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Announcer: This is the Inclusion Interchange, a podcast from the University of Pittsburgh's office for equity, diversity and inclusion. And here's the host of the Inclusion Interchange, Dr. Clyde Wilson Pickett.

Clyde Wilson Pickett:

Welcome to the Inclusion Interchange. I'm your host, Clyde Wilson Pickett, and I serve as Vice Chancellor for Equity, Diversity, and inclusion at the University of Pittsburgh. On the Inclusion Interchange, we take the opportunity to talk to individuals from across the University and in our community who are having a positive impact on the fields of equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility.

The annual diversity forum is a signature event at the University of Pittsburgh. This year's event is January 23rd and 24th, and is part of MLK Social Justice Week. The theme of this year's conference is amplifying our voices through active listening and constructive dialogue. We'll be exploring what active listening and constructive dialogue look like at a university campus at a time of extreme social media and political polarization. Today I'm pleased to welcome to our microphone Feminista Jones, who will be our closing speaker this year. She's an award-winning writer and the author of the critically acclaimed book, *Reclaiming Our Space, How Black Feminists Are Changing the World From the Tweets to the Street*, she has been a community activist and was a social worker. Her work centers around gender equity, queer identity, racial, cultural identity, intersectionality, mental health and social work. So good to be with you. Welcome to the Inclusion interchange. We're excited to have you, but more importantly, excited about your time with us at our conference. If you would, as you think about this theme of amplifying voices through active listening and constructive dialogue, what comes to mind? What comes to mind for you in terms of thinking about the ways in which we can use those constructs to make change?

Feminista Jones:

Well, the first thing I think about is especially now, the concerted efforts to silence those voices and what the implications of that are. So we're dealing with a time where people who are incredibly brilliant, successful, accomplished, people are being accused of only being where they are because of some identity, whether it's their race, their gender, sexual orientation and things like that. And I think that when you start to see that happening, you start getting this message that diversity is not actually something that people want or maybe that they don't understand what diversity is. When we talk about diversity, when I think about diversity, I think about diversity of thought. I think about diversity of experience. I think of people coming together who have different ideas about things, and unfortunately, there are those who actually don't want people who have different opinions and thoughts because it may challenge their status quo, it may challenge what they believe is right. And so when you open the door for diversity of thought, you're opening the door for significant change. And I think that there are a lot of people that are afraid of that. And so when we make these efforts to amplify those diverse voices, basically we are challenging much broader systems that have been in place for so long, and I think that that terrifies a lot of people, but that doesn't mean that we should stop. We should keep going, and that's what we need to be doing.

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Clyde Wilson Pickett:

I appreciate you offering that. I think you bring to mind something that's critical for us to think about in an era where there is effort to silence and to have a chilling effect. I think now more than effort, it's critical for us to think about how we rally individuals to be a part of not only the fight, but for solutions and active challenge to systems.

Feminista Jones:

No, I was just thinking we have to make sure that we are creating the space and the conditions where people can do that kind of work, and we have to make sure that we're supporting those who are brave enough to be on those front lines because of the risks, because of the dangers that come with that. We have to make sure that we are offering as much support as possible to those who need it.

Clyde Wilson Pickett:

I guess my question to you as a follow-up is where are those front lines now? I think there was a time we actively thought about the front lines of change being at colleges and universities and that being a space where especially student activism was critical in terms of moving and progressing change. I think that that is still the case, but I think obviously social media is now a place where some of that is present. I'm curious about your thoughts on those subjects.

Feminista Jones:

Yeah, that's where I cut my teeth as a student activist in undergrad, and I graduated over 20 years ago, and I think that I was following a blueprint that had been set by people from 20, 30, 40 years before me and 30, 40 years before them. When we think about the disciplines like black studies and women's studies and queer studies, all those things came out of protest, right? They came out of student activism and students saying, we demand better representation in the education that we're receiving. So student activism has a long storied and respected tradition, and that's the tradition that I come out of. And so I don't think that that's ever going to go anywhere. We saw it around 2013, 2014 when Trayvon Martin was killed and Mike Brown was killed in the Ferguson uprising. We saw that happening, the solidarity on campuses then.

Then 2020, we saw it again when George Floyd and Breonna Taylor were killed. We see these swells of student activism, so that's not going to go away. As long as there are things happening in our society that upset people and don't sit well with people, we're going to continue to have that. But I also think that social media has become a frontline for activism, and that is simply because activism takes place on all fronts. It used to be letter writing campaigns and phone banks and things like that. We will have direct actions and we always have those things. But what social media has done is broaden people's audiences and it's broadened their reach, and it's allowed people to connect across demographic lines, geographic lines to find commonality in our efforts to build coalition and to fight for change and things like that.

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Clyde Wilson Pickett:

As we think about where we are, and specifically in terms of activism and confronting some of the things that are facing our society in general, and particularly these systems in place, there's been much made about cancel culture. I'm curious to get your thoughts in terms of some of the ways in which cancel culture has been corrupted to influence the misperceptions about diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Feminista Jones:

Yes. I don't really know what cancel culture is. I have to be honest. I think that when people talk about it, they talk about it in so many different ways. I don't think there's a culture of canceling anyone because I don't think that anyone ever gets truly canceled. I think the people who are so-called canceled the most are the most marginalized people who don't have the support systems to keep them thriving. If you look at Hollywood or you look at the entertainment business and people who do things that folks don't like, who is more likely to get a pass? And so we have to look at those kinds of things. But in terms of people being like, oh, so-and-so is canceled. I think the attention span is so short these days that people forget last year that this person was accused of sexual assault, or six months ago this person was caught using racial slurs.

I think people, they have shorter memories. So I don't know how prominent cancel culture is. I'm not really sure what it is, but I do know that people make accusations of it. We see that a lot in some of the more conservative spaces where they swear that they're being canceled, yet they have half a million followers, or they are showing up on every podcast and every news broadcast. And I'm like, well, if you were canceled, nobody would be bringing you into these spaces to talk. So those kinds of threats. So I'm being suppressed. I'm like, I actually know what it's like to be suppressed and to be shadow banned and to have people try to remove me from things speaking my truths. But I think it's something that people have kind of made up in their head a bit because I haven't seen anybody get canceled in a way that actually resonates and has had a long-term effect. I mean, somebody who shall go nameless just released another Netflix special, and it's like how many times are they going to give him \$20 million to tell the same bigoted jokes? So I don't know if it's real.

Clyde Wilson Pickett:

I appreciate you offering that. I think it's a unique perspective to think about in terms of something that is espoused, but what the true impact of that is, and specifically who's being impacted. I think you relay something that is important for us to think about. A number of things that are shared and the impact most prominently falls on those populations that are typically historically underrepresented, underserved, and far too often are people of color. And we don't talk about that enough. And there is limited discussion on the impact on those communities. I'm interested in your thoughts in some of the ways in which we can illuminate the ways in which different communities have been impacted by that. And as we're thinking about ways to have candid dialogue and discourse, how we can amplify those voices because those are the voices I think we need to hear from most appropriately.

Feminista Jones:

When I think about this, I mean, I think about it even now on a particular platform that I'm on where I have really been talking about a lot of these issues lately, and I look at the replies that I get, and they're just so filled with antagonism and vitriol that sometimes I'm just like, why even bother? Why I didn't bother saying anything? And that's the exact tactic. That's what they're doing. It's like, let's inundate these people who have these diverse voices and these diverse ideas who are challenging the status quo. Let's make these environments so horrible for them, so stressful for them, so unpleasant that they'll just stop talking. And then you have the people who will say, well, we need you. We need your voice. And I'm like, all right, well, how are you supporting me though? Are you subscribed to my blog? Do you come to my speaking engagements? Do you pay for the classes that I offer? Do you do any of these things to materially support me other than just a kind word? Because while that's cool, that doesn't protect me from being doxxed. That doesn't protect me from dealing with racist and sexist slurs every day. That doesn't protect my mental health. Anybody want to cover my therapy? It's not cheap.

So if you're not willing to offer those kinds of supports, it's really difficult to hear people say, oh, well, don't go anywhere. We need you. We need you. It's like, all right, well, if you need me, if I'm taking one for the team, if I'm willing to go on the frontline and put myself and my family at risk for trying to speak truth to power, then I need you all to rally around and to support me and others that are willing to do that since you are not right.

And that's kind of where I think some people fall into spaces of shame or maybe even embarrassment because they realize that they are not willing to go that far. They are not willing to cross these lines. They're not willing to put themselves out there. And that's part of why when we try to make progress, we don't get as far as we can because we don't have enough people that are willing to risk it all. And that kind of puts me in a difficult position. It's like I have to keep a roof over my head. I have to feed my family. I have to do these things. And here I am still, I mean, we're talking 25 years of activism that I've been at it. And if I say something like, I'm tired, I'm inundated with people telling me, oh, well you can't give up. You can't give up. And I'm like, well, how long do I keep going? It can be a lonely journey sometimes, and I would love to see more material support, more emotional support, more just anything for people that are willing to go out there and fight that good fight. And if anybody wants to know what can we do? It's like don't leave us out there hanging by ourselves, standing by ourselves. It's kind of show up and be there for us.

Clyde Wilson Pickett:

I think one of the ways we've focused attention on our conference is to think about how we create spaces and opportunities to further develop the next generation of leaders, the next generation of individuals who will rally, who will amplify efforts and will be a part of those conversations. As you look at that, similar to you, I've always believed that there's a strong place for activism and leadership development at colleges and universities as well as places to have difficult conversations and places where we can agree to disagree, that's completely fine, but creating space for that and training the next generation of leaders is a big part of this conversation in the ways in which I think conferences like ours can prepare and create space for change. I'm curious as you look at

that and something that you bring to mind I think is important for me, us thinking about how we rally, how we create opportunities for what I would call critical coalition building.

As you share the sentiments of your experience, quite often there are those individuals who are the most vocal, who are always upfront sacrificing, and then there are people in the back who will in private companies say that they are committed to certain issues. But when it comes time for public declaration or when it's time to make sacrifices that are tangible, quite often some of those people won't step up. I think critical coalition-building, and these are just my thoughts, can help provide cover for those individuals who aren't as comfortable stepping up. I think that takes the form of different organizations. I'm interested in your thoughts in terms of what critical coalition-building might look like so that we can build the confidence and engender a new kind of activism to get others to come to the forefront.

Feminista Jones:

Well, I think one of the issues that we have is sometimes we wait for major events to happen before we are motivated to do things. So something like the way George Floyd was killed or the way that Trayvon Martin was killed, things like that, those kind of really difficult touchpoint. We wait for those things to happen and then we have a swell of energy, we get a swell of action, and then it kind of all fades after a while and people kind of go back to what they were doing. And it's like we have to realize that when you talk about these coalitions, it's like that's because we need to build things that are sustainable and ongoing and proactive. We spend a lot of time being reactive and waiting for the next mass shooting or the next attack on a trans person. We wait for those things to happen when really our work needs to be in preventing those things and making sure we're proactive about being engaged.

So those things don't happen. And that's where the coalition building comes from. And people have to recognize we all have different strengths. We all have different things that we can do. Not everyone is as charismatic and charming a public speaker. Not everybody is the best writer. Not everybody has money, not everybody has a whole lot of time. But I think as individuals, you can think, well, what can I contribute? I may not be someone comfortable speaking in front of a crowd. Maybe my best work is done on a phone, so maybe I'm comfortable calling my local official to talk to them about and remind them that they work for us and that they should be advocating. Or maybe I am a really good writer and I want to cover an event that's happened, and I want to be able to tell someone's story. A mother lost her son.

Let's not forget that maybe I can interview her and get her story out, or maybe I'm not able to do any of that, but I actually have money and maybe I can donate my money to these mutual aid funds or these bail funds or whatever is out there. I can actually give my money. And I think that it takes all of those kinds of actions coming together to work towards sustainable and long-term permanent change. But if we keep functioning as people who only come together when we're reacting to some major event, we're always going to trip over ourselves or we're always going to face that loss of energy. And when you think about people emerging as leaders and things like that, I'm kind of from the Ella Baker School where I feel like we all have a role and we need to stop deifying these leaders and stop putting people on pedestals because everyone's human being.

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And if we try to rally behind someone, what happens when they're no longer there? Right? Then what happens to the movement? So I think we need to take more ownership of this work individual, of this work. We need to be more open to creative ways that we can contribute and ways that you don't have to be the person that's holding the sign, the protest. There's people that are really good at that, but maybe you're the person who helped make the sign. Maybe you're the person who shared about the event on social media. We have to think about that. And I think that's where the coalition building happens, because people feel like they're a part of something. And when you feel like you're a part of something and you start seeing that change, you start feeling empowered.

Clyde Wilson Pickett:

All right. You're listening to the Inclusion Interchange. I'm your host, Clyde Wilson Pickett. We're talking with Feminista Jones, who will be our closing speaker at Pitch 2024 Diversity Forum, which is set to be January 23rd and 24th. And you can find out more about the conference at diversity.pitt.edu. We'll be back in just a moment.

Announcer: If you have a question or comment, we hope you'll write to us. Our email address is diversity@pitt.edu.

Clyde Wilson Pickett:

We're back for a few more minutes with Feminista Jones, who will be speaking at this year's 2024 diversity forum here at the University of Pittsburgh. One of the things I'm most excited to talk with you about is the place in which feminist theory can be elevated in terms of having a place and a presence in conferences like ours, as well as a broader platform in general. I'm someone who was raised by self-proclaimed feminist, so of course I was excited to have the opportunity to talk to you. So I'm interested in your thoughts there. Quite often, I think we don't elevate feminist theory to the same level that we should in different places. So I welcome your thoughts there.

Feminista Jones:

Well, one of the first things we can do is ask people who are talking about things like that is to name three feminist theories. That's not a part of conversation. You might get someone who knows what intersectionality is, right? Because that's been popular in our discourse. But it's like, all right, what feminist theories do you know? And so I think that that kind of gets us locked in these academic spaces where we know the average person does not have access to so, so we have to do something different. We have to go from theory to practice, those of us that can access feminist theory and can distill it a bit. We have to bring that you have to meet people where they are. And so I think about amplifying feminist work and feminist actions. I think that we have so much knowledge that has come out of some really brilliant, brilliant, brilliant scholars and theorists over time.

But I think sometimes it gets lost in the memification of social justice. And I had somebody say, "okay, boomer," one time when I was talking about this, and I'm like, wait, I'm still Gen X, what are you talking about? But the point that I was making was that, yes, we want to fight for liberation. We have liberation in mind, we talk about decolonization and all these things like that. And I'm like, these really big words, do you

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know what any of this actually means? And so I did a test and I was asking my followers, can you name three feminist theories? And people couldn't. I asked them, can you name one theory by bell hooks, for example? You love bell hooks, and you talk about bell hooks all the time, but what were her actual theories? What was she theorizing about? What was she imagining for us?

What did the future a feminist future look like? And so I encourage people to dig into the work and actually do the reading. And that my friend is where we struggle. We are struggling because we have a crisis of illiteracy in this country. We know this. We know that people are coming into higher education, not reading at the grade levels that they need to be able to. And so there's an intimidation factor. If I say, "here, go read this Angela Davis book" or "go read this book by Patricia Hill Collins" or "read this essay by Anna Julia Cooper," that's nice. But we're dealing with folks who are looking at it, saying, "This is heavy. This has a lot of words that I don't know. I don't exactly understand what this is saying. Can you make it easier for me?"

So maybe we have to adjust. And so we have to make videos now. We have to talk about it in simpler terms. And I think that's one of the ways that we can amplify feminist theories and voices because just telling people to go read it is not necessarily, it's not really working. I wrote my last book in the voice, and the tone, and using the words that I did, for a reason. I wanted to make it as accessible as possible. I wanted people who had never been to college to be able to read it. I want people that barely finished high school to be able to read it and to get some understanding. And I think in some ways, we have to do better with that. We have to stop preaching to the academic choir and remember that there are people in these streets that need this knowledge, they need this liberation. So it's kind of on us to make sure that we're translating it well. I hope that answered your question.

Clyde Wilson Pickett:

Yeah, absolutely. I appreciate it. I think you highlighted a couple of things that make me think. One, just in terms of the purpose of a conference is to bring and elevate voices in more importantly, to be accessible to all. And so we're an open conference, and so the opportunity to bring the message from an academic institution to the people as part of the conversation. But as you think about true social justice, that's the message that we're trying to advance in general. Obviously confronting patriarchy is a part of the conversation and one of the core tenets of the theory to move forward. But understanding that oppression or oppression in all forms is something that we have to actively confront. And to think about the ways in which we bring knowledge to the people is a part of the conversation could pontificate on that all day.

Feminista Jones:

I'm sure. No, but I think that you make a really, that's really the crux of it. So the fact that the university opens it to the public, there's a lot of places that don't do that. They only host it for their students. And then you already know that the students who come, unless it's required of them, these are the people that are opting into it. So they want this kind of thing. So again, it's kind of preaching to the choir. But when universities host these kinds of things and make it open to the public, yes, then we are increasing accessibility when they bring in folks like myself. Not to brag, but I happen to think that

my speeches and my talks are very accessible to people. I help them understand some complex topics and things like that in language that they can understand. But again, that's because I'm also from the streets.

I'm from these places. I have experienced things that most of my colleagues have not, I do not come from a privileged background. I am going to be the first PhD in my entire family on both sides, and I'm about to be 45 years old. So I'm coming from a different perspective that helps me connect. And I think what's happening with this kind of new wave of feminism is that we're starting to appreciate that there are voices emerging and ideas kind of coming into this public sphere that didn't originate in academic institutions. And whether or not we giving them credit, whether we or not, whether or not we are validating them, that's where I think some of the, we get stuck. It's like you think that this person who is writing this stuff on social media isn't valid because they haven't published an X, Y, Z journal. Well, that's not right. That's not fair. This person is really saying something brilliant here. So how do we bridge that? How do we make that connect? And that's been at the core of my work, people were shocked. They were like, why are you going to get a PhD? And I'm like, because honestly, folks ain't trying to hear me if I don't have it. And that's the bottom line. And there's a little bit of resentment there, but we'll talk about that another time.

Clyde Wilson Pickett:

Well, no, I think you, it's very important us thinking about the ways in which we can make stronger connection between the academy and people. And I think that's been some of the pushback for higher education. I think one of the things that we have to proactively do, those of us who are in this space is are rid academia and higher education of this insular, elitist mentality. I think that has corrupted the perception of many, and we have to confront that activeness.

Feminista Jones:

Absolutely. I'm a poor girl from the Bronx, you know what I mean? I was not supposed to be here where I am now, but I am. But I need a thousand more poor girls from the Bronx to be able to have the same opportunities and have their voices be heard.

Clyde Wilson Pickett:

Absolutely. And so as a poor young person from Louisville, Kentucky, that's trying to make sure that we provide opportunities at the University of Pittsburgh and other institutions, we have to be mindful of who we open our doors to, who we're supporting to be a part of our institutions at all levels, and to be intentional about what it means to share knowledge, what it means to transform communities, and what it means to elevate voices. And so I appreciate that. And so my last question is this: If you could share with us one thing that you're excited to message to the people that will join at your lecture at our conference?

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Feminista Jones:

I have this fervent passion for disrupting the prevalent narratives about Dr. King, because I don't think that people really realize how radical this man was. And I always get excited when I talk about not just his legacy and brushing it over MLK day, but for real, for real. Let's look at his essay on Black Power. Let's talk about some of these things that he said that don't make it into the books, into the common conversations. And I love when I get to talk with people and bring some of his ideas into the 21st century and say, listen, this is still relevant. This is still empowering. It's still inspirational. Here's how this can apply with you. Here's what you can get from that. And I find that my passion for talking about Dr. King and talking about activism tends to inspire the audiences. And that's what I really look forward to. And I hope that people come with open minds and ready to learn and ready to engage. I'm, I'm very culturally African. I'm very call and response. So I hope that people are eager to engage and interact in those ways, and I'm really looking forward to that.

Clyde Wilson Pickett:

Well, thank you so much for your time. Of course. We're excited to be with you and look forward to our opportunity, and most importantly, the chance that the community has to share with you.

Feminista Jones:

Thank you for having me.

Clyde Wilson Pickett:

I'd like to thank my guest, Feminista Jones, who will be speaking at this year's diversity forum. The event will be held January 23rd and 24th, and is a part of MLK Social Justice Week here at the University of Pittsburgh. The theme for this year's event is amplifying our voices through active listening and constructive dialogue. And you can find out more by going to our website, diversity.pitt.edu. We will see you soon. Take care.

Announcer:

You've been listening to the Inclusion Interchange, a podcast from the University of Pittsburgh's office for equity, diversity, and inclusion. Technical support for this podcast is provided by the Center for Teaching and Learning. For more information about the Office for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, visit our website at diversity.pitt.edu or find us on social media at #PittDiversity. The inclusion interchange is produced by Jay Togyer for OEDI.

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