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CALEB NEGASH: This is The Nexus, brought to you by the African American Design Nexus, an initiative from the Frances Loeb Library at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. The Design Nexus seeks to gather African American designers to showcase their craft, explore different geographies of design practice, and inspire design institutions to adopt new approaches towards elevating Black designers.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: Hi, everybody. I'm Tara Oluwafemi.

CALEB NEGASH: And I'm Caleb Negash.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: We are Master of Architecture students at the GSD. The Nexus podcast is produced in conjunction with a commitment by the Frances Loeb Library to acquire and create an open access bibliography of various media suggested by the community on the intersection between race and design.

CALEB NEGASH: Today, we get to talk with De Nichols, an activist and social practice artist based in St. Louis. She is Principal of Design and Social Practice at the design strategy firm Civic Creatives, where her work addresses spatial injustices and cultural inequities through design. De recently completed a Loeb Fellowship at the Harvard Graduate School of Design and is currently working on her forthcoming book, *The Art of Protest*. De, we're so glad you could join us.

DE NICHOLS: Thank you all for having me.

CALEB NEGASH: You're a multidisciplinary artist and designer, a social worker and an activist-- among many other roles. And you've really carved out a career that's at the intersection of your passion for design and for uplifting marginalized communities. So we're curious to know, what's your origin story, as both an artist and an activist?

DE NICHOLS: A lot of my story starts in rural Mississippi. I grew up in a town called Cleveland. And as a kid, I had to go to two schools at one time. One because I was Black and we had a Black school, but I was also tested into the gifted program, and so I was bused to another town to go into an accelerated learning program. And the experiences of being bullied, of finding a passion for art all started from that space that young. And I was always aware of social issues in the world, especially as it related to race, primarily because our town was divided by this railroad track. And on one side of the track is all the Black people, and on the other side are all the white people.

And when I grew up to move to Memphis and later on to St. Louis for college, that microcosm of experiences there were further expanded in what I was learning and witnessing about these spaces that I was then living in. And I got into a fight on the school bus and got suspended when I was younger for fighting a racist kid who called my cousin the N-word. And I remember my teacher not punishing me as harshly after that, because I had the good grades. And she was the one who directed me towards really using art as my voice, as my weapon against racism, against injustice. And as I grew, I continued to expand upon that, especially as an organizer.

CALEB Yeah, that's really powerful. I mean, I think that a lot of people have had that experience definitely of feeling
NEGASH: alienated, especially as a Black person in a school. And I think it's interesting that you mentioned the way that your town was divided by railroad tracks. And that's such a clear example of the way the built environment reinforces the systems of racism that are all around us.

DE NICHOLS: Indeed.

CALEB Yeah, and it's amazing that you were able to channel that frustration, that anger into art. So what were some of
NEGASH: your earlier experiences, I guess, with art? You mentioned a teacher that introduced you to using art as your voice? So what are some examples of that.

DE NICHOLS: Yeah, by the time I reached high school, I was actually attending a creative and performing arts school that I had auditioned into. And my teachers there really nurtured our young passion for social justice issues. And I remember painting this picture of this Memphis activist and singer named Alberta Hunter standing on Beale Street after a series of incidents had happened in the city and then going on to sell that in my first auction. That was my first piece that I ever sold. And it was of a social justice figure here. And it sold to this Black woman who was on our school board at the time.

And I remember taking that energy and then going into painting and creating more works that were about race, were about those frustrations that allowed me to get out of my own thoughts about homophobia, about domestic violence, things that were coming up in my life, but I didn't necessarily have the outlet to talk about it. And so art became my way of expressing it. And once I got into college, as a student organizer, my work study was all about helping students find their way towards affinity and joining groups and finding community.

And when the Jewish community and when the Black community were both attacked with racist and bias incidents in the same semester, I, at that time, was a design student and just started designing all of these posters and interventions on campus, flash mobs even, to get more students like myself to be like, no, this is not right. And I got in trouble, but I didn't necessarily get a harsh punishment from one of our deans because of that. But those moments really fueled a lot of energy that I have brought into social justice movement building since 2014.

TARA So I have a follow-up question to your being in the gifted program and actually being sent to another school, like
OLUWAFEMI: a better education. And actually one of my sisters used to do that. I think it was every Wednesday or Friday, they would take all the gifted kids, take them somewhere else. I have friends especially in New York who, they have all these programs, like Prep for Prep, that takes them from their neighborhoods and sends them to these fancy schools in Manhattan. And I'm just wondering what kind of effects that has or ideas about knowing that the schools in your neighborhood are not doing so well, and then that there is even a system in place to move students somewhere else instead of just improving the schools in our own communities. What are your thoughts on that?

DE NICHOLS: Yeah, So I think there are both benefits and detriments to that. Of course, the benefits are on that individual level of being exposed to things that perhaps you might not have otherwise been able to access. In my case, it was having those early moments of visiting museums, being able to learn about Greek and Roman mythology in third grade, and being able to understand more complex methods of critical thinking-- things that fueled a lot of the curiosities that I had.

But on a collective level, I think sometimes programs like that can be quite detrimental to how a young person can perceive themselves as exceptional, as not like their own people. And I've had to fight through a lot of that type of Talented Tenth mentality and respectability politics that those experiences start to fuel and ingrain within my mind. So that sense of staying grounded, remembering who I am and whose I am, where I'm from, that has always been the counterpoint to accepting and taking advantage of opportunities that allowed me to explore academically more deeply.

And then on a community level as well, I think there's this notion sometimes that, oh, this person who's been selected for this special program, that's their ticket out of the hood. And I think with so many families that live in communities that have been historically and economically disinvested and disinherited, I think that can be a detrimental effect as well of having people internalize that in order to be successful, they have to leave where they are from and leave a community versus stay there and build and be that bridge. I think about that on the collective scale, too.

CALEB
NEGASH: Yeah, I mean, that's a really difficult thing that I think we grapple with a lot as well. I mean, you bring up the idea of this Talented Tenth mentality, which can be really detrimental to individuals. Kids who are told, well, you have to, quote, unquote, "rise above your circumstances and make yourself better by leaving," right. And it's tough, and we've had this conversation on the podcast before about what impact designers can have as individuals in terms of making the world a better place.

And it is really difficult when you don't have those systems in the outside world that line up to let you have effective change, right. So in some sense, it doesn't really matter how well you do as an individual or how much you can so-called raise yourself up if your community is still repeatedly, like you said, disinherited, right, and disinvested in. And so that's really challenging. And I think on that note, as a designer and an artist, I know you're familiar with the way that design culture can be really intense, right. And it can really prioritize production and output over self-care, which is something we think about a lot. And as an activist and as a social practice artist, how do you deal with that tension yourself, and what advice would you give to people who are thinking through that?

DE NICHOLS: Yeah, there's so much there. There's so much. So I recently gave a keynote lecture to students who participate in the annual Design Futures Forum. And the subject matter of my talk was titled Sick and Tired. And it looked at the intersection of public health, but also mental health and well-being as it relates to racial justice, as it relates to the built environment in design. And I agree with you. I don't think that our professions in design cultivate an experience that is conducive towards mental well-being, towards collective well-being, towards justice.

And the labor intensity of it is part of that. I actually think that it is an extension of white supremacist values to essentially force people to slave over projects, to pride losing sleep and their own mental stability just to get a project done on an extreme deadline, and to always be valued for what they can produce. I've struggled with that so much throughout my career and throughout my life, and burnout is real. I've had many phases of burning out. But also, I've had detrimental experiences of my body giving out. And even most recently being hospitalized for digestion issues and how my body holds stress through the things that I eat.

Years ago, having to balance through a major project in St. Louis while suffering with fibroids and endometriosis and very severe anemia and nearly passing out on a project site. And those types of extremes doesn't benefit anybody, especially those of us who have already been marginalized within the field. How can I be better if you're tiring me out? If I don't have the space and capacity to really give my best creativity and vision and skill and expertise, because you've exhausted all of that from my spirit. And so, in the work that we're doing with Design as Protest, the ways that I'm showing up to my current projects, I'm centering that sense of care, building care into to the process-- self-care and collective care-- and modeling that in the ways in which I ask people to show up.

CALEB And you mentioned Design as Protest. So you're a part of that collaborative with some other Black designers--
NEGASH: Taylor Holloway, Mike Ford, Bryan Lee, Jr., who we're actually going to be speaking to an upcoming episode of the podcast. So how did this collaborative develop, and what are the goals of your work? And also, what do you see as your specific role as an artist within this collaborative?

DE NICHOLS: So to be a co-organizer with them is such a joy and is manifested from years of knowing each other but not necessarily having deep relationship with each other, but knowing that our foundations are quite similar. And that's especially true with Bryan. We met at a conference in St. Louis called Design Plus Diversity that was co-organized by Timothy Hykes, Timothy Bardlavens, and Antionette Carroll, who runs the Creative Reaction Lab. And I remember Bryan just being this guy who would not get off the dance floor. He danced every single time any music played. And that drew so many of us to his spirit, and that led towards conversations with how design conferences happen.

There aren't that many of us, so there's enough space that we can create at other conferences in order to have conversation really start building those connections. And I think I saw Bryan at maybe two or three other conferences, and most recently the one where we really got to connect was NOMA in New York. And he was telling me then about all of his ideas about design justice and how it shows up and how we can use media and how we can mobilize in the field. And I let it go. And then a few months after that, he calls me up and he's like, De, one of my team members is leading, and I can't help but to think of anyone to fulfill this role with my team besides you.

And I was a fellow at that time, a Loeb fellow at Harvard. And that really started to put into my head, OK, once I transition out of here, yeah, maybe I could go and work for a firm versus being independent. And then COVID hit. And that conversation got put on the back burner. And then George Floyd dies and Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery-- we saw all of these moments. And he reached out again and said, hey, we got to do something. What can we do? I used to run-- lead Design as Protest. Could you organize with me another national Design as Protest call?

And at that time, he told me everyone else who would be a part of it. And I'm sitting here in Memphis, so I'm like, yeah, I can get on a Zoom. I can talk. I can organize. And I thought that we would just be organizing this one national call with all these designers. And I did not expect over 3,000 folks to sign up and want to participate. We ended up hosting two-- a day of action followed the national call. And it became this organic thing of, OK, folks are into this, let's keep it going. But at the foundation, it was building off of the relationships and the conversations that we were already having and really seeing that, OK, this is prime time. This is a ripe moment where we can manifest this together.

So right now we are co-organizing with a little over 100 BIPOC designers. And amongst those there are some who are core organizers who are paving the way on some really amazing initiatives and campaigns that will be coming out over these next few weeks. We aim to host another national call, I believe, on August 21 to welcome all of our non-BIPOC co-conspirators back into the process so that this work is indeed expansive and collective. But part of it for me has been this question of, how do we model the ways in which we want to work together?

And so our meetings start with music. There's one designer, Kristin, who plays the ukulele. And they bring us in with those tunes on some of the calls. We have these moments of holding space not just to talk about the work, but to talk about our feelings, our emotions, to tap into our humanity. And I welcome anyone who's seeking that type of experience and that outlet for designing for justice to join in with us. If interested, they could go to dapcollective.com. That's the new website that's out. We're still loading on Actions, so you'll be able to see some actions over the next few days, few weeks that you can do independently. But if you would like to co-organize something in your community, in your school, at your job with us in the field at large, there's also space for you to do that there as well.

TARA
OLUWAFEMI: Thank you. So I just have a really quick question, and it's about design justice. How would you describe it and describe its origins and your interest in that? I just feel like it's almost like a-- I wouldn't say it's a relatively new term, but I'll say that it's something that we don't often talk about in design school. I think we got a little bit into it when we were on our last episode talking to Aisha about the ethics of design. I'm just curious about, what's your approach to design justice?

DE NICHOLS: I think design justice is something that is a bit radical for our field. When we think about the ways in which we can envision and design for racial, social, cultural, political change and reparation through our field, through architecture, through landscapes, through graphics, through UX and UI and experiential design. I think design justice for me really starts to challenge the power structures that exist within the field and reorient them towards, one, reversing a lot of the harm that has been caused over the last few decades, but also reimagining, what might justice look like within the built environment and spaces?

Cornel West, I think, describes justice as what love looks like out loud. And I think so often what injustice has looked like is neglect, is division, is things like redlining, leaving people out of housing structures, ignoring Black spaces and not preserving cultural assets from indigenous Black and Brown folks. So design justice as a counterpoint to all of those types of ills that come up within our practices, including urban planning, is designing with those things at the center. Designing with connection at the center, designing with true mobility and economic prosperity and joy and well-being at the center of how we build out buildings, spaces, experiences that everybody has to experience.

Design justice as we think about the carceral state also means dismantling what has been built in order to continue to oppress Black and Brown folks-- prisons, police stations, all of the amenities that have become these assets and amenities of white supremacy. Design justice is tearing that down and reimagining something that benefits the rest of us, all of us collectively.

TARA
OLUWAFEMI: Absolutely. I feel like the issue with architects is that we are in such a position of power. And there's moments when we're thinking about design justice where we really have the opportunity to ask communities and to ask people, what is missing? What do you need? But we often look from the outside and we're like, oh, we think that this park would be great here-- is that what the people asked for? I think that--

DE NICHOLS: Exactly.

TARA --it's our role to get back to the communities, and that's why we think the work you're doing with Design as
OLUWAFEMI: Protest is really, really important.

CALEB Yeah, and looking at the design justice demands the nine demands that DAP has put out, I think one of the really
NEGASH: powerful things about what you all are doing is calling for architects and for designers to really be accountable for the ways that the design professions have been complicit in injustice, which is why the framework of design justice is so important, right. And it sounds simple, but it's a really big, unacknowledged truth right within the design professions.

For example, calling for defunding the police doesn't sound necessarily like architects or designers in particular have a stake in that. But if we're designing spaces that support these institutions, that support organizations like police chapters, then--

TARA Police stations.
OLUWAFEMI:

CALEB Police stations, right, but--
NEGASH:

TARA Jails.
OLUWAFEMI:

CALEB --we're having a direct impact on the way that communities are policed. And so--
NEGASH:

DE NICHOLS: Yeah.

CALEB I guess maybe it sounds a little simple, but I think that that act of acknowledgment and refusal of the role that
NEGASH: designers have already been playing throughout history is a really, really important part of what you all are doing.

DE NICHOLS: Indeed. And I want to highlight with this is that, yes, Design as Protest is centering design justice. And I have to recognize and own the fact that there's a design justice network that has existed for years. And the work that we're doing is an extension of a lot of what has been cultivated amongst Black, Brown, Indigenous, queer, trans designers for some time now. And so I think with standing in alignment with the movement for Black lives through our efforts, we're able to really call for some stronger accountability from our field.

So I agree with you. We've been working with jails and prison populations in order to make the conditions that they are living in better. How are we supposed to just in a contract when what we're doing is benefiting them? And I think it might take some time for us to collectively realize this, but the ultimate benefit is that we're not throwing away people. That we're still seeing their right to humanity. And so there is this tension even within those of us who are using design as a tool for justice. There's a tension between reform and abolition that I think we'll continue to see come up in some of these, in some of the ways that the nine demands that we've made are adopted across the field.

TARA Yeah. So you're also doing a lot of the work in Design as Protest through your firm Civic Creatives. And Civic
OLUWAFEMI: Creatives was born out of an early nonprofit design firm called Catalysts by Design--

DE NICHOLS: Yes.

TARA --which you started with Cambrie Nelson and Emily Bornstein. Can you talk a little bit about that and also why
OLUWAFEMI: you chose to transition from a nonprofit organization into this firm?

DE NICHOLS: Oh my gosh, we were such babies back then. So this was, what, 2013. We were in grad school at the Brown School of Social Work, and I specialized in social entrepreneurship. And when I entered that program, I was coming off of a very traumatizing experience of designing with a team down in Alabama. And at the same time, my senior thesis had been a project called United Story that Cambrie was working on.

And when I pivoted away from the project in Alabama, I wanted to put a lot of our efforts together in some type of way in order to deepen the work. So from Alabama, I created a project called Design Serves that was teaching young Black students in rural Mississippi and then St. Louis how to use power tools and learn design processes in order to identify and build things within their own local neighborhoods and schools.

And with bringing Design Serves and United Story together, we found ourselves at such a ripe time while we were in grad school because the Clinton Global Initiative came to Washington University that same year. And Design Serves ended up being featured as one of the commitments to action on this national scale. So we ended up getting a lot of funding for that. And Washi was our fiscal sponsor, but we were like, having a fiscal sponsor, that's not sustainable. So we incorporated Catalysts by Design as a nonprofit in order to carry out essentially those two projects as well as a third one called FoodSpark.

And what we ended up realizing was that starting a nonprofit stripped our energy and our excitement about the work away because now everything became about fundraising, getting grant proposals, and in some ways competing for grants with the same people that we wanted to partner with. And so what we ended up doing was dissolving the nonprofit and pivoting into a social enterprise called Civic Creatives that was forprofit and that would use a BOGO structure and revenue model in order to fund these ideas.

So we would work with clients and then use a portion of the revenue generated from that to then fuel all of these community projects. And that became a sweet spot for us-- until I started the Loeb Fellowship. That's how we structured our work.

CALEB That's such a fascinating model for working. I mean, it's really great to hear the way that you all naturally grew
NEGASH: out of the nonprofit model. And I think it's interesting because-- especially I mean, Tara and I come from architecture. That's our background. And I think even the way that we learn in school about professional practice and the ways that architects can organize their labor, I mean, we don't necessarily think about starting a social enterprise. Finding ways to be for profit but find a way to invest in communities and make meaningful change while also making a little money. And so I think that that's really fascinating. That's the class that you should teach. You know what I mean? That's really cool.

TARA
OLUWAFEMI: I think it's funny because often what we hear is that a lot of architects will work on commercial projects so that they can use their extra money for their personal little art projects. So it's amazing to see that you're like, why am I going to be working on some little unbuilt thing in the corner? And instead I actually want to give back to my community. And that's something that we're going to be talking about in an upcoming episode as well with Stephen Gray is, beyond the work of the classroom, how can we now take some of that work and give it to the people outside? Move beyond the academia. So it's really incredible that as students you were already thinking like, how can we take some of this work elsewhere?

DE NICHOLS: Yeah. Also to do it in a way that meets people where they are and in some ways like the technical support for making projects happen. With our efforts, we grounded everything in what we call common cultural denominators or cultural universals-- the things that despite our differences, everybody has to experience. The fact that all of us have to eat food. So how can we use food as an experience to engage with civic and social issues? Everybody has a story to tell, so at United Story, how do we bridge divides and gaps in opinion about race, about social issues, about community violence just by listening and tending to each other's stories?

So I think that became so critical because that allowed us to get into a place of helping people unearth the things that they already wanted to do, and in many ways our role was to provide some of the project management for that. With FoodSpark, we ended up creating a system where we were giving microgrants through the parties and events that we were hosting so that it's not necessarily us coming in and doing the work for anybody, but really being a friend. Being more than a partner, but being a collaborator alongside folks.

So there's a lot of great energy that comes from the work that we were doing with Civic Creatives. And now coming from the fellowship, I'm actually trying to pivot once again to see how do we do this in a way that deepens our impact a little bit more where it's not just these very fun feel good experiences, but we can actually tie the work back to policy and back to some systemic restructuring that needs to exist in our city.

TARA
OLUWAFEMI: So I'm going to pivot a little bit. Recently the Frances Loeb Library sent out a call for submissions for books on the intersection between race and design with a particular focus on works concerning Black communities. So I was working on the back end of this project, and I remember you submitted a work by Jeff Chang titled *We Gon' Be Alright*. So could you share with us the significance this book has for addressing issues of inequality in design? And you were also featured in the book because of your involvement in the protests in Ferguson. So we would love to hear a little bit about that as well.

DE NICHOLS: *We Gon' Be Alright* is a book that I would recommend a lot of people to read, especially as it relates to racial justice and how it shows up in communities. And in particular with the uprising in Ferguson, Jeff did a great job of capturing some of our stories-- the stories of artists, of activists, of rappers, of people who were culturally using our craft to contribute to the movement. And when I first learned about the book, I was actually upset with Jeff, because I was like, I never met this man. How did he get my story? How does he know these details?

And I met him at an Americans for the Arts conference where he was doing a book signing. And I walked up to him with the book in my hand and I was like, hey, you wrote about me in your book and I wanted to introduce myself. And that was the start of a very healthy, intellectual series of conversations and stuff with him. But in the book, he featured the Mirror Casket Project, which had been collected by the Smithsonian as part of their opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. And Angela Davis wrote about that piece and named it The Art of Protest.

And it came from a space of mourning. In some ways it's like a visual elegy. It laments the dead, but it also provokes you to see yourself in the fate of Black people. And I think that book does a great job of capturing that essence and also tying the movement back to other causes that were happening in Oakland and all these other cities that were all united through the pains that we've had but were also forever connected because of the activism that lives and breathes through the people.

CALEB NEGASH: That's amazing, yeah. That work, *Mirror Casket*, it's really powerful. I love what you say about the two aims it has that I think are maybe captured in the title, right. The idea of the casket-- the eulogizing and memorial to Black death and to injustice, but also the mirror, right, the reflectivity and seeing yourself reflected and not losing hope. And I think that's a really powerful framework for thinking about art and design as protest I think in a broader sense. Christina Sharpe has written a lot about what she calls wake work, right. So the idea that we're all living in the wake of slavery, of the transatlantic slave trade in particular and how its effects linger over us, especially in the United States. And she engages with the way that we can ethically confront all this Black death that's happening to this day and that exists all throughout the archive.

And how we confront it and give some respect and memorializing to that fact of death, but also to challenge it and to challenge the idea that that's the only story that we can have as Black people. And I think that the *Mirror Casket* piece totally fits in with that framework. And I wonder if you have any thoughts about that.

DE NICHOLS: I do, actually. Because since 2014, there's been a lot of pressure that I've received in terms of, how do you beat that project? How do you top that? And I haven't topped it yet. It's been, what, six years. I'm still just like, I don't think I can outdo that. But I think the biggest thing most importantly is I don't want to stay in reflection of death alone but really transition my own spirit towards seeing and believing, embodying joy as a form of resistance, as a form of protest.

And what does it look like to cultivate experiences that allow other Black people to live out the joyfulness that is embodied within us? And so it's beautiful to see in so many of these protests how folks are doing the electric slide. There are people showing up into marches with cosplay. Black, queer, and trans folks are leading the way of showing up creatively even in the midst of facing the systemic ills and oppression. And I value that so much. And so this fall semester, I am actually teaching a course via Stanford's design school about joy. About joy as a catalyst for design. How do we encounter design through a joyful spirit? How do we infuse joy within the processes of design? And are we designing for, with, by joy? Is that the point? Or is it that if we design for justice, that joy is our outcome?

So there's a lot of pondering that I'm currently doing about that. I don't know how it will manifest in my work as an artist, but I'm hoping that it is something that doesn't necessarily outdo the *Mirror Casket*, but can be a testament of where perhaps some of our hearts are collectively right now with that struggle and tension between death and life, joy and resistance.

CALEB
NEGASH: Yeah, I mean, the idea about joy is so important. Because I think, not to belabor this point, but it is a big part of the logic of white supremacy, we think, that you would constantly only engage with the fact and the narrative that Black people are dying and we have been dying. So in a way, that refusal through protest and even through design and through art is a really important thing I think that we need to try and move towards. And I think this ties back into maybe some of your other efforts that you're working on, including a book club. So we know that you have your *Deliberate & Unafraid* book club. So, yeah, what are some of the books you have on that list, and is there any way that listeners can join?

DE NICHOLS: Yeah. This book club has been something that has been in the making for a while and is inspired by, of course, the words of Audre Lorde, who's a queer Black woman, poet, and scholar. And she has this poem called *New Year's Day*, where she ends it with saying, "I am deliberate and afraid of nothing." And that has been the mantra of my heart for so long. And part of it relates back to what we were just talking about in regards of how our sense of knowing death and fear is strategically the psychological warfare that white supremacy wants us to embody. And if we can harness through the things that we feed ourselves and fuel ourselves with to be deliberate, to be unafraid, I think we can build our arsenal, forever equip ourselves to resist having these ills continue to be perpetuated.

And so *Deliberate & Unafraid* as a book club centers the works of artists, activists, poets, writers who embody that spirit of speaking truth fearlessly to power, to these ills, to injustice, to oppression. And I feel great that so many people have been interested in having this intellectual exploration with me. But what I'm witnessing just from the first two events from it is that it's more so white people who are the most eager to read along because there is an unlearning that needs to happen with them. And they recognize that.

There's this balance that I now feel like I have to make in order to hold space intentionally for the Black/queer/fem perspective that I entered into this with and extend to those folks who are interested without necessarily making myself their educator about Blackness, about gender, about queerness.

TARA
OLUWAFEMI: That's something we've been talking a lot about as well in planning the podcast and planning the aims of *African American Design Nexus*, right. Where like, who is this for? And especially being two Black students hosting this podcast, we're seeing a lot of book clubs and things coming out how about educating white people and just non-Black people on how to not be racist and to do a lot of unlearning. And it's like, OK, but where are the spaces where we, as Black people, can really get to the meat of a lot of matters? And how can we really talk about a lot of the issues and things that are for us?

That's part of our aim with the podcast, is we are opening it up to everyone. We do want everyone to be part of these conversations. But we're constantly grappling with, OK, but we want to make it a little bit deeper than what is already out there. We want to get to really know Black designers and know them as people and not just see them as ways to educate other people about Blackness through design and all of that. It's interesting to know that in your book club as well you're also thinking about that. And I guess it's something that we're all going to have to keep working on and working towards and always analyzing who is this for and who feels affected by this.

DE NICHOLS: I think there is, one, the notion that it is not my role to educate white people on how not to be racist. That's just not my mission. There are so many resources out there. And there's this notion of what white activists in St. Louis call white folk work, is white people talking to white people about how to be anti-racist. And I think for the folks who are seeking that, doing that in community with other white people could be beneficial in the sense of not further perpetuating the guilt, the fragility into the spirits of other people. As you work through that, great, we want you to work through that. But it can create another toxic experience if we're still on the receiving end of people processing through those ills. So, yes, we got to find the balance.

TARA
OLUWAFEMI: Yeah. And I really like how your book club is called Deliberate & Unafraid. And I think that's something that Black people, we're constantly living in this idea of fear. And I feel like it's something that I always tell myself as well-- I have nothing to fear. It's like you almost have to give yourself a mantra to remember, even though you're surrounded by it constantly. So it's amazing that your book club is titled that and there's works in there that empower the Black community and the Black queer community. I just really appreciate it.

DE NICHOLS: Thank you.

CALEB
NEGASH: Is there a way that listeners can join the book club? I mean how has the COVID-19 epidemic-- I mean, how has that impacted the way the book club is organizing?

DE NICHOLS: It started in the midst of all of this, so it's been completely virtual. And part of it comes from my experience as a Loeb fellow, that I hadn't read as many books that I read this past academic year since I was in undergrad. And this course, the Intro to African American course with Cornel West, was quintessential to that. I took a lot of courses like his, as well as Civil Resistance with Erica Chenoweth at the Kennedy School. And the readings just kept me fired up. And I wanted to hold space for myself to continue reading these fiery works but also bring back in fiction. Because I believe in the power of Afrofuturism. I believe in the power of fiction to help paint pictures that perhaps we haven't already seen witnessed through history in our contemporary accounts of reality.

And so there's a mix within the book list and within the upcoming works that I hope people read with me that really encounters these notions of deliberation, of fearlessness. And more than just a nonfictional POV. I hope to instill more poetry, more fiction into it. People can get engaged with it simply by going to my website. It's denichols.co/bookclub. And you will see a link on the top of the page that says Join In that takes you to the form to sign up.

TARA
OLUWAFEMI: Awesome.

CALEB
NEGASH: That's awesome.

TARA
OLUWAFEMI: Yeah, I love how you're talking about fiction. I think that's one of the reasons why I love Black world-builders and Black fiction writers. It's because the way that they depict Black people-- we're so free. And they create these worlds that I'm like, there is hope somewhere. And even if this world right now doesn't seem like it, it's beautiful to see that there's so many people with a vision. And there's so many visions of ourselves in another place, in another time, in another space thriving. And it makes me be like, OK, well why not here? And how can I bring that world here?

So I really do think we need more Black fiction writers. And I'm always hyping up all my friends who write. I'm like, please, the world needs to hear your stories, because they're beautiful. And they give us hope for the future, and they make us unafraid.

DE NICHOLS: Yeah. One of the books that I read this past year-- actually I read the sequel as well-- was *Children of Blood and Bone* and *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* by Tomi Adeyemi, who's also a Harvard alum. And those two books for me had the same spirit that I felt when I watched *Black Panther*. Oh my gosh, there is a reality beyond now where we are like warriors. And all of these experiences, these reading experiences, led to the development of *Deliberate & Unafraid*.

CALEB
NEGASH: Yeah, I mean, in a way, design is a kind of fiction. It's a projection of a world and of things that don't exist in order to actualize them. And words conjure things, right. I mean, they have so much power. So I've heard so much good stuff about that *Children of Blood and Bone* series, which I think they're also turning into a TV series.

DE NICHOLS: Yes.

CALEB
NEGASH: That's really powerful. Yeah, so we hope people definitely check out the book club. Thank you so much.

DE NICHOLS: Yeah, thank you all for having me. This has been such an energizing conversation. So I really applaud and salute all that you're doing.

CALEB
NEGASH: Thank you so much.

TARA
OLUWAFEMI: Thank you. We really appreciate it.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

TARA
OLUWAFEMI: I'm Tara Oluwafemi, and you've been listening to The Nexus, a product of the African American Design Nexus at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Today's episode was produced and edited by Maggie Janik. And we would like to thank DJ Eway for our theme music. To learn more about the African American Design Nexus, visit us online at aadn.gsd.harvard.edu.