Veronica Chambers

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SPEAKERS

Omkari Williams, Veronica Chambers

Omkari Williams 00:20
Hello, and welcome to Stepping Into Truth, the podcast where we take on the issues of race, gender and social justice. I'm your host Omkari Williams, and I'm very glad you're here with me today. Hosting this podcast means that I am privileged to speak with people who are out in the world making a difference with their day jobs, their programs, their art, their activism, and I love doing this work. If you would like to support me in this, you can do so for as little as $3 a month by becoming a member of my Patreon community. You can go to patreon.com/omkariwilliams and sign up. There's also a link on my website omkariwilliams.com. And I would like to acknowledge that this podcast is made possible in part by support from the National Liberty Museum.

Omkari Williams 01:08
I have so been looking forward to this conversation. My guest today is Veronica Chambers. Veronica Chambers is an award winning author and the lead editor of Narrative Projects, a team dedicated to telling multi-platform stories at the New York Times. Based in London, her most recent book is Call and Response: The Story of Black Lives Matter. She has taught writing at several colleges and universities including Bowdoin in Maine, Bard College at Simon's Rock, Massachusetts, and the Stanford School of Earth, Energy and Environmental Sciences. Born in Panama and raised in Brooklyn, she writes often about her Afro Latina heritage. And it is my great pleasure to welcome Veronica to the podcast. Hi, Veronica, I am so pleased that you are here today. How are you?

Veronica Chambers 02:01
I'm good. Thank you so much for having me.

Omkari Williams 02:03
Oh, yeah.

Veronica Chambers 02:04
It took a minute but we worked it out.

Omkari Williams 02:05
We worked it out. And it was worth the minute that it took because this is going to be fun. So there are a ton of things I want to talk to you about. But let's start with the main thing, which is your latest book Call and Response: The Story of Black Lives Matter, which I really read as part history and part handbook for activists. And in your book, you traced the growth of Black Lives Matter, from the Facebook post that Alicia Garza did that went completely viral in the wake of the not guilty verdict for George Zimmerman in the trial for his killing of Trayvon Martin. And you take it from there to what it's become today, which is this massive global movement. And I'm really curious about what your impetus for writing the book, at this particular moment in time was?

Veronica Chambers 02:56
You know, this was a tricky book, because like you said, the book is really about the moment that we're still in. Last summer, I had a daughter who had just turned 13. And I think for me, I was really processing like so many people, this massive grief, as well as the inspiration of seeing people take to the streets. And I was having to do a lot of catch up. And I think one of the things that I really wanted her and young readers to understand is that last summer is part of a long continuum that goes back to reconstruction, that goes through lynching, that goes through the modern Civil Rights Movement, that goes through the modern, you know, black power movement. And to put that all in context, makes you see it really differently.

Veronica Chambers 03:50
I think it was not a question of Black Lives Matter or not. It's a question of systemic racism, the constant quest for equality and humanity, and all of the things that that meant and I really wanted to write about it. And also, I felt like the New York Times had done such a powerful job of capturing the images of the moment. You know, they say that journalism is the first draft of history. And I think that history depends a lot on who is doing the telling. So I wanted to capture some of what I saw, what my colleagues saw, as reporters and photographers, because as we've seen, now, it has shocked me, and I say this with all the compassion in the world, the ways that so many institutions and businesses and people have sort of moved on.

Omkari Williams 04:45
Yeah.

Veronica Chambers 04:46
Past the moment they were in last summer, and I get it. There's a lot going on for attention. But if you had told me, in some ways when I was writing this, I thought, well, we all get it now. It is the largest protest movement. In the history of our country, 26 million Americans were involved in some sort of Black Lives Matter protest. It is more than any protests ever in our nation's history. And yet a year later, it's a little like, for some people, black lives what?

Omkari Williams 05:18
Right. I have to say that, you know, as I listened to you say that, there's this part of me that's like, Yeah, well, of course, it was going to fade because it continuing, that energy continuing, is so dependent on

where you sit in our society, and you know how much skin you have in the game. And if you're in a position of privilege, it's much easier to walk away, after, you know, a few months, or whatever, than it is, if you are the person who was marginalized, or the person who is dealing with this every single day. And something that you referenced. And I was also thinking about when I was preparing for this conversation, was the arc of this struggle. And you know, it is a long arc. But one of the things that I found really fascinating in the book was the way you really connect Black Lives Matter to the civil rights movement of the 50s and the 60s. And I would love to hear what your experience of sort of drawing those lines and seeing how the people who came before really shaped the Black Lives Matter movement?

Veronica Chambers 06:35
Oh, absolutely. I mean, first of all, I just have to tell you, I love this conversation, because you clearly have like, you understand the book. But it's nice to also hear it reflected that so much of our intentions are, are being heard and seen. And so I want to thank you for that.

Omkari Williams 06:52
Oh, my pleasure. I loved the book.

Veronica Chambers 06:54
You know, you can't, you can't always control, can't always assume that people will know what your intentions are. And all of your questions tell me that you get our intentions very much. I think that for me, as someone who writes books, and as a journalist, you know, one of the main jobs is to connect the dots, right? To say that, not that I'm saying anything new or that hasn't been shown, but how do I, as an observer, connect the dots.

Veronica Chambers 06:58
So we talk about the Civil Rights Movement. And I think one of the things that I saw so clearly, and so did everybody else, but I felt like the Black Lives Matter movement took equally from the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power movement. And I think that, that is something and you know, I had my daughter turn 13 last month, I don't know if I mentioned that. And it was interesting, because she's like, I learn about Martin Luther King every year, I never learn about the Black Panthers. I never learn about Malcolm X, I never learned about Marcus Garvey. I never learned about any of those things. And, and she's a history buff. She's, like, passionate about it.

Veronica Chambers 08:04
So one of the things that I observed and that I really wanted to bring together in the book is, which is why we did the civil rights and black power timeline, is that I think that Black Lives Matter used the traditional protest techniques of the civil rights movement. But there's also the radical self imagination of the Black Power movement. It's saying that our humanity is not earned through us being the part of the talented 10th, with all respect. Our humanity is not earned by Black excellence. We are human, because we are human. And we are entitled to equality, because we are human. And if our pants are saggy, or you don't like our music, or hair's in a style that you don't like, none of that makes it so that you can break the laws of this country and treat us less than. That, as you know, comes from the Black Power Movement. It's saying that our humanity is earned because we are human. That's very different

than the politics of respectability, that, you know, necessarily, and I understand it was part of a moment was so much part of the civil rights movement. So I think it's very important to acknowledge both of those movements in the heritage of this movement that did so much in such a short time.

Omkari Williams 09:22
I think that that's such an important point because there is that tendency to look at the civil rights movement, and sort of put aside the Black Power Movement because we don't learn about that in school unless we actively seek to find that out. And the way that those two movements intersect is really significant. Because there is a problem when you are telling someone, well I will treat you as human if you are either extraordinary or if you conform to the ideas that I have for what you need to be as a human. I mean, we don't do that to other people. White people don't do that to other white people. And we need to understand that that tendency, that thought pattern is really destructive to the fundamental goal of equality and fundamental goal of justice and freedom for all people. And we need to catch ourselves, when we find ourselves sort of falling into that respectability trap. I think that's seriously important.

Veronica Chambers 10:31
And the fact is, is that we can understand historically, how, you know, I love the work of Martha Jones, a brilliant historian who wrote a book called Vanguard about voting rights. And one of the things that she really educated me on was that you had to build in the, in the period of reconstruction at the dawn of the century, you had to build the room for Black excellence. You had to build the room for Black History, you had to build the room to say this is what Black achievement is, this is what we are capable of all of those things.

Veronica Chambers 11:07
We understand how we got there. But the fact is the respectability has not protected us, we know that. All the things that we did right did not make us safer, did not protect our children. So I think that the Black Lives Matter movement was so educated on the history, because they took what they found valuable from both movements. And they went radically forward, right? What does radical mean to imagine in a, in a whole new way what was possible for and what we could demand, without degrees, without the right suits, the right clothes, the right everything, it was saying, you know, we are right, because we are.

Omkari Williams 11:55
I could not have put that better. I love that, you know, and so looking at, you know, Black Lives Matter relative to the civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s, or the Black Power movement, something that Black Lives Matter has going for it that they didn't have his social media. And I generally think that social media is a tool of the devil, but in this case, I think there is an example of how it's been used for good. And I would love to hear you talk about how social media has not only allowed Black Lives Matter to make this huge impact so quickly, but how it's helped to build the movement into a movement that is deeply intersectional across not only lines of race, but across country boundaries.

Veronica Chambers 12:43

Sure. I mean, I think that one of the things that we saw, and I think we saw this a lot in Ferguson, is that we had people like Johnetta Elzie, people like DeRay Mckesson, who were more than activists, they were citizen journalists. And they kept the nation's eyes through social media, on what was happening, when we wanted to turn away. What I thought was so extraordinary about 2020 Is that a movement that was less than 10 years old, was able and you know, the term Black Lives Matter is so easily shot down by its detractors. You know, the blue lives matter, the all lives matter the this versus that. But you know, like, it was not the easiest term to plow forward with.

Veronica Chambers 13:37
But what was undeniable, was the truth that these young activists kept in front of us, they kept the story alive, they allowed us not to turn away, and they also connected the dots and said, this is not a bad apple or a bad actor. This is systemic. I grew up certainly, in Brooklyn Public Schools, learning that racism was a bad chapter and bad apples that happened in bad states where people did bad things. And I think that one of the things that these activists were unequivocal about was that it is everywhere. It is systemic, it is deeply entrenched. And, you know, we, we read it in Isabel Wilkerson's Caste, she's like this is what America has been longer than it has not. That was something that we, many of us, had the clarity of mind and the quiet here last year, and we responded to it.

Omkari Williams 14:41
I think that what you say is so true. I mean, I grew up in Manhattan, and I had that same experience in public school of what I understood the problems to be and how I certainly internalized that being in the North, I was somehow insulated from racism. So you can imagine my shock when I found out that that wasn't true.

Omkari Williams 15:03
But to get back to Black Lives Matter, one of the things that I found incredibly impressive about what has happened with Black Lives Matter is that its founders Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi and Alicia Garza have done something incredibly unusual in a culture that celebrates and elevates celebrity. They, instead of centering themselves and hoarding the power that they have, they have intentionally created structures that empower those at the local level to be able to address the specific needs of their communities under the Black Lives Matter umbrella, so to speak. And I feel like that's a really important piece of the work that's being done now is that it's being decentered and being put out into the local communities. Would you speak about that?

Veronica Chambers 15:56
Sure. I think this is, you know, something that they talk about, about not wanting to be leaders, but wanting the movement to be full of leaders. I think that, you know, it's interesting, I think we'll see in the long term, how that plays out. But I think the other thing that we can say is that Black Lives Matter in its tenacity, in its focus in its radicalness has been an incubator for so many movements. I mean, so this movement was one that like you said, it was decentralized, it was also one that was queer centered, which is very different than the modern Civil Rights Movement. It's one that has focused on disability rights, which has focused on economic issues, you know, it's talking about redlining and people and environmental issues.

Veronica Chambers 16:48
I mean, really, it's about equality and humanity. And I think that the, they've pitched a tent that's large enough to hold the intersectionality of all of these issues. You know the fact that we can't actually solve police brutality outside of, you know, economic issues, outside of community and housing issues, you know, like that. They're all its web of inequality that we are, we are facing, and that can seem overwhelming. But I think that it's also, it's like seeing the matrix for the first time, right? It's like saying it's complex, but if you can see and hold on to the complexity, then you can get to work, you know?

Omkari Williams 17:38
I think that's really very true. And the thing that strikes me about what you are saying there is, we tend to want to separate things out into, you know, this issue that issue another issue, because it's kind of easier for us to hold things if they're in separate buckets. But one of the things that I teach when I'm doing my activism workshops is that whatever your causes, you have to also focus at the very base of it on anti racism. Because racism is actually the problem that supports all the other problems that we are having across the board, is that notion that some people are entitled to take whatever they want from whomever they want, no matter the cost to the larger whole.

Omkari Williams 18:28
And I think that one of the things that sort of happens in that whole conversation is that we will let our attention be grabbed by something that is very specific and discrete. And then we can sort of forget where it connects to other things. So like the killings of Breonna Taylor or Ahmaud Arbery. We can glom on to those and look at a specific thing, but then forget that, okay well, if we're talking about Breonna Taylor, we are talking about the police. We are talking about how do the police respond to communities of color. If we're talking about Ahmaud Arbery we're talking about this historical and deep seated racism that exists very openly in the South, and how people in authority in the police department in the prosecutor's department will ignore things until pressure is put on them. So I mean, one of the things that I think is really important is how do we connect those dots? Where do we do that kind of research for ourselves so that we can bring all of these things together and see the larger pattern?

Veronica Chambers 19:43
I think, absolutely. And I think like you said on your site, we have to choose our moments. One of the things that was really interesting to me, I'm just back from Glasgow, and being at COP26. And one of the most powerful moments I had, I was interviewing David Lammy, who is a member of the Parliament, Shadow Undersecretary, and he did a TED talk called Climate Justice Cannot Happen Without Racial Justice. And he said climate crisis is colonialism's natural conclusion. And I think that was very powerful. And you know, if you think about it, you think the patterns of colonialism, and you know, in our own country, colonialism and all of its forms, right.

Veronica Chambers 20:30
Colonialism was a form of oppression, expansion, exploitation, extraction, and the valuing of profit over humanity. It ties together. It is the poison that has affected us for millennia now, you know, like, it is the thing. And so I think recognizing the patterns, and seeing them in whatever part of the work that you focused on, is really important, because I think that we, we need bigger solutions, we need bolder solutions. And I think we need leaders who can hold a bigger vision.

Veronica Chambers 21:15
And I will say that, you know, I always say that everything you love has a history. And I spent a lot of the last couple of years looking at suffrage, and the 100 year battle from American women to get the vote. And one of the things that was so striking to me, is that women of color, Native American women, Asian American woman, Black American women, queer women, of all colors, were not considered suffragettes because they were never on one movement.You know, they couldn't be. So Ida B. Wells started the Alpha Suffrage Club, but she had to think about lynching. She couldn't let go of one thing to focus on women and voting.

Veronica Chambers 22:00
And so often, I think in the history we get categorized under the one thing that someone sees us as being emblematic of. So Ida B. Wells become synonymous with lynching. But she's doing everything she's doing housing, she's doing lynching, she's doing women's rights for decades. And so this Zitkala-Sa is looking at nation sovereignty, and Native Americans, but she's also doing women's rights and voting. Mabel Ping-Hua Lee is looking at voting rights, but she's also looking at the Chinese Exclusion Act, which is not giving citizenship to Chinese people, while demanding them to be laborers that build the country. So, you know, I just think that this, the single story that we hold about our leaders, is actually not reflective of the complexity with which our most beloved leaders and heroes and heroines have have pushed forward. And again, I think that this generation of young activists is holding on to a level of complexity, that maybe a decade or two ago, we we didn't fully grasp.

Omkari Williams 23:18
That's really interesting that I appreciate the way that you put that.

Veronica Chambers 23:21
And you are an activist so maybe, you know, differently. This is just my observation.

Omkari Williams 23:28
No, no, I agree. And I think that part of the challenge of activism across the generations, is that complexity and holding that complexity, and how does that inform the decisions that you make? And how does it also inform what you get to do in the world because we do all have limited energy and time? But there is a way still that I believe that within the limitations that exist, by virtue of being human, we can still embrace the complexity of things. And that's where I find that the intersectional nature of this work really becomes important because other people can put more attention in one area, which doesn't mean there's no attention in another area, but it can be their main area of focus, because they know that there's someone else on the ground, doing the heavy lifting over here, or the heavy lifting over there. And that feels incredibly important. And because we are connected now in a way that we weren't in Ida B. Wells, this time, we're able to do that differently.

Veronica Chambers 24:41
Right. And yet at the same time, it's it harkens back, listening to you makes me think of Anna Julia Cooper, right. And it's like "When and where enter in the quiet and undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence, without suing, or special. patronage, then and there, the whole race

enters with me". And I just have to say that I'm someone who's a first generation American. You know, I was born in Panama, I came here as a little kid, my parents were Panamanian, I understood pretty early on that. Black people have held up hope and possibility of equality for a nation forever. And, you know, when people would say to me, Oh, you're not Black Black, you're like, you know, you're like, Caribbean Black or Afro Latina, whatever, whatever. I'm like, I'm Blackity, Black, Black, because I'm about our people and all of our people. And that is what Black people have been doing from day one.

Veronica Chambers 25:48
You know, I was talking to someone. And it was saying that there is not a moment. I always say that, like, Black history is Futuristic, in its essence, because and that's why like, you know, I'm sorry, I'm hypertexting a little bit. But, you know, there have been times when I've been on tour with this book and people are like, well, let's talk about critical race theory. And let's talk about why this book is hard to teach. And I'm so sympathetic to the teachers and the pushback, they're getting the librarians and everything. But let's be super clear, and say that there is not a moment in this history, when Black people have done something, just for themselves, to say, this is about me, and the five minutes, I'm going to be on the earth. And I'm just going to like, let it go.

Veronica Chambers 26:37
It has always been about the future, it has been about living through the unbearable, with the hope that things are better, not only for your people, but for the people they will walk the earth with. And that is the message that I get from reading all of this. That is the reason why I wrote this book. And I feel like we need that. Now, we're at a point where we're like, will the planet be here, you know, it is a warming planet, we are not we are not. We are not leap frogging towards these goals that we need to get to. And, and so I think that the fact is, is that we need to look at Black history because it is inclusive, it is expansive. And it is always, I think, at the best of it, obviously, I'm not saying Black people are all heroes and all whatever. But I'm just saying, at the heart of it, there is a belief that America can be better, that we can do better, we can create more. And, and that is in the face of things that have told us again, and again, the very opposite.

Omkari Williams 27:48
I think what you're saying is really profound there. I mean, as a second generation Americans, so I've also heard the while you're not really Black thing is like everyone walking down the street, seeing my face thinks I am so yeah. But I actually think that that is reflective of how racism has infested everything, because it's all about degrees in racism. So even as Black people we are, we are prey sometimes to separating ourselves out from other Black people rather than embracing the collective nature of us as just part of the human family. And I think that that is something that is slowly being addressed more directly at but definitely needs attention.

Omkari Williams 28:40
And I think that in some ways the climate crisis is making that clear, because what we know is that the people who are going to be most dramatically impacted by climate change, and impacted first are primarily in the global South. So they are people of color. They are people who live on small islands that are being taken over by the sea. And you as you mentioned, were recently at the COP26 conference on climate change in Glasgow, and you moderated a panel, Climate Justice is Racial

Justice. And I'm going to link to that folks. So you'll be able to find it because it was really interesting. I loved it so much, because I felt like here we are hearing these voices of people who have a very clear understanding of where these two things intersect. And I want to know what your experience of that panel was because I wanted to be there in person.

Veronica Chambers 29:39
So yeah, I was profoundly honored to be invited to be part of this climate is not my regular beat. But I was really happy to have the opportunity. And you know, I have to say one of the lead architects of the New York Times climate hub, is a Black woman named Whitney Richardson. People should follow her on Twitter, and Instagram. And this is something she's been working on for over three years. I mean, every time I talk to her, we're like, what if we did this with the New York Times, she's like, I am focused on climate. And so to your point about choosing one or two things, she was very focused, and she made it amazing. You know, we know that people of color suffer more from environmental impact, from zoonotic pandemics to air pollution.

Veronica Chambers 30:25
This panel, I thought was really important, because it was a panel of all people of color. And I think that it's not unknown that people of color suffer disproportionately. But when you're in these rooms, in at places like top 20 sites and the climate hub, it is a lot of people talking about communities of color. So I definitely want to call out like Gloria Walton, the president of the solutions project. Varshini Prakash, Executive Director of the Sunrise Movement, Nick St. Fleur, who's a science reporter for STAT, and of course, MP David Lammy. I felt like what was so powerful is that we were able to really talk about the inequity, but also talk about the opportunity and the possibility. You know, there was a point where David Lammy goes, let's be clear, despite the optics of this conference, the white people are not going to save us. And so, you know, like, it's not like the same. And I mean, that, you know, with all respect to colleagues to everyone, it's that idea, what I loved about it, and like, the youth activists like Elizabeth Wathuti from Kenya is so amazing, you know. Like, these are people who are saying, we can do more, there is low hanging fruit on every corner in terms of solutions.

Veronica Chambers 31:54
And yes, we need the bigger solutions, we need the investment of the countries that have created these emissions, and this imbalance, to do what they promised to do 10 years ago, we need corporations to do better. But we also, we need to support and amplify the voices of people who are on the ground who are doing the work. You know, I saw a woman from Kenya, she has a project called Lensational, if you want to google it, and she said that, you know, there are these Maasai women who make their living herding livestock. And they know the impact of climate change, because it is a difference between being able to feed their families or not. And she goes, but the two things that you'll notice right away, they never use the words climate change, to describe the shifting patterns and impacts and everything else. And two they're completely separated from a movement in which they could be leaders. They are not connected to that in any way. So how do we bridge that gap between language and leadership? Between the people on the ground who are making solutions because they have to?

Veronica Chambers 33:08

You know, I mean, I think one of my favorite things that I got growing up in a Black community is that feeling of, you know, make, I always talk about it at work. And I think sometimes, at the New York Times, people are like, Oh, it's like your Brooklyn showing. But I'm always like, you got to make $1 out of 15 cents, make a way out of no way. Like, these are things that we learned from the ancestors. And so I think the fact is, that's happening in climate that's happening in Louisiana, it's happening in Native American communities. But we do not have the cameras and the lenses. And we're not microphoning the work that's happening on the ground by people who don't have the luxury to fly to conferences and talk about problems and solutions and communities in peril. And so I think that connect is the work of the moment. And that was my big takeaway.

Omkari Williams 34:03
I love that because this is where social media could actually not be a tool of the devil and actually be useful is in amplifying the work of the people on the ground. Of people who are doing the work with no notoriety, but they are just they're doing the work because they are committed to it. And they know how important it is. And they love their people, and they are trying to save their people and this planet, or whatever the cause might be. But I feel like that is something each of us can kind of take away and start looking at. Where can we start amplifying voices that need amplification but aren't getting it rather than always putting our attention on the voices that are being lifted up every single day, because they're not enough. That's not how the whole thing works, and we all need to be doing our part.

Omkari Williams 34:57
So I'm going to shift gears here a little bit.

Veronica Chambers 35:00
Yes, please.

Omkari Williams 35:01
Because I don't want to forget to get to this because you specifically asked me if we could talk about my Noah's Ark rule.

Veronica Chambers 35:07
Yes.

Omkari Williams 35:09
And I generally don't really talk about what I'm doing in these calls, but you mentioned it twice. So I was like, Okay, we have to talk about the Noah's Ark rule. And for those who don't know, my Noah's Ark rule is a rule I made for people in my activist training class. And it's that you can only focus on one or at most two causes at any one time. Because human beings here, and limited capacity. So you, Veronica are fascinated by my rule. And I'm curious as to why.

Veronica Chambers 35:49
You know, it's interesting, because I think I'm a generalist, as a writer, as a thinker. But I also, I think a lot about the idea of what is the impact of the thing that I can focus on, and what might I lose by not paying attention to something important? You know, like, I would say, for example, that climate has not

always been my focus. But I got that message loud and clear, not just this year, but you know, for a long time now that that actually is not an option not to focus on it. And so I think that is the kind of thing that I'm trying to navigate is, because I'm also someone who, I don't know how much like, I'm wondering about the Noah's Ark rule, whether or not it's keeping a general awareness of the things that are important, and then say, my time itself in my work will go in one or two directions. So...

Omkari Williams 36:49
Yeah, actually, that's exactly what it is, because I am interested in, and concerned about so many thing, but I don't have the time to put my attention on all of those things. And the Noah's Ark rule also has flexibility in there. So for instance, when the former President started putting babies in cages at the southern border of the United States, that bumped one of my other things off of my list for my main focus of attention, and I put a lot of attention on that. Because, you know, as babies in cages, come on now. But once that crisis sort of started to level off, and people had created the structures to take over, people who really understood how to do that work, lawyers, immigration lawyers, etc, etc, then I shifted back, because I believe that each of us is going to pick our things, and that there's so many of us, that we will cover everything. The things aren't going to fall off of our plates and are going to just sort of disappear into the void. There is someone who is deeply committed to obcure issues of policy or whatever, that are important, that I don't have the bandwidth for.

Omkari Williams 38:07
So the point of the rule is really to keep us in action as activists rather than to have us be so overwhelmed by the multitudinous options, that we wind up doing nothing, right? So that's really what the Noah's Ark rule is for. And, you know, right now, for me, my two things are climate and race. Because if we don't save the planet, everything else is moot. You know, it's like, whatever doesn't really matter if there's nowhere to live. But those two things are my profound things. Now, something could come along, that was an emergency, that might take my attention off of something. But I'm going to go back to those two issues consistently. I have faith...

Veronica Chambers 38:53
I'm taking notes.

Omkari Williams 38:55
I should be taking notes. I have faith that there are people out there who are doing the things that I also feel are important, but I can't get to. And that's why I actually think what you were saying about amplifying voices is so important, because then I'll say, oh, there's this person over here in New Orleans doing this. There's this person in Kentucky doing that. There's this person in Glasgow doing this, and I will know that they're handling it, it's being handled, and that I can keep my focus where my focus needs to be at the moment. So that's the rule. That's why I have the rule.

Veronica Chambers 39:34
I like it. I like it. And I also think, you know, in some ways, I was talking to someone about this, that, you know, there's that saying that we overestimate what we can do in a short time and underestimate what we can do over a long time. I think that we also do that with impact.

Omkari Williams 39:55
Yes.

Veronica Chambers 39:56
We underestimate our impact in small gestures, and we overestimate what it takes to make change. And I think that that is something that I think a lot about, I think, you know, we can speak to who's listening. So it was important to me to have this conversation with you. Because I want it to be, I want to be in conversation with people like you. And I feel like this is, this is changemaking, this is essential, it's, it's different than 10 emails going back and forth.

Omkari Williams 40:31
It's very different.

Veronica Chambers 40:32
You know, and so I can't I literally, I always say, email is my worst sport. And when people are like, you owe me an email, I was like, join the legions. But I feel like if I can, you know, if I can make time to just sit and not multitask, and just be in conversation with deep thinkers about things we care about, then there's a ripple effect. That is very powerful. And it's partly because it makes it helps my brain slow down, and I get some new information. And I can be more inventive and imaginative. And, you know, hopefully a little more visionary because of it. But then there's also other people that you connect with, in unexpected ways because of it.

Omkari Williams 41:20
And you actually referenced this in your book. And because our time is getting short, I'm gonna make this my last question for this. You talk about contact hypothesis in your book. And I feel like that is such an important thing for people to understand, because people are always saying to me, yeah, but you know, what I'm doing is so small, how does it make any difference? And contact hypothesis tells us different? So would you speak about what that is? And why our individual conversations are so important?

Veronica Chambers 41:58
Yeah, I think that contact hypothesis, the idea that intergroup contact, can reduce preconceptions old, you know, like, just that, ultimately, I think of it as like the difference between head knowledge and heart knowledge. You know, like, ultimately, you can read something, you can learn something, someone can tell you something, that you have that moment of contact where it just makes sense. And, and then that carries forward and creates a change that's long lasting. I don't know if that's a good description of it.

Omkari Williams 42:35
Yeah, I mean, I think to just sort of flesh that out a bit more. Basically, it's the idea that if you talk to a person, about your own experience with something, someone, you know, someone you're close to a family member or a friend, that you actually have the potential to broaden their perspective on an issue. Because all of a sudden, it's not just this theoretical thing, it's something that they actually know someone who's experienced or know someone who has a really clear point of view on and it becomes

personal, and that the personal aspect of it really matters. So those individual conversations become really important. I mean, it's like, you know, same sex marriage.

Veronica Chambers 43:22
Right.

Omkari Williams 43:23
You know, people changed their minds about it when they started realizing that, a) they knew gay people that they didn't realize they knew, and that they liked those people and didn't want them to have a life that was different than the lives they were able to have simply because of their sexual orientation. So...

Veronica Chambers 43:43
Right. Right. And, you know, it's interesting, because I think it's not, it's not so much that you need to know someone to think more broadly. But that also that the effect of that is longer lasting, like it's not lip service. And I think we see that like with exit polls, right. Like people sometimes tell pollsters, what they want them to know, or what they think they want to hear. But it's like, what really makes change is what you're talking about.

Omkari Williams 44:14
Yeah. And it's, you know, it's one of those things where it feels so simple when you think about it, and yet we underestimate its impact. And I think that one of the things we just need to keep remembering is that impact is something we generally don't get to see. We don't generally get to understand how the ripples of what we do, are going to reach out into other people's lives. So that's just, you know, my way of saying keep talking to people keep doing the things because you never know what the impact is going to be. So we are almost out of time, and I want to ask you what I asked all of my interviewees, which is, I want to leave my listeners with three things that they can do in support of the work that you do. So do you have your three things for me? You do.

Veronica Chambers 44:15
I emailed you three things. And now I don't remember what I said,

Omkari Williams 45:19
Oh, that's fine. So I'm going to tell you what you said to me. And you tell me if there's anything you want to add?

Omkari Williams 45:25
You said that you would love it if they checked out, your work on Black History Continued. And there's a link to that from the New York Times that I will add. And you also mentioned two organizations that help young writers, Girls Write Now and Youth Communication, would you talk a bit about both of those?

Veronica Chambers 45:45
Okay.

Veronica Chambers 45:45
Sure. So Girls Write Now is an extraordinary organization that really helps girls find their voice. They don't have to become writers. But I always say that narrative is a life skill. If you understand how stories arc, you'll know if you're in the beginning, middle, or end or something. And you know how to make a new beginning or imagine a new end. And I think that is particularly valuable for young girls. And so I think that they do a great job of that they help girls find narrative skills through audio training, from podcasts, and things like that to television writers, to novelists, to poets, to documentary filmmakers, they just show them the spectrum of storytelling, and the impact that might have on their lives.

Omkari Williams 45:55
I love that. Thank you so much. Oh, this has been such a great conversation. I'm really happy that we had an opportunity to speak. I'm glad we managed to work out the logistics of it. And just thank you so much Veronica this was wonderful.

Veronica Chambers 46:34
And Youth Communication is a New York organization that creates a student run newspaper. What I love about it is that it is incredibly diverse. And they have two publications, one that represents all the economic, gender, racial diversity of New York City, but they also have a newspaper, you know, that's digital that's written for and by kids in foster care. And so they actually get to interview the Commissioners of Foster Care. They get to interview kids who have aged out of the system, they get to interview foster care parents. So they have kid reporters who are in foster care, who are really investigating the system, which if you know, anything about foster care, you know, it's a system that's deeply flawed. And so I really believe in, I love to read their stories, I love to amplify their voices. And I just feel like it's something that's really worth supporting. Because I think that is the kind of leadership that makes powerful change.

Veronica Chambers 47:57
No, thank you so much for the invitation. And then I'm always just so happy and I think we covered some good ground today.

Omkari Williams 48:05
I think we did too.

Veronica Chambers 48:06
So here's to hope right.

Omkari Williams 48:09
Yes!

Veronica Chambers 48:10
As my my friend Shay Youngblood who's a poet and writer, she always says, I think it's an African proverb. She's like, move your feet while you pray. And I feel like that's what we did tonight.

Omkari Williams 48:21

Oh, thank you. I love that. That's, that's really meaningful. Thank you so much.

Veronica Chambers 48:26
Thank you have a great night.

Omkari Williams 48:28
You too.

Omkari Williams 48:29
Veronica and I covered so much ground in this conversation. I loved it. And I want to just end with saying a few things here. As we talked about in our discussion, antiracism work really is sort of the foundation for other areas of social justice. And the notion that some people are inherently more worthwhile than others has led to the problems we struggle with across the board today. Understanding the evolution of Black Lives Matter gives us a way of connecting our struggle today with, not only, the struggle of previous generations, but the struggle of groups with different focuses than racism specifically. And each of us doing our part is how we move the needle across the board. So thank you all for listening. Thank you for doing what you can do to move our world towards justice. I will be back with another episode of Stepping Into Truth very soon. Until then, remember that change starts with story. So keep sharing yours