Transcript for Episode 303: "Listening to Black Voices: A Conversation with EbonyJanice"

Please note: This transcript has been lightly edited to remove filler words or sounds.

EBONYJANICE: Everybody needs therapy. And when I say everybody needs therapy, I mean everybody. I mean your childhood pastor needs therapy, your grandmama needs therapy, your uncle, as wise as he is, with all of his funny, wisdom sayings, needs therapy. Your mama needs therapy, your daddy needs therapy, your best friend from high school needed therapy. Everybody. Everybody needs therapy.

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LINDSAY KOLSCH: You're listening to the To Write Love on Her Arms podcast, a show about mental health and the things that make us human. Each episode we'll be talking about the things that can often feel hard to talk about, like depression, addiction, self-injury, and suicide. We'll be sharing stories and exploring big themes like hope, healing, and recovery.

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CHAD MOSES: Hey everybody, it's Chad Moses, TWLOHA's Director of Outreach. In last week's episode, we spoke about the heartbreaking injustice and loss of life that's happening in our country. Systemic racism impacts people of color each and every day, which means it also affects their mental health and well-being. At TWLOHA, we not only believe in the power of hope and help, but also in the importance of storytelling, so we want to continue listening to and hearing from Black voices. Community is at the heart of everything we do, we often say that People Need Other People, and we are thrilled whenever we have the opportunity to meet new friends, and find ways to partner with them in sharing their passions, perspectives, and stories. So it was a real gift today to be joined by EbonyJanice on the podcast. She's a womanist scholar, author, activist, and the founder of Black Girl Mixtape—a platform that creates sacred space to celebrate the voices and wisdom of Black women. We are truly honored to share this honest and thought-provoking conversation with you. Let's get started.

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CHAD: Today we have a really special guest. It's my honor to introduce you to our new friend EbonyJanice. We've been connected to her through our mutual friend, Joél Leon. And it's been really amazing over these past few weeks just to see how these criss-crossing nets of interests are going and how we are really, truly more connected than we've been led to realize. This is going to be a great conversation, one that I hope is of immense value to you and your communities. But yeah, let's get you to learn a little bit about EbonyJanice. So EbonyJanice, why don't we start here? If I were to look up EbonyJanice in the dictionary, what would I see?

Where's home? Where are you coming from? And I guess what are the most important pieces that make EbonyJanice, EbonyJanice?

EBONYJANICE: Yeah, I like that question in that way. I am EbonyJanice. I go by my superhero name, but it's really the name my mother named me. Ebony no space Janice. I'm originally from Sandusky, Ohio. So I really am a Midwest girl through and through. But I have these super city moments. I've spent a good deal of my life, my adult life in Atlanta, Georgia. A few years in California for grad school. And then now I live in New York City. I live in Harlem. Harlem, which is actually Manhattan, but Harlem wants to be its own place. So I live in Harlem. And yeah, I think that those things are all very important like if we're looking at the dictionary definition of EbonyJanice. Being from Sandusky, being from the Midwest, really growing up in Georgia even though you know, I was an adult, the earlier part of my adult years, and then California briefly. And then now New York. Because all of those things absolutely lend to my lens, to the work that I create, to the art that I do, to my advocacy work, just everything about me. Those places have really largely contributed to that language. And I'm a hip-hop womanist. I'm very possibly, we'll talk a little bit more about womanism later, but womanist is to feminist as hurtful is to lavender which is language that Alice Walker put forth. She defined womanism in her book *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens*. And so my womanism is my socio-political and spiritual religious framing for everything. It's my lived practice. I call myself a hip-hop womanist because I was raised simultaneously in the church and in hip-hop culture. So it feels impossible to speak of myself, the wholeness of my spiritual religious or my socio-political framing, without considering hip-hop as well. And what I do is I try to make people laugh and feel ease and joy. I talk about dreaming a lot through my Dream Yourself Free work. All of those things that I just said is my resistance work and a major part of my contribution to what I believe will be the revolution that finally gets us to a just and equitable society.

CHAD: I think you hit on some really important things when it comes to identity. Not just limited to our family of origin, but the cities, the environments that raised us. You pointed to spirituality, you pointed to music. I love that as you were describing these different influences on your life, I imagine that removing even just part of one of those things would utterly change who you are, right?

EBONYJANICE: I'm not even who I am without Sandusky, Ohio. I'm not even who I am without hip-hop. I'm not even who I am without Harlem, right? This version of me just ceased to exist. As a matter of fact, I was just having a conversation about a situation from 2011, which I will very likely talk about because it has a lot to do with my mental health journey, but about this situation and about how much I have grown from that place. And about how grateful I am for it because I would not be who I am if it wasn't even for that moment. So I am absolutely somebody who believes that even the moments are creating our identity and adding to our identity. Definitely taking even one of those ways that I defined myself out of the equation creates a completely different person, and we likely wouldn't be having this conversation.

CHAD: Well, I'm grateful for those moments that have led to this moment, that we get to interact and have a conversation. But I think it's also safe to say that this moment, perhaps, is radically different than how we would have imagined 2020 going. We're already halfway through June, which is a time warp in and of itself, and it's just even felt in more hyperdrive over the past few weeks. I want to just take a moment to kind of acknowledge that moment. How are you doing right now?

EBONYJANICE: All the actual complexities of what it feels like to be a Black woman, I am those things still. And I wish I could cite them because I believe in proper citation, but I saw somebody tweet recently, that for a lot of our non-Black friends and co-conspirators, this question feels like a very new question, like the depth of it, like, how are you *really* doing right now? But there seems to also be a disconnect of understanding that this is how Black people feel in America on a regular basis. So it's not just this moment for us where we feel like the heaviness and the tension of what this environment has created. It may be being performed, for lack of a better language. It may be being performed more, it may be on display more because there seems to be an awakening for people, so there's more of a spotlight on the rage and the grief that we're experiencing, right? You see the manifestation of that rage by the Minneapolis police station being burned down, you see the manifestation of that rage by the protest. You see the manifestation of it. But we exist inside of a rage, a constant rage. James Baldwin speaks to that. To be Black in America is to be in a constant state of rage. And so there is this rage that I feel in my body, a tightness in my stomach, a heaviness on my chest, the weight on my shoulder, but I feel that every day. So simultaneously inside of that rage, it's also... I saw this tweet by the actor Yahya Abdul-Mateen II, he's in Watchman, Dr. Manhattan in Watchmen, and he said, “Black family. Give yourself permission to also experience joy right now. We need that too.” And so we're constantly trying to reconcile, what does it look like for us to be very conscious of what this moment means for us and what's happening across the globe as it pertains particularly to Black Lives Matter and to police brutality, etc? But also, Black people, we need to give ourselves space and permission to experience joy and pleasure as well. And so that's how I am. I'm somewhere between a tension in the pit of my stomach because I just want to be well, and I want my people to be well, and also, I'm gonna laugh really hard several times today, possibly several times in this conversation.

CHAD: We'll welcome that laughter. I think laughter is as honest as anger can be, and I think you nailed it. You have to be able to allow yourself the freedom to feel fully. What I loved about you describing some of these emotions was, you could locate these emotions in your body. I know just the idea of having a body is something that you are passionate about, as well. Do you care to talk a bit about that? About kind of linking the head and the gut? The head and the body?

EBONYJANICE: Yeah, for sure. So kind of from two different spaces, but the same space, a lot of my justice work actually is around Black women's bodies, with ownership specifically as a justice issue. What that means is that just showing up in this body can be a tension for a cis, hetero, patriarchal, white supremacist society. Just my body. My voice, I have a heavier

registry in my voice, and so I could be talking right now about the fact that right now I have ginger and turmeric in my coffee. Right? That's just something very basic that I'm talking about. And then I could be talking about oppression, and as soon as I start talking about oppression and racism, if I were having that conversation with a specific group of people, the heaviness of my voice creates the story around, “Why are you being angry? Why are you being angry?” This is what my voice sounds like when I'm talking about the dog. This is what my voice sounds like when I'm talking about my coffee. So just because now I'm talking about something that there is discomfort around, doesn’t mean that I automatically got angry. I actually even sometimes compared it to when the Hulk said, “That's my secret. I'm always angry.” Like, that's my secret. I'm always angry, so I didn't switch over to anger. I was already mad, but you have never actually really seen that rage manifest, right? So I’m understanding the way that the body, just the way that I sound, just the way that my facial expressions, just the way that... my body posture, right? I enter a space very conscious of this body. And so I'm being intentional about intending to keep myself as safe as I possibly can be. That is a justice issue because there are groups of people that can just walk into a room, and they never have to consider what their body is doing. What do I sound like right now? What is my face doing right now? Right? So I'm so I'm very aware of my body. The next place of that, where bodies feel very important to me is because I'm a healer. And so as a healer, some of the work that I'm doing, I'm offering these tools and rituals, you know, to other Black women, women of color, but Black women, specifically. What does it look like for us to just sit with ourselves and scan our bodies? Just go from the crown of your head to the soles of your feet. Just start to scan. Just pay attention. What does my body feel like right now? What do my temples feel like? Is there any tension in my neck? Is there any tension in my lower back? Am I feeling something in my chest? Literally just scanning the body all the way down to the soles of our feet. And then whatever we notice, this is the work that I'm doing, whatever I notice, whatever we notice in that scan, pay attention to it, and just begin to ask questions. What is this happening in my stomach right now? What is this about?

I have a girlfriend, and her name is Thea Monyee. She's a licensed mental health practitioner, and she talks about how anxiety… We talk about the symptoms of depression, anxiety, etc, etc., but we never really talk about the root of it. And so I'm just also making that connection as well. The work that I'm doing for Black women specifically to be healed and well and whole, I'm helping us to understand that some of that was showing up in your body. Especially if you're doing these scans on a daily basis, you tend to start to notice where that tension is showing up for you on a regular basis in your body. Some of that is as a result of a response to systematic oppression. That is anxiety, but it's anxiety as a result of, you know, a post-traumatic stress experience. And so to be able to name that and label it is the beginning, in my opinion. It’s the beginning for a lot of us to do some healing work around it. Because I can't go through the whole day with this knot in my stomach, but I used to. I used to live with that knot in my stomach all day long. I had no tools or any consciousness of, “Oh, this doesn't have to be this way. I don't have to feel this way.” But it had just gotten so normalized because I've lived with it for so long that I just expected that when I wake up I’d feel tension in my stomach and in my

chest. And so that scanning is a major part of the reason why I'm able to identify that this is what's happening for me. This is how I feel.

CHAD: I think that is something that we so often overlook. I think it's one thing to visualize what a mental health conversation looks like. It's one thing to train our vocabulary, like you mentioned earlier, training your vocalization, your tambor around discussing something sensitive like your feelings, like what's going on. But when you get to that visceral, that knot in your stomach, the anxiety, the stress, the “What happens when I do give my body a voice?” You know, that can be such a barrier to people taking that first important step of just saying, “Hey, I'm not totally certain that I'm okay.” And the reality is, it's okay to not be okay. You've always been allowed to feel your feelings. But yeah, just kind of connecting all those points. That the mind, the heart, and the body. Yeah, I think you walk through a really beautiful diagram.

EBONYJANICE: Can I just say something about what you just said about giving the body of voice? I love that. I'm gonna cite you the first time I say it, and then after that it's mine. I love that. But I want to actually say that, because I feel like it's important to really understand some of the ways and the reasons why certain groups of people respond the way they respond to stress, to anxiety to this current global experience and this ongoing global experience. It feels important to understand the history of bodies, particularly Black bodies. Why you wouldn't be readily available to, or have access to the language to express what's happening in your body, or why you wouldn't be readily available to explore what's happening in your body, is if you have lived in a society that has systematically denied your right to your body. When enslaved African people were not even considered human, the body was just a thing. It was nothing. It was just a thing. So they didn't have the ability to freely explore sensuality and pleasure. It was a created experience. They didn't have the ability to freely explore emotions. Their emotions would make them unsafe. So you can't be inside your body. So you start to become, historically, what we understand as enslaved African people then became even more spiritual. The already deeply spiritual people became even more spiritual because there's this desire then to be out of the body. If you can get out of this body, you can be free. So when you have now the generations of Black people specifically trying to get back into their bodies. We don't want to be free in heaven. We want to be free now. So that's why I believe there is this major conversation that is happening and that we hope will be happening even more around Black people doing deep healing work, deep intergenerational trauma, healing work, to be able to reconcile that we have been attempting to escape our bodies for so long. And that very often has looked like not being able to give our bodies a voice. Your body is just in pain, but you know you can't go to the hospital to get checked out because medical racism is a thing. So you are better off just suffering in silence than going to the hospital. You know that your emotional wellbeing is in danger, is at risk, but you can't go get a therapist because language around your sanity has historically, since slavery, been used against you. So you are better off just putting yourself even deeper at risk, right? There's all this. We just don't talk about the systematic racism and oppression and the result of, the residual impact that slavery is having on our bodies and our inability to be fully in our body. Because there is a huge portion, a huge

chunk of our history on this continent, where our bodies were just things, that's it. There was no voice for that thing. That thing, that body did not have a voice, so it would be better for me to get out of this body.

And for me, what I imagine is healing for so many of us that are doing this mental health work, particularly in the Black community, is that we are intentionally, like I said, doing the work to get back into our bodies. Doing mindfulness, grounding work, doing deep intergenerational healing work talking about trauma, doing somatic movement, doing all the things that will help us to actually be in our bodies, because our history doesn't lend to that. Our history in this space, in this actual space that we're in right now. Our history doesn't lend to that. Our history lends to like, “Oh, if you will be free, if you will be well, you will have to get out of this body to do that.” And now we're into, you know, probably about two or three generations of people that are saying, “No, I want to be free in this body. I don't want to have to wait until heaven to be well. I want that wellness, I want that freedom to be here now.”

CHAD: That is just so, so important to acknowledge the history and the societal lens that got us to this point. I mean, otherwise, just that existential pain of–you wake up, you become self-aware in the 21st century, and you don't know why you don't have the language, you don't know why you don't have the framework. So thank you so much for giving us a bit of an overly-simplified and probably too quick for this conversation look through how we got to this point. But I'm wondering, would you be comfortable adding the most recent chapter to this, the more personal chapter. How did your journey with mental health begin?

EBONYJANICE: I have suffered with anxiety since I was a teenager. I remember, in 12th grade, having a little breakdown and being sent to the counselor's office. Which, for the record, they are not certified to do the work that they have to do with young people. But I went to the counselor's office, and the only thing that he could do was offer me space, which I'm very grateful for. But I was like, becoming undone. I'm a Capricorn, and the story that I have growing up is around perfectionism. And so I was going through this experience of just feeling overwhelmed and anxious and really stressed out about college happening and all the things, you know? I was just really having a breakdown. That's the best way I can describe it. And then there was no more talk about it. Then my junior year of college, I remember having another breakdown. All this stress, all this anxiety, all this stuff is going on around me, and I had just a breakdown. Then I just pleaded the blood of Jesus over my life, and I went back to business as usual. I say that like that, and I kind of giggle because, historically in my family specifically, but for a lot of Black people in America, who grew up in a Christocentric society, particularly as a result of chattel slavery, Jesus is the answer for us. That's it. What I was just talking about, about the body, that what we have believed is that we just need to get to heaven then. Because there is promise of freedom in heaven. No more crying in heaven, no more dying in heaven, right? So we just need to get to heaven, then, because we won't be free here. So there's so much inside of our religiosity, in our spirituality, that never really gives us the space or the language to really reconcile a healed free version of ourselves in this form. And so just pleading the blood of Jesus over really was the answer for my family about whatever it was

that I was experiencing, and there was no actual interrogation of what's really going on. Then in 2011, which I call the Great Depression of 2011, I had *the* breakdown. I went through a depression so bad that I thought I was going to die. I never strategized a plan, but I wanted to die. And I'd wake up confused–"Why am I still alive? I was supposed to die last night." Not to make light of it at all, but I do have this moment that I used to try to explain to my friends, what it would look like for me to wake up. What is that movie with Diane Keaton and Jack Nicholson? Something's Gotta Give! Her and Jack Nicholson's character break up, and she's at her beach house working on this play. But there's these scenes in the background, or the kids singing the song real sad and melancholy. And she's waking up out of her sleep, sobbing, you know, cut to the next scene, she's sitting at her desk working on the play, sobbing, you know, she is in the shower, sobbing. That's what my life looked like in 2011 every day. I would just wake up out of my sleep and realize that I was alive, and I would just start screaming, crying. It was just as dramatic as it sounds. And also, when I look back at it now, I can try to giggle about it a little bit, because I'm like, I was like Diane Keaton in Something's Gotta Give because there was just so much trauma. But it was real. I was just going through this deep depression, and I didn't have language for it. What I knew for sure was that I couldn't just plead the blood of Jesus over it this time. Me and Jesus needed to really reconcile what was going on with me. And that brought me into therapy in a very real way. That brought me into doing other holistic healing work in a very real way. Working with a therapist and a coach simultaneously–which is a huge privilege, that's a conversation for later that I'm sure we'll talk about–but working with a coach and a therapist around creating rituals, daily rituals to bring me into my body, to bring me into this moment, to bring me into being grounded and being mindful. That depression majorly catapulted me into my mental health work and the commitment and investment. Then, a little over a year ago, I had a video on race go viral. Whew. And as a Black woman whose work focuses most specifically on Black women, it was difficult for me. Because when videos on race go viral, racist people come to find you. Like, "I got to go find this woman to tell her she is wrong and I hate her." And so there was a lot of energy in my space that I wasn't used to because I had been doing this very focused work and having this very specific focused conversation, and accidentally had a video on race go viral. And when I say accidentally, I mean I literally recorded the video from my bed, like under the covers still. So the fact that it ended up doing what it did, was just amazing. I didn't mean for that to happen. Because like I said, I'm so used to talking to a very specific group of people. That brought me to therapy two days a week. If I could have afforded it, I would have been sitting in my therapist's office or in her face through a teleconference everyday like, "Hey, girl. Ain't nothing wrong. I just wanted to say I'm here." And so on a whole other level, my mental health journey has drastically increased in the past year because, as my platform has grown and expanded, there are more people in my space that are not necessarily my specific target audience, even though I do believe that there is an overflow. There's a bit of people that aren't necessarily my target audience still benefit from the work that I do, because when Black women are well, everybody will be well. So as my platform has grown, I have needed to continue to do deep work around some of the trauma that happens for me when people show up in your space and they don't know how to and they don't even know that they are being

problematic, or they have the privilege of not processing how problematic that they're being in your space, right? They have no capacity to keep you safe.

CHAD: To touch back briefly in 2011, we're just so thankful that you're still with us. We're thankful that depression didn't get to claim you. Was counseling or therapy offered to you as an option? Is that something that you had to find on your own? Or did you feel like you had some people advocating on your behalf to take those steps?

EBONYJANICE: I didn't have anybody really advocating for my mental health. It really was still kind of a plead the blood of Jesus from the core group of people that were around me. But I said to this woman at my church, thankfully, actually, that I said this. She's an elder at the church that I went to at the time. I said, “Does this mean I'm not saved?” Mind you, I've been preaching in the pulpit since I was eight. So the fact that at what, like 27 or 28, I was thinking that depression meant that I was not saved. It's very indicative of what it feels like to be a Black Christian woman processing mental health. I need to say that. It feels very difficult for so many of us to be able to acknowledge that not just going to lay down at the altar, or not just praying, that you cannot necessarily just pray mental health issues away. You can't necessarily just call a group meeting and get the elders to lay hands on you and then depression goes away. Thankfully, I said this to her because she was, I’m just thinking about this, but she was in school at the time to get her master's in social something… but had something to do with mental health. I'm making up her degree, but it did have something to do with mental health. And she said, “Absolutely not. It does not mean that.” Somehow that conversation ended up getting me connected to another person at our church who I did actually have a close relationship with. I can't remember if this particular elder told me to talk to her, but somehow I ended up talking to her. Her name is Tracy Barbie. And she is a psychiatrist. She's a deacon at the church, but her work is, she's a psychiatrist. And she sat me down and basically said, “Okay, this conversation doesn't count as therapy. But let's talk.” And she gave me somewhere between a big sister elder in the Lord's church conversation and also a licensed mental health practitioner’s contribution to the discussion. From there, I ended up getting in therapy.

CHAD: I think there's something hugely profound there. There was, it sounds to me, this grasping for another piece of your identity. Your spirituality was so important to you and having to face identity conversations on a daily basis, this was one other piece that now is my spiritual identity at risk and having the wherewithal to authentically challenge that and say, “Look, I can't afford for this to be true. Can someone can someone correct me? Can someone give me an answer?”

EBONYJANICE: And I'm very grateful that I spoke to the person that I spoke to. Because I have seen language from spiritual and religious leaders talking about depression in very harmful ways, right? “God hasn't given us the spirit of depression. You need to just find that…” You know, language that can be–not can be–language that *is* very problematic. I have seen it. This is coming from somebody who is a spiritual religious leader. That is my work. So I am not

talking from outside of this space. I'm talking from inside this space saying that, if I would have just so happened to talk to somebody in the next office over at that church, it's very possible that this would have been a drastically different story. It just so happened that I, and I believe it was God ordained, but thankfully, whatever brought me to that moment, I'm so happy that I did end up talking to the person that I talked to, because it could have been very different. It could have been like, “Well, we’re just gonna pray. We'll check back in with you.” And I could have just been left to my own devices. But what I needed was a therapist. I needed therapy. I needed somebody who was licensed to talk about the deep things. I needed somebody who had been trained to allow me to talk and to ask me questions that would cause me to probe deeper what was happening to me. I needed that. As a spiritual leader, with great discernment and great healing, I'm several generations in as a healer at this point, right? So even that. But I'm not a licensed practitioner. I did not go to school and train to be able to point out and to notice and to probe into. I wasn't trained for that. So no matter how deeply empathetic and insightful and intuitive I am, that’s still not my work. And so after you do your work with EbonyJanice, you still need to go get some therapy. After you have this conversation with your pastor, you still need to go to therapy.

CHAD: I think even well intentioned voices can still can still be voices of microaggression. That intention, you can hope for the best, you can try to be a helper, but at some point, you got to raise your hand and say, “This may be above me. I can love you best by pointing you in a better direction than what I have to offer in this moment.” That doesn't mean I'm gonna pat you on the back and wish you good luck. I can still walk alongside you as we find a better guru for life's journeys.

EBONYJANICE: And it is good for me that you do that. It is good for me that you still be in relationship with me on this journey. Particularly because mental health, this conversation, especially for a lot of Black people, especially for a lot of Black people who grew up in the type of society that I grew up in, a Christocentric society, it feels very isolating to be on this journey sometimes. It's very hard, too, because we are very communal people. Black people are very invested in community. We belong to each other. And so the ways that we view our parents for example, even if you have parents that are toxic, the way that Black people talk about even their toxic parents is drastically different from the way that other groups of people talk about their toxic parents. What I have found in my own work and in my experience is that white people have greater ease saying, “Grandpa is toxic. We don't deal with him.” Black people are like, “Grandpa, that's just how he is.” And that's not that's not to just make a blanket statement, but that is in my own experience. Very often, that's what it looks like. Because we have been taught because we belong to each other so much, we have been taught to endure in a way that other groups of people haven't necessarily been taught to endure. And so being in therapy can be very isolating and lonely. Because if you are in therapy, and you're having the revelation that your relationship with your mother is toxic, and as a Black woman you’re like, “But that's my mom. But that is my mom, how do I, how do I reconcile that? That's my mom, how do I reconcile that?” And so, if your mom isn't simultaneously doing that work, where do you go? How do you create boundaries? So therapy has, for me personally, been very

supportive. And being on this journey that can feel very lonely and very difficult, and simultaneously supporting me with the language to create certain boundaries inside of family and community and systems and institutions that I have never historically had the language for, number one, and number two, felt like it would be safe. Is it safe for me to say, “Mama, you can't talk to me about this anymore because it's very triggering.” Can I say that to my mom? And so that is, I think that it's important to understand that I don't think people are just rejecting therapy just because it's not accessible, even though it can be very inaccessible. Just because of some story, it's also that being in their healing can really isolate you sometimes, particularly if everybody else isn't doing that work. I saw this meme that said, and I'm done with the sermon, but I saw this meme that said, “The hardest thing is realizing that you are likely in therapy for people who won't get therapy.” And, whew.

CHAD: That might be my favorite vocalization of a piece of punctuation is that “whew.” I think you're right. That seeking counseling, seeking therapy, investing in your own mental health, while initially, that language is self care, this does turn into communal care. Wou were playing out that, “Would this be a betrayal of trust in my family community if I seek help from outside the fold?” And one kind of adage that's coming to mind is, you know, “If your old man did you wrong, then maybe his old man did him wrong.” So this is a generational thing. And unfortunately, it doesn't take too many generations for some really destructive patterns to emerge. Where we're seeing that mental health access, and you just spoke about access a second ago, mental health access in the United States is directly correlated to conversations about privilege. So for example, our friends at the Black Emotional and Mental Health Collective, they did some research and they found that Black people are seven times more likely to live in areas with limited access to mental health care. And we know that there is a shortage of Black mental health providers and only a third of Black people who need mental health services receive treatment. You can't read those stats, you can't acknowledge those, you can't hear that, without saying mental health is now a social justice issue. There is no reason why I should be receiving care more accessibly, and then opting to not receive that care, or having options for other care when my Black, indigenous, people of color friends and family can't get the same thing that I can.

EBONYJANICE: Absolutely. Because when we talk about accessibility, very often we're talking about proximity, or we're talking about the cost, right? We could think about it that way. But listen, when I was at the University of Cincinnati, an undergrad, I remember one of my girlfriends, a white girl, her dog died, which is major. I want my dog to live forever. So this isn’t me minimizing the fact that a member of her family died, this is very real. I got this. Her dog died. She went to her academic advisor and was like, “I can't even think about this schoolwork right now.” And they connected her with an on-campus therapist. She already had a therapist, but they connected her with an on-campus therapist who signed off on her to have two weeks out excused from her work from class. I never even heard of this. That this was a thing you could do. I never even knew that the school mental health department, I didn't even know that that was a thing, period. That's first of all. And then second of all, even once I thought about it, like, “Oh, yeah, of course they have this on campus. We had that in high school or some

version of that." It wouldn't have never crossed my mind to be like, "I'm about to go get some mental health days from college." So understand that also a part of accessibility is ensuring that our people know that this is a service that's being offered. Because we didn't know. For sure. I teach undergrad now at a school in New Jersey, and I teach predominantly students of color, which makes sense for the demographic of the city that I'm in, where I teach. But what I was about to say, which is kind of weird, because I'm not teaching a very, you know, I'm teaching, you know, Women and Gender Studies department, that's where I'm at. But it's mostly students of color, mostly women of color, as a matter of fact. I have taught several classes now there at this point. I always start with language around mental health and being grounded in mind-focus. I also teach adjunct at an online, seminary, social justice school, and I teach a mindfulness course online. So I'm always talking about mindfulness, always talking about wellness, always talking about, "Do what you need to do to take care of yourself above all things." And when I tell you that my students have affirmed for me that no one else is having this conversation with them, no one else has ever had this conversation with them, and they didn't even know that the counseling center existed. So those are resources that are actually available to them, and they didn't even know it was there. So to me, the question isn't just about how do we make mental health more accessible as in proximity, as in money, as in resources in that way, it's how do we make it accessible and intentionally target a group of people with this language? Not to say like, "Oh, we know y'all need this help, so here, come get it." But just to say, "Did you know this existed? In the event that you would like access to it, here is abcdefg. Just walk down the street or just make this call." And I've noticed that with several different issues, even with COVID, there is an assumption at the very beginning of this social distancing time, there is an assumption that everybody's getting their information from the same place. So when I'm in Harlem, and I still see the majority of my neighbors out, just hanging out, no mask, no gloves, no nothing, I don't assume the way that other people might assume that they just don't care, and they're just breaking lockdown or quarantine or social distancing, because they don't care. I know that they are not getting their information from the same place that other groups of people are. Because I have a lot of neighbors who aren't on social media, I have a lot of neighbors who probably don't watch CNN. I have a lot of neighbors who probably aren't listening to NPR radio. So where are they getting their information from? The assumption that even the access to the input to the knowing is equal, is also wrong and problematic and will keep us from ever having. You can lower your prices, you could create amazing resources like Open Path Collective, etc. All these resources can exist, but if people that need to have access to that access don't know about it?

CHAD: Well, I think that leads to, if they're not, if people are not getting their information through social media or through the news media, then man what a premium that puts on our ability to be storytellers. The amount of students that you talk to that you get to see the light bulb above their head turn on when you say, "Hey! I have massively benefited from counseling, maybe you should, too." It's so often, with To Write Love, conversations around mental health aren't so much about diagnoses or even treatment plans or treatment strategies, but so often the conversations about A) Who can I ask for help? and B) Is it okay? Is it safe to ask for help? And yeah, if you're not getting that affirmation through anywhere, then personal stories…We

were just talking about community, the power of community to frame narratives, good or bad. But these are narratives that are woven by storytelling. That is such a gift that your school community, that your neighborhood, that your wider circle of friends and family, have you authentically sharing your experiences. Man, I don't know if we ever get to fully see the legacy of our stories but, damn, EbonyJanice. I am just so encouraged by something that seems as simple as authentically living your life and sharing your experiences. I can only imagine how many people are now more encouraged than ever to seek the help that they deserve.

EBONYJANICE: I also think something you said about this being a justice issue, a social justice issue. That feels so important to think of it that way. And the way that I would love for us to, within institutions, let's think from a… Like we talk about the narrative and the storytelling within our communities, but imagine if in the same ways that when you start working somewhere, they have you understand sexual harassment policies. And understanding the sexual harassment policies isn't just so that you won't sexually harass somebody. It's also so that if you have been aggressed against or harassed you know that there is a safe space for you to go and report that. Or, that's the intention. It's not always the way that it works. So additionally, when you.. We're certainly moving to a place, especially in my department, Women and Gender Studies, where we ask our students for their preferred pronouns. What will make you safe in this space? How can we identify you in such a way that you feel safe? And there's something that opens up. There's a moment, because a lot of them have not even heard of preferred pronouns in the particular demographic that I teach. But for a few of them, I can see this moment of like, "Oh, right." We're starting conversations with, "What is your preferred pronoun?" We're starting conversations with, "Take care of yourself. If you need to get up and do like this or go to the restroom or get something to drink or whatever." We tend to start that in spaces. But what we don't start with an institution is, "Here are the resources horses that are available." I'm talking about the classroom setting. I'm not just talking about giving a pamphlet, I'm talking about the verbal conversation that we have to have before we can move forward is, "This is what you can do. This is to be sure that you are well. This is what you can do to be sure that you are whole." And so, for me, I do that with my class, with my students. Before we get into the syllabus, before we get into anything, let me tell you that if you have something going on… Actually I said this, I tell them like this: Listen, I have scammed my life through a couple degrees, so you cannot out-scam a scammer. So here's the thing that we can do. We can just be real with each other. If you have something going on, even if that something is just, "I needed a nap, and I chose that over doing this reading." It would be better for you to tell me about the nap than for you to make up a story. I create this whole moment for them to understand that I got it. Life is hard. I want to take a nap more than I want to grade these papers. I want to, like I have that, I've got that. And so I think that that also becomes a part of our justice work to be in communication institutionally. And that is a moment within an institution. I'm not necessarily, you know, nobody told me to do that, but that feels like the same way that I'm going to ask about your preferred pronoun to make sure that you're safe and well is the same way that I'm going to let you know that x y z won't be tolerated in this space as it pertains to race, gender, class, etc., the language that we use, is the same way that I'm going to make sure you know that if you have something going on, and you just need to be

pointed in the right direction, this is a safe space. You can send me an email, you don't even have to tell me details and specifics. You don't have to tell me your trauma story. You don't have to tell me any of that. Girl, I chose to take a nap over reading the material. Take an extra day, honey. Send it to me tomorrow then. That needs to be a part of our training as instructors and/or as people who are in a leadership position. Do you understand what I'm saying? It's like we're in these spaces where we are pretending like we're okay, and we're “in charge of people.” I'm doing quote fingers, “in charge of.” And we're “in charge of” people who are having to pretend like they're okay. And none of us are okay. So why don't we just start the conversation with, “Here's what's accessible for all of us.” There will be days when I'm going to show up, and I'm going to do the very best that I can, but that might not look like the highest version of myself, because life. Because life, right? So I think that also could be a part of our justice work. That no matter what space we're in, if we could just begin, especially within institutions, if we could just begin by leading with, “I get it that we're all human. Here are some ways that I'm making sure that we are both acknowledging mutually our mutual humanity in this space, and that is going to include a conversation about mental health and wellness.”

CHAD: Our friend Tiana Soto was on the podcast earlier this season. She talked about duck syndrome. Where you go to a pond, head out to Central Park and you'll see a bunch of ducks that are just seemingly floating by. And it looks really graceful until they swim over some really clear water and you can see that they are paddling as fast as they can to keep moving. And that's such the journey, especially for college age individuals, or college degree pursuing individuals. But the myth of being an amateur professional. Like, “Look, I'm going to school because I don't know as much as I think I know. And I need people to tell me but what I don't know.” But we pretend that we are instant gurus, instant professionals, when we've only been to like a class or two. So I say all that to set up this. We're talking about storytelling and I just brought up myths that are worth challenging. We are at this point, collectively as a society, North America, the United States, where this is a time where people are waking up to challenge myths. We talked last week that when you encounter a story, when you encounter a myth, you can do a few things with that myth. You can accept it and make it part of your own identity. Or you can challenge it and say, “I think there's a better way to look at what's going on.” So using that framework, what are some myths pertaining to mental health that you see are worth combating?

EBONYJANICE: I think the most basic, which would open up worlds of possibility for us is that needing help means that something is wrong with you. I say on a regular basis, and I break it down very often. Everybody needs therapy. And when I say everybody needs therapy, I mean everybody. I mean your childhood pastor needs therapy, your grandmama needs therapy, your uncle, as wise as he is, with all of his funny, wisdom sayings, needs therapy. Your mama needs therapy, your daddy needs therapy, your best friend from high school needed therapy. Everybody. Everybody needs therapy. Life is very generous. And I'm deeply grateful for just breath, right? Just being able to breathe. You know, life is generous. But life is hard enough all by yourself without us being worried that getting support through this journey means something bad about us. So I think that that's the first layer of it. Really understanding that,

even you coming to the revelation that, “Oh, yeah, no, no, I need some support.” Just understand that you have come to the revelation, but that doesn't mean that because other people around you haven't come to the revelation, that there isn't a revelation to be revealed. They need therapy too, you know. Just because they don't, they haven't come to that understanding for themselves and you did doesn't mean that you… So there is this heaviness that I think falls on us when we feel like, “Whew, I don't know what to do, I don't know which way to go. I don't you know, I just feel like I'm running in circles. I just feel overwhelmed. I just feel all the things that you feel.” And then maybe hopefully you get a revelation of like, “Oh, I just need to get some support.” So that's number one. And another thing that I say when I break this down, it's like I'm understanding mental health as something more than just an emotional response to our conditions. That mental health issues are varied and complex and they can often be a result of various things, it could be an environmental response or it could be chemical. It's the brain, right? And in the same way that if I had a little murmur in my heart, I would not hesitate to be like, “Oh, let me go find out what's going on in my heart.” So when something is happening in our bodies as a result of our thinking, our mind, our whatever that is, but it's connected to some mental, potentially emotional stuff. Why would we continue to think, “Oh, I can just out-think my thinking.” So, for me, it's like when we begin to see and understand the brain as an organ, that is also being impacted by all kinds of things, all kinds of realities, I think that potentially that could help us to maneuver through the myth as well, or the fear and the trepidation around actually acknowledging I’ve got something going on mentally that I need to process, that I need to deal with. But my opening, my grand opening and my grand closing about therapy is always going to be that everybody needs therapy. And so for me, just because I might be one of the only people in my family or my close community unit that is in therapy on an ongoing basis, doesn't mean that I'm the only one in my community that needs to be in therapy on an ongoing basis. The next level of that is for me, right now where I am in my life. I'm pretty okay, right? Where I was in 2011 when I needed to go to therapy, if I could have gotten to some type of residency where they just kept me there every day, that would have been best. But where I was in 2011 is not where I am now. I have great language for what's happening in my body and what's going on with me. I have a great handle on tools and resources and ways to show up and be grounded and to take care of myself. I have boundaries in place. I have all that. And so I'm pretty decent. Life ain't no crystal stair, but I’m okay. And I still show up at therapy on Mondays. My therapist is an older Black woman from the Islands that just looks at me as soon as I log in, and she's like, “Hi, Ebony. Hi. How are you today?” And that's just kind of her entrance to let me explore whatever I want to explore. Because I don't have anything specific, you know, some days I dive right into it like, “Girl, my life is falling apart. And I’m ashy.” But there are some days when we just sit and talk until something comes up. Because it's not that I just am always feeling like, “What am I going to do?” I don't feel that way all the time when I go to therapy. Things can be good.

[music playing]

CHAD: Hey podcast family. This show and episode are really meant to help us talk about the things that are hard to talk about. We’ve learned that not only is there a shortage of Black

mental health providers but that Black people face increased barriers to accessing that care. We want to do what we can to help. We've created a growing collection of mental health resources, created by and for the Black community. We also want to remind our Black listeners that we offer a treatment and recovery scholarship that can be used to lessen the financial barriers you may face when it comes to caring for your mental well-being. To learn more about what resources are available to you, as well as the list of Black mental health resources, please check out our show notes or visit TWLOHA.com/FIND-HELP.

We also know that in order to confront the systemic racism that impacts the mental health of people of color every day, we have to be part of ending it. That requires us to do more than just believe in equality, but to learn and practice antiracism. As we ourselves learn, we will continue to update a guide created to help you start your journey toward learning and practicing antiracism. You can visit twloha.com to access it, and you'll also find the link in our show notes. Thank you for being here and for being willing to do the work that is required of us.

[music playing]

CHAD: How have you been caring for your own mental wellbeing during these past couple weeks of protests?

EBONYJANICE: I opt out whenever I can, which is a privilege. But also, I'm worthy of tapping into that whenever I need to because I've been marching to Selma since I was a little girl so I deserved naps and I deserve baths and I deserved foolish playtime on FaceTime with my friends. I deserve that, and I need it. And so I opt out of–when I say opt out, I'm obviously not opting out of a revolution or opting out of this experience, because it is my lived experience. But I opt out of social media, I opt out of conversations, I opt out of engagement, I opt out of sometimes talking on the phone. I just have to opt out sometimes. And that looks like many things. Again, it looks like me logging off, and often sometimes that looks like me saying I can't have that conversation. So that's been a major thing that I've been doing. And then I just kind of said a lot of the other things that I've been doing. I've been asking myself the question, even prior to this moment of unrest that we're in, I have been asking myself the question for the sake of my mental health for maybe the past year or so. What can I do to be a wild, lavish, succulent woman? For me, to show up in the fullness of my humanity and my womanhood and my muchness and my gentleness and my wildness, like what does that look like for me today? I have been asking myself that question anyways, but I feel like over the last month or so, on a whole other level, I've been asking myself that question. What do I really need today? I think people think that self-care has to be like, you have to spend money and you have to… No, I just take a bath every day or I'm just sitting down and doing nothing. Definitely I have a deep meditation visualization practice, which are two separate things, but I can of course bring them into one space. I light candles and sit in the evening sometimes with the lights off and just practice my breathing. I take deep breaths and fill my lungs on a regular basis. I stop sometimes in the middle of a conversation and ask can we regroup. I'm just constantly trying to find ways to slow down because I understand myself as I can be overly productive and we

live in a capitalist society that wants us to be grind grind grind all day long anyways. So I've been really rejecting that a lot by just slowing down and chilling out. And then another thing is I create. I create playlists on a regular basis. Some of my music choices are just super... I'm song obsessive. So I'll listen to a certain song on repeat. The main song that, I think Jhené Aiko, some of her streaming checks for the past year, because I have kept Jhené Aiko's Trigger Protection Mantra, it's a song I have kept it on repeat. I will put it on repeat at night and just turn the volume down sometimes. I will turn it on first thing in the morning. Sometimes if I wake up feeling a little anxious, I just put it on and just lay there until the words… I mean it sounds very simple. I don't know if you know this, but she's playing the singing bowls, the Tibetan bowls, that's her playing. She's just singing, "Calm down, calm down, calm down eventually, protect your energy, I am protected, I am protected." That's the whole song, and then she just repeats it.

CHAD: Now, what, in your opinion, would it look like for non-black people to embody and engage as allies with this moment, as it pertains to mental health? What are ways that we can continue to serve the mental wellbeing of our Black friends and family in the midst of this time wired for intensity?

EBONYJANICE: First, I want to say that white people and people who have white privilege, or proximity to whiteness and that privilege. You do not get to opt out of this moment. That's first of all. There, of course, is going to be some discomfort coming up for you. But that's because that privilege has always made you not have to deal with this. You could always opt out. And this is a moment in time when you don't get to opt out. If you really mean that you are in relationship with Black people, and you really are considering yourself an ally, which I would like to give some alternate language for that in a moment, but if that's what you're really considering yourself doing, if you mean it when you say Black Lives Matter, then you have to understand that Black people have been holding up this banner by ourselves for generations now, and it is your moment to pick that banner up and carry it with us. You don't get to opt out. Yes, it will be uncomfortable. Yes, there is discomfort. Yes, you will feel tired. When you are feeling uncomfortable, for you to sit with that discomfort, and to ask yourself, to begin to ask yourself some questions about that discomfort. "This moment feels exhausting for me, but for the people that I am saying that I am here to support and be in relationship with and to do the work of getting us to an actual just and equitable society, How are they feeling? And how have they been feeling? And what can I do on my own time and my own wellness journey to be equipped? I have hundreds of years of generational ease and play and pleasure. I can give Black people and people of color who are suffering in this experience 25 minutes to go take a nap while we stay here and continue to do this work. You have to stay on the work. You don't get to opt out. You don't get to say I'm uncomfortable. This doesn't feel good to me. You don't get to say that, because historically that is what whiteness has allowed you. And saying Black Lives Matter in this time, in this moment means that you are actually also saying Black Lives Matter enough to go and take a break and the work will continue. Black Lives Matter enough to go and be well and you will continue. Black Lives Matter enough for me to support this in whatever way my privilege gives me the ability to do so. So with that, I'm talking about in the in

the physical work and the literal work, because I want to get to mental health in a second, but this is... I mentioned earlier that I had a video go viral a little over a year ago, and it's actually been making his rounds again this year because it's very relevant. What happened was after Stephon Clark was murdered by the police in the Bay Area, his cousin and a group of allies who have been trained to do this work, went to the city council meeting, and they did a speak out. But what they did was they centered this Black man who was yelling in the courthouse like, “This is what y'all do every time. Every time. Y’all get away with this every time.” But what you see in the video is these white allies making a circle around his body. The police are trying to get to him, and they're literally never attempting to touch the white people or the people with white privilege. They're literally trying to bypass these people that are also a part of this protest to get to this Black man. And it's the best. When I saw that video, I woke up, it was like March 7, 2019, and I just remember that because I'm a Capricorn and I remember details. I woke up, I saw this, it’s like 6:45am. I see this video of this happen and I'm like, “Whew!” People cannot pretend like whiteness is not a privilege and proximity to whiteness is not a privilege. Because this video shows the police aggressively trying to bypass, like will not touch these people with white privilege, trying to get to this man vigorously, aggressively. So what I did was I took the video, I slowed it down, I added commentary to it, breaking down every moment that's happening. I added diagrams, I'm showing arrows of police in the background pulling their baton out, I really break it down. And I offered the language of accomplice over ally, because an ally can be across the water at home safe, right? You know, we have allies in Europe. They're not on this soil. They are not impacted firsthand by that. That doesn't make them not worthy and necessary and essential to this work, but they are allies and they’re gonna be okay at the end of the day. An accomplice, however, has some skin in the game. An accomplice is, they're strategizing with you. An accomplice is ready to do that work with you and ready to put something on the line. What white people have in this moment, and people with white privilege and proximity to whiteness in that privilege, have in this moment is a certain cloak of safety. Now, clearly, police brutality can and does impact so many of us, not just Black people. But disproportionately it impacts Black and brown people, disproportionately it impacts based on class and location, and disproportionately white people have had the privilege of not experiencing the type of aggression and murder that Black and brown people and poor people have experienced at the hands of the police and at the hands of police violence. And I have seen it. The reason why that video has been going viral again recently is because white people who are considering themselves allies and/or intending to take on the language of accomplices are like, “Wow, here's a perfect example of organized protesting and centering this Black person's message and using our whiteness as a shield to protect him.” We've seen that in these recent protests. White people using their whiteness as a shield in the front line to protect the Black activists. And so I'm also understanding as someone who is... I have a master's degree in social change, and so I've done a lot of organizing work in the past and studied movement making and so I understand that everybody has a different role to play in this moment. My role when I was a little girl used to be, I would be in the front line marching everywhere, wherever we were going, I'm ready for it. I'm there for it. Now my role might look different, particularly as an artist and an educator. I take on a different role. But everybody has a role. And so for white people intending to really be allies and or consider entering into an

actual accomplice position, that is essential then to understand that you're going to have to put some skin in the game, right? You're gonna have to put something on the line. That doesn't just have to look like your body being on the line. Because I understand that that could be very ablest to assume that all white people could be out there putting their bodies on the line. What else do you have? You need to be willing to put something in the game. Now when it comes to, in this moment, actually being allies and/or entering into and putting some skin in the game as an accomplice, as it pertains to Black people's mental health in this moment, I think the most simple thing that I'll say, and I'll say one other thing, but I think the most simple thing that I can say is, in this moment, stop yourself from adding to Black people's trauma. Stop yourself. Get out of my DMS telling me how sorry you are about this experience, that I have been experiencing for the whole 37 years of my life on this planet. Your revelation today is triggering. I suffer from post-traumatic stress just as a result of being a Black person in America. So if you slide into my DMs asking me to tell you, trying to apologize to me for something that I'm mind blown you didn't know was happening last week, because I was talking about it last week, too. That's triggering. So that is the simplest thing white people can do as it pertains to our mental health in this moment, to not continue to contribute in overt ways. You're going to contribute in ways that would be considered microaggressions because it's a part of white culture. White culture aggresses against marginalized identities. Whiteness gives that privilege. Again, it's just an aggression. So you're going to get that wrong. But the the outward, that kind of stuff. Just be quiet. There's so much healing in silence. Just be quiet. Just listen. Just take this moment to listen instead of always… Because you end up centering yourself when you say, "But how are you really?" Right? That really means, "Now perform your pain for me." I don't want to. I don't talk about this. I was talking about this last week, and you wasn't listening. I don't want to talk about it this week. I don't want to. Just listen. Just be quiet. Just take that moment.

The other thing as far as actual skin in the game on the next level, that to me looks like, whatever privilege you have, if that is resources, if that is money, if that is access, if that is a platform, if that is using your voice, using your voice to amplify the voices of people of color who are doing this work, using your voice to amplify and lift your platform. We saw recently a group of well-known white women participated in this campaign called Share the Mic Now, where they gave their platform with millions of followers to the, to lift the voices of Black women who don't necessarily have as many followers as them. That may seem small, but that's major. Because if you have 5 million followers and you are a white woman with privilege who can just post avocado toast every other day on your timeline and then there is a Black woman who has maybe 40,000 followers and she's doing this work every day, right? Listen to even the way that I described that. You have privilege, you have 5 million followers, you just be posting some avocado toast and your dog named Scruffy. Meanwhile, this Black woman over here every day, she can't even use social media to just post her lavender today or her beautiful plants, right? She can't even do that because, in the midst of posting her lavender and her beautiful plants, in the caption she's over here breaking down critical race theory. So sharing that platform, it's like, "Okay, guys. We're gonna talk about avocado toast today, but instead of just talking about avocado toast, EbonyJanice is here to tell you about this amazing avocado toast that she made today. Which was a privilege because she also lives in a food desert. Let's

talk about that." So there is a way to actually lift the voices of Black people who are doing this work and to continue to support and to honor that work. I think that those feel like two very simple things to me, but they feel like two very major things to me. To use your privilege, the privilege of your body, like the cloak of your body to ensure that Black people are safe in this moment, and to also use your privilege and your access and your platform. Even if you have a platform of 20, that's still a platform of 20 people to lift the voices and to center the voices of Black people and people of color who are doing this work around mental health and around justice making working and realities. And that doesn't have to center you at all by saying, "Look at me, I'm so great. I'm giving this platform to a Black person. Or I'm centering a Black person in this moment." That literally could just look like you saying, "I'm going to be out the way for a second. Here are some sources that you, not just follow, don't just go collect a whole bunch of Black people to follow, but here are some sources that you can really begin to support and learn from. And be quiet when you show up in that space and keep them safe when you show up in that space." So it's that kind of language. I think that those are the things that… those are some very tangible and some very easeful, maybe not easy but easeful, things that you can do to, at the very least, begin to protect Black bodies and protect Black mental health in this moment.

CHAD: That's gonna be something I replay several times to make sure I really get my teeth into it. We're gonna get to just one more question, and then I'd love to give your work besides teaching a bit of a spotlight. I'd love for people to know where they can find you besides his podcast. But before we get there, in light of everything that we've said up until this point, where do you currently see hope and in the conversation with the Black experience and mental health?

EBONYJANICE: I see hope in... You talked about our mutual friend, Joél Leon, Joél Daniels. Just thinking about the fact that Joél is this Black man doing this beautiful work of transparency and vulnerability and storytelling, and is always including that transparency and vulnerability in his work as a storyteller… Seeing him and his platform grow, seeing his work grow and seeing his access and his reach grow, that feels very hopeful to me. Especially because that is a Black man. And I say that especially, I put that emphasis because all of us are suffering, but I just genuinely feel like Black men having space to be more vulnerable, because toxic masculinity is a thing. Toxic masculinity will talk men in general, but particularly Black men out of saying, "I am suffering." And so I love the vulnerability that he speaks to and from because I think that it just makes me feel very hopeful about more Black men being able to deal with their own mental health issues, which is impacting toxic masculinity, impacting hegemony, impacting the story that we hear most dominantly overall in a patriarchal society. I feel hopeful about that.

I also feel hopeful about… I'll tell you this. So, I call myself a womanist. I call myself a hip-hop womanist. And I feel like we're really in maybe a fourth wave of womanism. As a socio-political and spiritual religious practice, I believe we're in like a fourth wave of womanism. And what that wave of womanism looks like to me is dreams as resistance work. It is justice work. That

Black women and women of color having access to dreaming as their resistance work is some fourth wave justice conversation. Then there is Tricia Hersey-Patrick of The Nap Ministry. Her justice work is around breaking down capitalism and critical race and teaching from this critical race theoretical perspective, and it centers taking a nap as resistance. Which is just like–I love it. So she's saying that taking naps is like, “F capitalism. We shouldn't be working this hard. We should take a break.” So we got dreaming. We got naps. Then we have Shelah Marie of Curvy, Curly, Conscious, who's doing work that’s centering Black women playing. And she does a lot of work around mental health, talks very vulnerably very often about her mental health journey, her meditation journey, all the things. Therapy, counseling, even within her marriage, all the things. So we got dreams, we got napping, we got playing. And then we have Thea Monyeé of MarleyAyo. Thea Monyeé is centering pleasure. She can bring pleasure into any conversation. Any conversation. I'm just blown away. Like, we could be talking about pineapples and Thea will find a way to be like, “Well, yeah, this is a pleasure issue.” And I'm like, “How do we get here? But I want to be here.” So you got dreaming, you got rest, you got play and pleasure. And this is our justice work. The things that I just listed is our justice work. That feels like a whole other wave of understanding ourselves inside of a socio-political, spiritual religious moment, especially as it pertains to our mental health because our mental health is at the forefront of every single one of those movements. We will be well and free when we can dream. We will be well and free when we can take a nap. We will be well and free when we can play. We will be well and free when our pleasure is centered and prioritized. And so I feel hopeful about that, because I've identified that as a new wave of our womanist work, as a new wave of our spiritual religious framing and thinking, and as a new wave of the way that we're creating, especially as a scholar, the way that we're creating theory. That my theory is centering is centering our wellness. I don't want to get free, and then we start talking about, “Now can we get free therapy?” I want Black people to have access to free therapy today. I want Black people to be able to dream and imagine that. I want white people, and people with white privilege, to really expand and explore their imagination and their dreaming. Because the fantastic hegemonic imagination, hegemony, white cis maleness created this version, this world that we're living in right now. That's hegemony. That’s andro-centric, that’s white androcentric thinking created this moment that we're in right now. So even white people need to be dreaming more. But a new dream. You're responsible for a new dream. And what you imagine for Black people and people of color and people in marginalized identities in this moment, it's going to shape the future. It's going to help shape it. So dreaming is my justice work, but my dreams are not for my great grandchildren. My dreams are for right now. I want to be free today. I want access to better health care today. I want access to mental health today. I want that now. I can't wait. We have waited for too long. For too long.

And I would close that little sermon by saying there's this poem by my favorite poet, Amir Sulaiman. He has this poem called “We must win” and at the end of it, he's talking to Black people, and he says, “We have died for everything. We have died for everyone. We have died for nothing. A draw is a win for losers, we must win.” That's the moment that we're in right now, particularly as it pertains to Black people's wellness, our holistic wellness, and in the context of this conversation, our mental health. We can't just be okay. We got to win. And to

me, people considering themselves allies need Black people to win right now. You aren't even well right now, because Black people aren't winning. We have to win. And so our winning can't just be we, get to the end of this and finally, we're free. But what does freedom look like then? So we need to begin to imagine that freedom now, today. And now, today that freedom looks like freedom in my mind, freedom in my spirit, freedom in my body, freedom in all the ways right? That is how we win. So I feel hopeful about this wave of womanism, particularly. I feel hopeful about Black men talking about mental health in a very vulnerable way, because we have to deal with hegemonic imagination, we have to deal with male-centered imagination that creates a toxic environment for all of us, for the globe. And also especially for Black families and black communities, it contributes to that. But mostly I feel like we will win, we must win, and that will happen by us centering the voices of particularly Black women, from my perspective, centering the voices of Black women who are talking about dreaming, resting, play, and pleasure.

CHAD: Having this wake up call to get back to dreaming is so, so important. Thank you so much for expanding on that. EbonyJanice, I have so, so valued this time and I revel in that I've been able to experience this very selfishly just with one-on-one conversation, but I'm feeling a little bit generous. So where can everyone else find you to continue these conversations?

EBONYJANICE: Yeah. I am @ebonyjanice on Instagram and Twitter. I'm always preaching, teaching, and reaching from those spaces. That also is my website ebonyjanice.com. And right now we are… I speak in "we's" because I'm usually talking about me. But right now we are launching a six month intensive for Black women, women of color to be able to dream and to do deep healing work. So there's a session on intergenerational healing. There's a session on ritual creation, daily ritual creation, for our wellness. There's a session on using our spirituality and our religion, because I understand us to be very spiritual people, using that as a tool for creating a more just and equitable society for ourselves and for our children. There's a session on pleasure. There's a session on shifting our successful money blueprint. And then there's a session, a creative session on journaling ourselves into liberation, which really centers our thoughts, centers our thinking, gives us a space to really begin to journal more deeply and more reflectively, and prioritize our thoughts and our thinking as a part of our wellness journey, as a part of our healing journey. And so we have been doing a campaign to raise funds for Dream Yourself Free to make it entirely free for Black women because I didn't want to create another place of resistance for them, having to figure out how to be able to afford it, as we're paying for facilitators. Brilliant, incredible, the roster of facilitators, it's just actually a little ridiculous and incredible. So have been doing this fundraising campaign, and we've raised $90,000 as of yesterday. The goal was 20k in 30 days, and that we raised $90,000 in 30 days. Because what happened was, somebody asked the question, actually a woman of color, with some means reached out to me and said, "How can how many are you reaching, and how can we double this?" And actually started the conversation by saying, "You had me at dreams as resistance work. So how can we double this work?" And gave us $50,000 in one conversation. So that put us well over our initial goal. But we're continuing the fundraising efforts so you can find that information on my website. Just go to the Dream Yourself Free link when you go to

ebonyjanice.com, just look in the menu and there's the Dream Yourself Free option. When you go to that Dream Yourself Free link, there are several different options and ways to support women of color in having access to this work. So we're continuing our fundraising efforts. Because now that we have solidified our ability to take care of the first cohort of women doing this healing work and this dreaming work, now we are imagining what the second iteration of this will look like in the fall, and how we take this work even deeper and even even further. So this work is really forming. I'm just so thrilled at being in integrity with how I wanted to support Black women and women of color in this way, and I'm so thrilled and excited and honored about the way that people have shown up to say, “Oh no, there is something here. There is something too ensuring that we contribute and we participate and we lift this work.” And in fact, you had asked me about how other people could contribute to the mental health. And I kind of said this, but I just want to say another very easy way to contribute to the mental health of Black people, in this moment, is to share Black joy and pleasure and playing and dreaming, as much as, if not more than, you share Black trauma. Because so often we're in this moment of like, “Oh, look at this terrible thing that's happening.” And then we won't see you as so-called allies, we won't see you again talking about Black issues until there's another Black lynching. And that's not what we need. We need Black joy to be lifted and centered and prioritized. So maybe if you see it more often and if you contribute to it more often by just lifting that, that would be a thing. So I said all those words to say that you can donate to the work of dreaming, to the work of Black women dreaming and experiencing ease as a part of their justice and resistance work. You can donate to that work at my website on the Dream Yourself Free tab.

CHAD: Awesome. Do you care to say anything about Black Girl Mixtape?

EBONYJANICE: I launched Black Girl Mixtape several years ago because I do work that centers Black women, of course, women of color, but Black women are being centered, are intellectual authority. Because too often there have been conversations being had very often about Blackness, very often about womanists, and even often about Black womanists, and there would be no Black woman invited into that conversation to speak from a place of authority. And so I created Black Girl Mixtape to be a safe think space for Black women’s intellectual authority to be centered. That shows up as a podcast, that shows up as a lecture series, similar to a TED Talk, but it shows up as a lecture series. But starting in the fall, supposedly, we're launching an invite-only table read for Black creatives, Black women creatives, to do healing work. And so through our art, through our scholarship. Doing table reads of papers, table reads of plays, doing table reads of some of the intellectual contribution that we've been making to our individual fields. It's going to be across the Diaspora, so it's going to be Black women across the Diaspora. And filming those discussions and those conversations to lend to just a more growing narrative of what a collective Black woman, Black girlhood resistance work looks like, especially as it centers Black intellect in that discussion.

CHAD: Well, EbonyJanice, thank you so much for your time. Thank you for your insight, your stories, sharing your life with us. And from the bottom of our heart, seriously, thank you. We

can't wait to continue this journey of hope, this journey of resistance, this journey of getting there together. Wherever we go, we are committed to getting there together.

EBONYJANICE: Thank you so much for having me. I'm so proud of the work that y'all are doing. So if I can make any connections, I would love to make those connections because I think that the work you're doing is so important, and I just want to see it grow and impact even more and more and more people. So thank you for doing this work.

[music playing]

LINDSAY: We hope this episode has been a reminder that your story is important, you matter, and you're not alone.

If you're struggling right now, know that it is okay to reach out and that there are people who want to help. Part of our mission is to connect people to the help they need and deserve. You can find local mental health resources on our website twloha.com. That's T-W-L-O-H-A.com. And Click FIND HELP at the top of the page.

Or, if you need to talk to someone right now, you can always text our friends at Crisis Text Line.
Simply text the word TWLOHA—that's T W L O H A—to 741741. And you'll be connected to a crisis counselor. It's free, confidential, and available 24/7.

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A big thank you to our friends at Copeland for the original music on this episode. The To Write Love on Her Arms podcast is produced by Lindsay Kolsch, with editorial support by Rebecca Ebert. Music assistance was provided by James Likeness and Ben Tichenor.

I'm Lindsay Kolsch, thank you so much for listening.

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