to our oppression and we need to stick together. And if we stick together, the reimagination will happen. This next generation is doing it. They're doing it in a way that I don't even understand. I don't understand the TikTok thing, but I understand that it made some difference. So, I think that is where institutions... it's going to be interesting to see how they

respond because I don't think they understand what is happening. And I think my generation is saying, don't do it our way. Don't do it the way of the sixties. Do it your way. Do it together, align these revolutionary moments together and stand up, and stand forward, and stand out and give space to your reimagination. Don't take the world for what it is, take the world for what you want it to be.

Smitha Khorana (00:39:47):

Absolutely. Chaédria, I'm going to turn to you now. I'm wondering when you were at the Guggenheim was whiteness willing to give anything up, and where do you go from here? What are your thoughts, your hopes for next steps?

Chaédria LaBouvier (00:39:58):

No, no, they weren't, which is why it was so hard, you know? And I think it was always kind of interesting that they never wanted to say that I was the first Black curator and they recently have just said, "Oh, she's the first Black woman," which I mean, they invented a title that is not industry standard of like the first solo curator, the first Black solo curator, which is never used for a white curator. I've never seen a white curator titled that way. And so whiteness moves goalposts to preserve itself. Whiteness is an institution in and of itself that is personified literally. And so, whiteness moves, shape shifts, and reimagines, and we'll do whatever it takes to protect itself and recreate itself.

So, I think that knowing that, I've always known that about whiteness. I knew what I was looking at, which I think a lot of people don't always know, what they're looking at in these situations. They overestimate the goodness of whiteness and conflate that with people that they like and love and institutions. You have to sell, you have to separate the two. And this moment, you know, of course the letter has gone out. And I think that I've said that, I publicly this time don't have a response because I want to be very thoughtful about it. But I do think that there is something quite interesting that has to be said, which is this moment in which the Guggenheim curators have become emboldened and feel empowered to say something, and to say something about leadership, which has been abusive before I got there. This moment in space has been created for them by a Black woman, because I sit on the front lines, and risk my career, and risked being ostracized, and was called crazy, and

hysterical, and jealous, and delusional, and you're imagining things. This moment has created space for them and everyone else in the museum world to speak up, and they're using it. And that's a wonderful thing. But if you do not re-center that Black woman's work, and why this space exists, then you are not doing this correctly.

Smitha Khorana (00:42:43):

Was it frustrating to see that when this all went down, back in November, you didn't have the kind of support that you have at this moment. Can you tell us a little bit about this process? And this is also Professor Baber, what are the risks of this moment that some of the responses will be cosmetic or that institutions are now very eager to put out statements and address their histories of institutional racism, but how do we make that substantive and how do we give voice to all the people who have not had voice in the past, because it really was not safe to speak out?

Dr. Lorenzo Baber (00:43:20):

Yeah. I think collective accountability. So, taking these letters, and by the way, you can compare these letters, these demands to the 1970s, and they're the same, the demands are the same. If you compare to the Black liberation movements in the 60s and 70s and their demands, they're aligned. Lori Patton Davis, one of my colleagues, has a great article about that, that I can share with the group. I think it takes accountability. It takes the idea of, okay, these are your words, where are your actions? And not being placated by superficial responses like listening groups and committees, which are good first steps. Don't get me wrong. Those are good first steps, but they're first steps, they're not final steps. Or we're all going to read "How to be an Anti-racist" and have a book club. That's good, but that's just the first step. And by the way, when you go to people's offices and they have that book, pick the book up and see if the spine is broken. Because I guarantee you half the people who are buying this book, aren't going to even open it. So that's the way we have to do, we have to be accountable to the people who are saying they're with us and not believing them until you see it.

The old saying, by I can't remember who said it, but it's like, "I can't believe what you said, because I see what you do."

Chaédria LaBouvier (00:44:54):

James Baldwin.

Dr. Lorenzo Baber (00:44:55):

James Baldwin. Yes, thank you. And that's my attitude. "I cannot believe what you say because I see what you do." And until I see something different, I'm not going to believe what you say.

Smitha Khorana (00:45:10):

Chaédria, do you have any response to that?

Chaédria LaBouvier (00:45:13):

He said what he said, you know, I think it's if it doesn't have any teeth and you're not willing to risk anything... I think that's the thing people don't understand is that you have to be willing to risk it. Sometimes all. Like this space that we're talking about with me, had I played it safe, this space would not have existed. I am not the first curator to have been brutalized in some way, but I risked it, and that's the only way that you can make actual gains. If it were as easy to be polite and start a revolution, then we would have wrapped this up back in 1620. So, you know, you just have to know you cannot bring a butter knife to a war.

Smitha Khorana (00:46:12):

Absolutely. We have a question from an audience member who says, I would like to thank Chaédria for her incredible work and ask her how she is healing herself and to Dr. Baber, what the research says about how Black students heal in white spaces.

Chaédria LaBouvier (00:46:30):

Well, I'll just say that, I think one of the things that I have done and continue to do is, I have a really amazing personal support network. And, you know, my family and my friends were with me a hundred thousand percent. I was very lucky to have also resources like housing and food, and the things that help make it easy to heal. But one of the things that I continue

to do is to remember that I am a human being and that I am also allowed to take my time with responses or what those steps look like. I have more than earned the right to center myself because I created this. And I think that is when people try to strip you of your dignity and your agency and your power to just even be able to say, no, no, no, like I'm not selfish, or arrogant, or self-aggrandizing to say, no, I created this. And if you are not centering me, you are not doing this correctly. And I will not allow that, that I think being able to have to have stayed true to who I am and the values that are important to me has been incredibly healing because I did not wait for other people to validate my humanity. It has always been there for me.

Smitha Khorana (00:48:06):

And has there been an experience of heartbreak having these experiences and not being celebrated for producing amazing work that is appreciated in the Academy, appreciated in your field? Is there a toll, it takes on your psyche, on your heart? I know as a person of color in this society, I feel that there certainly is a feeling of heartbreak that sometimes enters, and then you have to heal it and move on.

Chaédria LaBouvier (00:48:32):

I think of course, I mean, there's a grieving process that happens that I never and would never do publicly. But I negotiated the rights to my work, and so there's something that...it's always about the work, you know? And so, the work I think can break your heart, but I think it can also be very healing. And so, I think that with this project, I think that there are a lot of avenues to reimagine and re-center the work. And I certainly have the support of the people who are at the center of this story, the participants, and that is important to me. And I think, no, of course I should have been celebrated. There's no question about that. And I got a fraction of what I should have had. That being said, as a historian, I have to believe in history, and I have to believe that I was on the right side of it, and that I did the right thing, and that the timing will come. You have to believe that otherwise, history is a material that we all work with, and if I don't believe in the material that I work with... you have to have faith. And I think scholarship is an act of faith. Discovery is an act of faith. So, that becomes more spiritual and, that's not everyone's thing, but you have to have that. You can't do it without it.

Smitha Khorana (00:50:16):

Dr. Baber, I wanted to turn to you now with the same question about healing and how do people heal from these experiences in white spaces?

Dr. Lorenzo Baber (00:50:28):

This amplifies the value of cultural centers as formal spaces for healing on white campuses and why that is so important to maintain for students of color in these white spaces as well, informal spaces. So cultural centers, student organizations, as kind of formal spaces to cultivate this collective healing and individual healing but also informal spaces, informal connections and also institutional anchors, churches, community centers neighborhoods that were made by us and for us and spaces that students can go to and kind of escape from the everyday realities of whiteness that they may be encountering. So, I think it's important, and it does amplify the need to maintain these spaces, to not consider them kind of relics of the past. Again, this kind of idea that we're in a post-racial society. And so, the ways in which students can fight, but also the ways that institutions maintain those spaces for those students, and the ways that students maintain the spaces for themselves.

Smitha Khorana (00:51:48):

I'm going to turn to the audience. Now, if anyone has any questions, please place them in the Q and A box on the bottom of your Zoom panel. And in the meantime, as we wait for any questions, I'm going to turn back to the two of you and my last question for you both is, what would you like to communicate to again, to young people in this moment? What do you think is a critical goal in terms of making these choices and protecting oneself and also fighting these fights?

Dr. Lorenzo Baber (00:52:20):

Okay. I'll start. So, I think it's important for people to maintain their self-worth. I always loved those stories. I started with Du Bois, so I'll end with Du Bois. So in Aldon Moore's book about "Scholar Denied," which is a book about how Du Bois was denied his rightful place as a father of sociology. He was asked about, this is a story that is related to the book, Dr. Du Bois was asked about the prestigious honor of being the first African American to

receive his PhD at Harvard and Du Bois reportedly replied, and I quote, "The honor, I assure you, was Harvard's." I think it's this idea that no one controls your self-worth and to suggest that you should be grateful for where you are is, is bullshit, right?

You are here because you belong, because you earned it, because you cultivated the fire inside of you, and developed a sense of worth and a sense of voice that has been recognized as valuable, and should always hold true to that. And I think we should take the words of Dr. Du Bois, that attitude of competence, of resistance, of precision, and carry that with us everywhere we go. And don't let anyone tell you that you don't belong and that you're different, or that you are as I once was called a "snowball of negativity" because you resist this performativity, you resist these forms of whiteness. Your value is in your self-worth, your values and your community, your culture, ancestors that came before you and those that will come after you.

Smitha Khorana (00:54:04):

Thank you for that. It's very powerful. Chaédria, I'm going to give it to you.

Chaédria LaBouvier (00:54:10):

I think it's the same. You have to have a sense of self-worth, because it's just so easy to fold if you don't. And you cannot fold in these spaces. And if you think you are going to fold in these spaces, you may not want to be there because the stakes are just too high. So, you have to craft your life, and craft yourself mentally, to a place that you have to be willing to know how and where to risk it. Otherwise you will be eaten alive. And those are just the facts and not everyone is built for that. And you have to know that about yourself, but you have to be honest, because if you are not honest, then you become just as problematic. You become a gatekeeper, you become just as invested in these systems as white people can be, and this idea that you cannot be problematic because you are of color, or you are a woman, or because you are queer. I mean, it's part of the reason why we're here in the museum space. For instance, the thing we're not talking about is that these spaces, a lot of men are at the top of the museums. But these spaces, these curatorial spaces, these education departments, they are mostly women. They're predominantly women. So that means when we're talking about museums not collecting, and, you know, these museums having violent

experiences for people of color, we're talking about women doing this. And then some cases, women doing this to other women. So, we have to be vigilant about how harmful we can all be.

Smitha Khorana (00:56:07):

Absolutely. So, we have a question from the audience, could both Chaédria and Lorenzo speak more about love, creating cultures of love, as Lorenzo said, and rigor as an act of love as Chaédria said. And also, about loving ourselves in the wake of institutional racism.

Chaédria LaBouvier (00:56:24):

Go first Lorenzo.

Dr. Lorenzo Baber (00:56:26):

That's a deep question. I mean, love is the center of what we try to do, right? I don't dismiss you know, I am inspired by bell hooks, especially, and her notion of love and loving as a form of pedagogy. And so, recognizing that and honoring that and your teaching and your advising. And so how do you do that? Well, you have to develop a relationship that's outside the Academy, it's outside the kind of normative nature of the Academy. So, I always tell students that, when I critique your work, or when we're having conversations, I am not doing that to define your self-worth. Your self-worth has already been established with me. You're here. And I love you because you're here, right? I know what you went through to get here. I teach in the graduate program, I already know that you have value. What we're doing now is working towards amplifying that, right? Not establishing it, amplifying it, and thinking about that as a partnership. Not as me, that has all the knowledge and I am imparting on you, but us working together. And I learned from you as much as you, you may learn from me. And I think that's a form of pedagogical love. And I'll stop there.

Chaédria LaBouvier (00:57:54):

There's no success without love. There's no change without love, there's none of that. I think it was bell hooks who said that "love is a practice" and it is. I think about Alice Walker, I thought about Alice Walker's "Looking for Zora" a lot when I was creating the show, because I felt that the work was parallel, you know, there was this painting, which

there was absolutely nothing on it, and looking for the men, and looking for the human beings behind this. Part of the reason why we don't know much about the painting is because we lost a generation to genocide, to AIDS. And that is sacred, that is sacred, and you must proceed as such. And I was very inspired, you know, by that essay in which she talks about going to Eatonville and looking for Zora, looking for the grave because Zora had an unmarked grave.

Chaédria LaBouvier (00:59:02):

And Alice Walker, I think was a grad student. So, she's talking about being in the cemetery and she's basically collecting this oral history pretending to be Zora's long, lost, niece to find her, literally find her, because she felt that Zora was a genius and a genius of the South. And it was criminal that she was lying somewhere in an unmarked grave. Malcolm X talks about love, and we don't talk enough about how much he talked about love, or Che Guevara who talked so much about love being at the center of his revolution. I mean, he went to Bolivia, unmatched, outweighed without the provisions that they needed, but out of a love and belief that every human being deserves liberation. And I think that kind of love is insane, beautiful, it changes the world. And so that is love. And that is where we all should be aspiring to, the level of Alice Walker looking for Zora, of Malcolm X, of Che. That was love, the way that Black women have loved a nation, loved people, loved men and held like that. That is love. And I think that's the bar.

Smitha Khorana (01:00:45):

So that's a wonderful and hopeful way to close our program. And I just want to thank you both for joining us today for this important conversation, and we're looking forward to many more. So, thank you for joining us tonight and thank you for your decades of work, both of you in these areas and your scholarly work, as well as your insight into these experiences. So, for everyone else who joined us today, thank you. You can stay informed about our future programs by signing up for the Data & Society events list and the chat. And you can continue in conversation online by tagging tonight's speakers, learning about past events, and we are going to distribute as well, a resource sheet with some writings and research and articles by both Dr. Baber and Chaédria about their work. Thank you everyone for joining us tonight and the stay safe and have a good night.