

Systems of Privilege: A Conversation with Dr. Neal Lester

SUWANEE, GEORGIA, UNITED STATES, July 27, 2020 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Recently on the podcast [Polititeen](#), hosts Varoon Kodithala and Damian Galvan interviewed the celebrated and influential scholar Dr. Neal Lester, Foundation Professor of English and Founding Director of Project Humanities at Arizona State University.

Dr. Lester's work as a public scholar includes extensive writing in the field of African American Studies, as well as discussions of Disney representations of female characters, black masculinity, folklore, children's literature, and the gender and race politics around African Americans and hair.

One of his notable contributions is his academic courses on the N-word, which have spurred uncomfortable but necessary conversations among hundreds of students who have passed through his classroom.

On this episode of Polititeen, Dr. Lester discussed the importance of those uncomfortable conversations if we're going to create real change and equity for those who are marginalized.

First, the hosts and Dr. Lester discussed discrimination and privilege in the world of academia. "The academy has been complicit in creating these hierarchies of value, these hierarchies of what constitutes research, what constitutes excellence—all these things have been informed by the cultural and political bias against those who have been minoritized," Dr. Lester says. "And we can also throw women into that—when we start looking at things intersectionally, we know that women of color are not represented the way white women are. Who's the equivalent of Jane Austen? We can ask any number of things."

Dr. Lester also uses popular culture to highlight this bias against minority groups. One example he offered is Josephine Baker. "Before Marilyn and Madonna there was Josephine Baker," he says. It's telling that popular culture reveres Marilyn Monroe and Madonna, despite the fact that they weren't doing much of anything terribly different from those who came before them, but Baker, a groundbreaking African American performer, is rarely placed on the same level as these white performers.

Above all, the focus of the conversation was on how we must continue to learn, discover, and evolve. As Dr. Lester says, we're still learning things about history. "I think of myself as a lifelong

learner. This isn't stuff I knew when I started out ... I'm learning, for example, about how many Disney songs are actually minstrel songs. Once you know that, you can't unknow it. The important thing, I think, is are we doing it now, and are we open to changing it?"

Finally, the hosts asked Dr. Lester how we can make people actually want to have those uncomfortable conversations and to learn what they don't know. As he said, that's a tough thing to do, because people inherently dislike being uncomfortable. Naturally, those are the conversations people tend to avoid.

But, with the pandemic, a democracy in crisis, and the widespread protests against police brutality, we are in a moment, he says—a moment in which we have the chance to increase our empathy. "It doesn't have to be you [who's suffering], but you have to care enough about humanity, which is what these oppressions deny. So many things that feed into this system of privilege have a certain serviceability. It services certain people. And those who benefit from these systems--now and generationally--are not likely to relinquish these unearned advantages easily."

Listen to the [entire interview here](#).

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