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**CHRIS DAVIS:** Hello, and welcome to the *CARC Podcast*. I am your host, Chris Davis, the Associate Director of the Career and Academic Resource Center. And it was my great pleasure to speak with Dr. Amie Breeze Harper, who is an alumna of Harvard Extension School.

Dr. Harper has a PhD in the social sciences with an emphasis in intersectionality, anti-racism, and racial, gender, inclusion, and equity. She holds an ALM in educational technologies, now a retired field from Harvard Extension School. And she received the Dean's Award for her master's thesis at the time, which was on how racial gender privilege operates in online forums.

Dr. Harper has over 15 years of experience as a diversity, equity, and inclusion expert. She's the founder of an innovative inclusion and equity consulting firm that is called Critical Diversity Solutions. Dr. Harper is also a published author.

She created and edited the groundbreaking anthology *Sistah Vegan-- Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health, and Society*. Her first novel, *Scars*, was published in 2014. And her second novel, *Seeds of Sankofa*, will be published by Brill Press in 2022.

Dr. Harper has been invited to deliver workshops, keynote addresses, and lectures at universities and nonprofits. Her talks explore how and why people have unique relationships to food and to wellness, sustainability, and ethical consumption, and how these relationships are impacted by race, socioeconomic class, gender, sexuality, and physical abilities. It was a pleasure to speak to her, and these are some excerpts of my conversation with Dr. Harper.

So Dr. Harper, thank you so much for joining us today. I described your writing output and your published work in my introduction. Can you talk a little bit about your writing process and about how your creative outlet also stems from your academic and social justice work?

**AMIE BREEZE HARPER:** Yeah. So basically, I think it's really important to get these ideas out that I talk about, equity and inclusion in justice. And much of the work that I read in graduate school and in my doctoral program, it was just theory, history, social sciences. And that's not necessarily what the mainstream wants to read about in terms of diving into these subject matters. It's not very entertaining.

And I went to Dartmouth College and was introduced to women and gender studies and Black feminist studies. And I really liked the theoretical aspect of this. I just liked theory and philosophy, but I also liked novel writing. So I decided that I would take my senior thesis, which looked at what it's like to be queer and a woman of color in a rural area and looking at Dartmouth College.

And I decided, how can I make this more palatable for the mainstream to dive into these very real and very important issues around racial injustice, being queer, being working class and in a rural environment as a woman of color? So I decided I would take a stab at my first novel called *Scars*, which would come out, gosh, 15 years later in 2014. And basically, what I do is I think it's really important to convey the information of equity and inclusion around race and gender, especially in many different methods possible to get the word out.

So some people will take a class, and they like the fact that I convey that information through a webinar. Others, they like the more creative aspect of learning about these things, whether it was through a movie or through a book that they had read, like books like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, really starting to learn about racial injustice through that narrative form. That's more entertaining, and it goes more from the head than to-- I mean, it goes more to the heart than just the head to really make those connections.

So my book, *Scars*, those who read it-- and I've gotten really great reviews. And it was basically the method I chose, because just telling these stories and connecting to real characters really connects to most human beings when they're reading it. So my latest book is called *Seeds of Sankofa* which tries to dive into all that stuff that was in my dissertation work but through Afrocent-- sorry, Afrofuturism.

And Afrofuturism is a way to create a future through the imagination of the African diaspora and a future of possibilities, sci-fi and fantasy. So what could liberation and freedom look like from the perspective of Black protagonists? And my book has four Black women protagonists who are trying to fight a future of inequality and inequity.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Very quickly, when you and I spoke the other day, you talked about how your degree program in the Extension School, initially, had a focus-- at least, your focus had been on Java. And it sounded like more programming side of it. And then it morphed into what ultimately became your thesis, which was racial gender privilege and how it operates in online forums. Can you talk a little bit about that and also about the genesis of your coaching and consulting on diversity, inclusion, and equity?

**AMIE BREEZE HARPER:** I think it was-- maybe it was back in 2003. I don't even remember, but it was early 2000s. And I had enrolled into the Extension School, into educational technologies program with the intent to be a Java developer. And I took my first Java development class.

And I notice, out of I think a class of about 175 students, I was one of two Black students. So my goal was like, I think, I'm no longer going to focus on social sciences and Black feminisms and Black studies anymore, like I did in my bachelor's program. There's this booming startup or dotcom era in the 2000s. And I was living in Boston.

So I think I'm going to jump on that and just become a Java developer and learn. But just that first class, me realizing, wow. And bothering me that, why are there no Black students? Why are there no more than two Black students in a class, in an era where it would be great to develop those skills being a Java developer? So we can gain economic mobility and job stability.

Why is this not-- why is this the case? OK? And then at the same time, I was working full time at a place called YouthBuild and working with underserved youths who had not finished their high school diplomas. Many were adjudicated youths.

And one of my colleagues, who is a Black woman who was a contractor there and had her PhD in interdisciplinary studies focus on equity and inclusion for organizations. She saw that I was not doing well, and I told her, I'm having reproductive health problems. And she's like, you should check out plant based diet by this woman named Queen Afua. She's a Black woman who really talks about plant based diets or veganism from a more empowering Afrocentric perspective.

So I checked out that diet and that regimen and how so many mostly Black women had healed many of their reproductive ailments through that way of eating and being. But I also realized I had never, outside of reading that book, I had-- in the Boston area, I had never met any other Black vegans other than myself. So I decided I'm going to do a call for papers. Because I love reading books, and I love editing and writing material.

So I'll do a call for papers for the first ever anthology to interrogate this question from my Black feminist years and studies is if being racialized and gender in the United States as a Black woman or girl means that we're going to have collectively unique experiences based on that, whether it's in education, or in the workplace, or how we eat, then this is probably going to affect how we collectively go about practicing veganism. So I did that call for papers on the early years of the internet, on forums. And the idea of the project was met with animosity from mostly white identified vegans and animal rights activists on this website.

And they didn't like that I had named the project Sistah versus sister, so using Black English vernacular. And also proposing the idea about veganism is not objective and universal, but in fact, it will be shaped by race and gender, among other things. So I posted that and came back a week later to look at if anybody had commented that they were interested in engaging in this project. And it ended up being pages and pages of mostly white vegans very upset that I had brought this in and insulting the use of the word Sistah. And just all of these instances where it was clear that covert forms of racism and anti-Blackness were operating in this website.

And I found this interesting, even though I was also doing Java development at the time. And I went to my advisor at Extension School and told her what I have seen. And I was excited about it, and I had said that I was so excited about it. We had a long meeting about it.

And she says, it seems like you're more excited about this than Java development. And I actually think you should consider really switching. Because this probably should be your focus, and then I did. I ended up switching back to doing that.

So moving away from doing Java development to understanding this new world of educational technologies, such as online forums, and in tandem with the new research, focusing on how hate groups are using the internet to mobilize and operate. So there's this concept of more overt racisms and white supremacy which was clear in the neo-Nazi groups and alike that were mobilizing on the internet that scholars were researching. But it wasn't clear how this would affect those who were engaging in more covert forms of white supremacy and systemic racism and maybe not even realizing it.

So on that forum that I looked at, I had posted, but there was a lot of racial coding going on and assumptions made that very much pointed to, aren't we all post-racial? But at the same time, a lot of anti-Blackness, a lot of anti-Black sentiment, a lot of sense of entitlement that really produced, for me, a new way of understanding how covert racism can and does operate in a safer space where people can speak more candidly about their beliefs in a way that they would not necessarily say in a physical space. So that really became the site for me to investigate what this current era of educational technologies and forums and these other networking spaces online mean.

Is it a safer space? Because now we have avatars. And is it true that race and gender shouldn't really matter? You can feel safe. When clearly, this particular site and what was happening would actually tell me, if I went there as a person of color, vegan interested in veganism or animal rights, and I saw what had transpired, the first thing I would think is wow, this space is really unwelcoming.

And it seems like, whether they know it or not, they're very much upholding white supremacy. So I don't want to be part of this community. So just really investigating all of that and what that means. And once again, I never participated in it. I just observed it.

I discursively analyzed all of the threads. And then I developed a pretty cool thesis around that. And that motivated me, after I got the award, but before I got the award, I got motivated to go back to school and focus more on social sciences aspect of the work that I was doing. So at the Extension School, I think it was in 2006, I applied to PhD programs, so I could focus more on understanding what's going on here in the animal rights world, the vegan world, the supposed liberal world, where there is truly anti-Blackness happening, and various forms of white supremacy, and covert racism that's happening? What does that mean?

If this is supposedly a space that the mainstream are trying to define as liberal and cruelty free, and what does this tell-- this is a microcosm. So what can this tell us more about the United States as a whole? And that rich history and that sordid history that started in 1619. So I decided to carve my own path.

And it felt like it was I was kind of on the margins and talking to myself for a long time, when I was trying to promote the idea to mostly animal rights vegan and food organizations to really understand how covert white supremacy and racism are operating, not just in terms of individuals, but how it's affecting us in terms of institutions and cultural racisms that we may not even realize are impacting how we think about food justice or animal advocacy. But I did that. I started just doing that in the consulting and lecturing.

And then it just slowly built and built as I got better at doing the trainings and the strategic consulting. And then I formally put together an LLC in 2017 with my cofounder, Elise Aymer, who's in Toronto. And we decided that we'll just keep on doing this work part time, even though we weren't getting a lot of responses. Because it just wasn't trendy, but we really focused on anti-racism justice, equity, and inclusion.

And not just doing trainings, because you just can't give an organization the training, and yhr organization, overnight, will just change everything. It has to be a comprehensive project, where yes, training can be part of it. But there's also the need to do a climate assessment.

So we really want to know and ask the right questions to dig in. How inclusive and equitable is this environment for racial minorities? And then also having a strategic plan working with these organizations and helping the leadership gain the competencies and literacies around what we're even talking about when we say, diversity, equity, inclusion. So our work is a very comprehensive package that ultimately will drive structural changes to create an equitable and inclusive environment, which should yield belonging and thriving for the most vulnerable population.

So that's the work that we do is creating those trainings, doing the surveys, helping with the strategic plans, and shifting the paradigm from non-racist, from inaction to being heavily active around being an agent for change for equity and inclusion and justice for these organizations. So we're doing that work. And as of May, unfortunately, with the murder of George Floyd, I mean, our work has finally gone from the margins to the center. It increased 20-fold in requests from organizations that, whether they're sincere or not-- we're hoping they're all sincere, that they finally get that you just can't have a training, check off a box, and be done. That this requires some deep structural revamping and reframing.

And most people, if you don't have literacy and what we mean by anti-racism, what we mean by racial equity, then you need to hire someone like us to make that happen. So we can help you gain that literacy and that competency. So eventually, you can start looking at those policies. You can look at job descriptions. You can look at the employee handbook and figure out, wow, when we wrote this five years ago, when we wrote it this way, now, I can totally understand how the outcomes of this negatively impacted Black people, Indigenous people.

So that's what we do. We help. We guide and ultimately, hope that organizations will at some point be able to start just critically thinking on their own and help mitigate or prevent injustices from happening.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** So I'm curious. Now that you're talking about that, have you seen any kind of evolution in the way organizations have responded to this work? I mean, have there been instances-- because I can certainly-- I've done a little research in the area.

And yes, there is a question of a lot of organizations, a lot of businesses, larger companies, corporations using this as a checklist, as a means of legal compliance. Do you find that organizations are now more-- have more of an appetite to think about this in the structural sense? Or is that really still a struggle?

**AMIE BREEZE HARPER:** It depends who we work with. I get the sense that many of these organizations and leadership knew what they had to do a long time ago. There's a lot that people are invested in keeping the way things are, because that's the status quo. I highly doubt that most people sincerely didn't know who are in leadership positions.

But now that they do know, I'm seeing, suddenly, corporations that never thought about it have \$150 million available to invest in Black racial justice. So I'm seeing the action. But I'll be honest and say, since I believe that it's not like this is new to them, but I do believe that, because now it's trendy, and now, oh, I guess we want to be on the right side of justice and history, a lot of them are doing it because OK, maybe it's not so scary. And maybe it's trendy now. So let's do those structural changes?

I don't know though to the depths that they'll actually do it and how long it will last. I don't know yet. I think it gets harder if you are a big corporation who's been invested in this.

And there is a reason that you are a big, multibillion corporation, because you have benefited off of sexism and racism, xenophobia, and extreme forms of capitalism. So I think that just has to be put out there on the table. That's the reality of how these corporations got to where they are. So I'm a little hesitant to believe that what we see now is actually going to last any more than a year or two.

With the smaller organizations, I have a lot more hope. There's a lot more sincerity with smaller organizations and businesses that we've been talking to and working with. Because I feel like they're in a different position. And as much isn't at stake as it is when you're talking to these Fortune 500s.

So we'll see. I don't know if it's already not trendy anymore. This past summer, I gave a free anti-racism parenting workshop. And there were 500 people that joined on a Zoom call.

I gave it again-- I don't know-- two months later, and 30 people joined. And then I gave another one last week that I was asked to do for the same organization, where we had 500 people join for free, and only seven people joined. So I'm not sure if it's already losing steam.

But at least there is-- we are seeing these statements being released that we stand with Black Lives Matter. We are anti-racist. And it is a little cringeworthy, because like I said, these are the same organizations who would say, when Black Lives Matter started, we don't want to be political. We want to be neutral.

And I've always said, this is not about political. A lot of times that word is used, because people don't want to come to terms with that what's happening is injustice. So when you say that you're just-- what you're probably saying is I don't want to confront the injustice that I'm in collusion with, because I have deeply benefited and privileged from this arrangement of power and resources because of my racial privilege.

So I think that's what people mean when they say that our organization or company, we don't want to get too political. And now, suddenly, they want to quote unquote "get political." And they're putting it on their pages and issuing these statements on social media and on their websites. And I think to myself, wow, a lot of these organizations are the same ones that they were clearly in denial or didn't support people doing that type of work or people like even Colin Kaepernick who wasn't supported. And now, it's trendy to support him.

So I'm a little hesitant to think that there will be-- that this is a movement versus a moment. We'll just-- it's too fresh, just started happening in May. So we'll see. I'm hoping it's a push toward a movement and a structural change, not just nationally, but globally. But we'll see.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** So to close, I was going to ask you what advice you might have to offer as someone who has been in this field for a number of years. And as we talked about, your work with coaching and training is one aspect of it. Your narrative fiction work is one perhaps branch of it. And the work that you've done on food and social justice is another part of that. But for students who are now going to enter into the new economy let's say, in the 2020s, and are interested in doing work that intersects with social justice, what advice would you have for them?

**AMIE BREEZE HARPER:** Oh yeah, definitely. So it's different than it was when I tried to do it. I mean, I started this back when I graduated from Dartmouth College in 1998. And it's always going to be a challenge, but it's not impossible.

I would give the advice that to stick to your purpose and the goals that you set for yourself. Be prepared for many obstacles, but it doesn't mean that you can't get through it. And to carve your own path, and just surround yourself with those that support your purpose.

I think that's very important, because it looks like I was doing a lot of things all at once to try to figure it out. But I always stuck to what my purpose is, which is racial justice and social justice. That was my purpose and may have manifested through different roles and jobs. But that was my purpose.

And to really just keep your eyes on the prize of justice, even if it may not be popular at the time. What I was doing was not popular, literally, until three months ago. But I've been doing it unofficially since I was in undergrad, doing this work 24 years ago. So I think that's important.

Also mentorship is really important, finding someone to mentor you through that process informally. I've had informal mentors. I personally am-- I'm available for that. I have like five or six, mostly I think women and non-binary people of color who are in their 20s.

I'm in my 40s, but they are in their 20s, early 30s, talking with me, because it can feel lonely. And it's really great to have guidance from a mentor to work through this process. Because so far, it is pretty new. And it can be a little difficult and challenging, when you don't have that supportive network.

And if you are getting into this, find ways to figure out how to present what you do in a way that maybe aligns with what the corporation is or the organization as what they're doing and using that language. So a lot of organizations, they're not comfortable if I say, I want to do justice work. They're more comfortable with the language of diversity or diversity and inclusion. So I frame it that I do diversity and inclusion work for many of them. But I know in my heart what I ultimately will be framing this through is justice and equity.

And like I said, just not giving up. It's very easy to give up, because we often live in a society that doesn't support you just doing you and going, working toward your dreams and your goals. So just don't bow down. It is going to be a challenge. But if life wasn't so challenging, then you wouldn't actually go through transformation.

So that's what I try to offer when there are very, very challenging times trying to do diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice work to stick to your purpose and not give up, because I didn't. I've had difficult times, but I never gave up. I never gave up, and I never lost sight of what my purpose is.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Well, on that note, Dr. Harper, I have to say thank you so much for joining us today, for sharing your experience, your wisdom, your input. I'm tremendously grateful for your time.

**AMIE BREEZE** Thank you, Chris.

**HARPER:**

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**CHRIS DAVIS:** You have listened to the *CARC Podcast*. This is the podcast for the Career and Academic Research Center here at Harvard Extension School, and I hope you will join us again.