

Female Narrator (Dr. Johnson):

Insufferable Academics takes you beyond research and safe spaces and into the lived experiences behind the data. Pull up a seat as we talk with arm chair intellectuals, book nerds, backseat pontificators, and scholars alike. At IA there's only real talk without filters. So, sit back, grab your spiced tea or your half-caf/ decaf and learn something from Insufferable Academics.

Dr. Valencia Walker is a practicing Neonatologist, Associate Clinical Professor and an Assistant Dean of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion for the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. Dr. Walker graduated from Florida A&M University and received her medical degree from Emory University School of Medicine. She finished her pediatrics residency at UT Memphis and a fellowship in Neonatology from the prestigious Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center.

Since joining UCLA's faculty, she's also obtained an MHP in Health Policy from Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health and throughout her career Dr. Walker has distinguished herself as an outstanding clinician, educator, and garnered a national reputation for her involvement in diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts within academic medicine.

Dr. Lissa D. Ramirez-Stapleton originally from Columbus, Ohio is the oldest of three and is a first generation college student who was raised in a single parent home. Lissa and her wife now live in Southern California where she's an Associate Professor of Deaf Studies and Core Faculty of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Cal State University Northridge. Lissa teaches and researches about equity, history and access for deaf students, faculty and staff with a particular interest in the intersections of race, gender and disability. Likewise, her service in research primarily focuses on equity and access for deaf students, faculty and staff with a particular interest on the intersections of race, gender, disability, and sexual orientation.

Her research can be found in the *Journal of College Student Development* and *The Negro Educational Review* and *Thought in Action*.

In this episode of IA, the question was posed: Are you a fighter, a healer, or a builder? It's an all family affair today while we look at ourselves and the season that we're in right now in our collective lived experiences and dig deep to try to find an answer to this

question. Quite frankly it was not an easy effort. Join the conversation. Learn something.

Valencia: I was having a conversation with an amazing and dynamic and just young intellectual, young black woman intellectual and you know the type of person who has a presence and a spirit that you just automatically connect with?

Dr. Johnson: Indeed.

Valencia: When you didn't really know them. Well, I had met this young woman at an event that we hosted at the medical school and she told me she was in the School of Public Health and she was a post-doc and how she was working overtime to navigate the space that she was traveling through as she completed her post-doctoral work. And I knew I needed to reconnect with her. But you know, you're bombarded with so many things during your day to day, but I took her card and it took me some time before I did and we just kind of had a quick email exchange. But then the pandemic and if I thought that I was busy before, the pandemic gave a whole new space to over [inaudible] [00:04:52] over work under resourced.

Dr. Johnson: Indeed.

Valencia: But we created an opportunity to join a task force specifically to look at the disparities we knew were happening even before they were being reported and it just so happened that this young lady and I ended up on the same task force and working on the same project. That's when I really got to know her better and know more of her story and her struggles and as someone who feels I think I describe myself now as a budding black womanist I felt compelled to try to do more to support her and to encourage her and to be a resource for her.

And in the middle of a really difficult situation where we were having a conversation, I admired her ability to still be so insightful and so reflective and she issued this to me as a question she often asks. Are you a fighter, a builder, or a healer? And I'm like you know, instinctively, she was like no, no. Before I can even answer she already knew. She's like no. Pick one. What is your dominant one?

Obviously, we have to move through all three of those roles, particularly in academia. And I was stumped. I couldn't answer the question. I mean I had no idea when really pushed and challenged because as a physician I mean it would seem obvious that I'm a

healer, with all the things that I'm tasked with doing trying to create things that don't exist, curriculums, responses to issues, solving problems, [inaudible] [00:06:58].

Dr. Johnson: Right. Mm-hmm.

Valencia: When I think about the move to persevere in these often harmful and toxic spaces of course, I'm a fighter.

Dr. Johnson: Right.

Valencia: And I didn't – and I told her, I said I don't have an answer. And that question just stayed with me for weeks. I couldn't find an answer. And then today I said I've gotta have an answer. I went old school. I just looked up the definitions and when all is said and done I settled on fighter and I think I feel good about that.

[Music]

Dr. Johnson: What do you think it was that served as a catalyst for you to say a fighter is in my nature; this is my characteristic of choice?

Valencia: If you type in define fighter: noun. One, a person or animal that fights especially as a soldier or a boxer. Underneath that and then two, there is a fast military aircraft designed for attacking other aircraft. But under one it adds, a person who does not easily admit defeat in spite of difficulties or opposition. That I feel has been my life as a faculty member and more than the other two definitions that I read for builder and healer, when I tried to not just think about this moment that we're in where we are clearly fighting but looking at the totality of my career.

[Music]

I have not wanted to be defeated in spite of the challenges I faced; in spite of often the blatant opposition to who I was and the work I wanted to do.

[Music]

Dr. Johnson: As an MD by profession, you meet the definition of healer, right. And let's stick with defining it as it comes up in the dictionary. A person who is able to cure disease or injury using special techniques. Someone who mends or repairs, someone who can help to alleviate a person's distress. That's part of your job.

Valencia: It's a huge part of our job and when we think about our roles and how students come to us, even if they're not our students, they just see us for who we are and say I'm hurting. I mean just before this podcast I got an email and you could tell when the title is in all caps it's a distress call.

Dr. Johnson: Indeed.

Valencia: I'm the only black one in my department. I asked my leadership to speak out. They said call me. **[Sighs]** I need help. What do I do? I-I immediately go into that healing mode. How can I comfort, how can I get you through this clearly difficult time that's causing you so much anguish? But how am I gonna do that? I'm also gonna fight. So, even in healing for me I don't think I ever completely, now that I've thought about it more, I never completely walk away from that idea I can fight. So, I must fight. Particularly for those that I know are more vulnerable than me.

[Music]

Lissa: It's even been good to hear how you all come to some thinking around this because I think – when I think about myself I think I am a natural builder but I am forced to be a fighter, but I am being called to be a healer. And how I'm dividing that up is like when I think about being a builder I think about what brings me life and what brings me joy and what comes from a natural just talent. So, that, when you were saying like as you were growing up like these are things you've noticed in yourself. Like I'm a natural builder. I have these moments of like I don't just, I build connections, I build opportunities, I build bridges, I build moments.

And I can pinpoint those throughout my lifetime and even now um, but I'm exhausted from the fight because that is, that is not my natural tendency but is what I am forced to do in order to keep building. Because the stuff I build just keeps getting torn down, destroyed right. So, I mean I build again, and I fight to protect whatever I've, I've built. Um, but I do think in this season I do feel deeply called that actually being a builder is a part of that but really your ancestral calling is about being a healer. Um, and that's something I've, I've thought about, I feel like I keep being told by outside people that see it in me but I haven't fully embraced in a conscious way.

So, again involved in the community, um, trying to find ways to stay connected to the larger movement of raising awareness for my antiblackness, being able to stay active and connected to larger

social justice issues and I believe there's multiple ways to do that. Um, but one of the, one of the ways that I have been conscious of that is specifically working with deaf communities of color. Specifically, black deaf communities and just noticing that there's a lot of different – there's webinars, there's amazing webinars and talks that are being given and people are creating spaces, and there's protests and there's all this community, all these community things happening.

But they're not always accessible. They're not always accessible. Everybody can't, either for a variety of reasons. Uh, some of it is there's no interpreter so it's linguistically not accessible. It's physically not accessible. Um, people are working. There's multiple reasons that people can't be involved so I've been really thinking about how do I help create or build spaces that are healing for communities that are not always thought about in this larger movement but that deeply want to be involved in the movement. And so, uh, two colleagues and myself put together a healing circle space today for deaf communities of color and signing communities of color so I will be hearing individuals that also sign.

So, I'm an uh, Associate Professor. Yeah, I can say that now. I'm an Associate Professor.

Dr. Johnson: That's right. Yes, you can. Welcome, welcome.

Lissa: Yeah, at Cal State Northridge in the Deaf Studies Department and so again, it's about kind of creating this space for our students, for faculty, for staff, for community members across the country that have not had an opportunity to really unpack the emotional pieces of all this and what does it mean to heal and be in the fight at the same time and just by a lot of again opportunities to be signed at or talked at, but not a lot of connecting with people in real ways that of I'm not just okay and can I unpack that with you? Um, or, these are the ways I'm setting up boundaries for myself or this is, can we, can we even talk about what healing means? I think we have a very granola idea about what self-healing can mean.

You know, I need to just be able to meditate and find some peaceful space and that'll be it; I'll, I'll be healed. When in reality there's this great image that looks at healing from this almost it's a pie diagram. It's like well healing is about difficult dialogues, healing's about figuring out what's your responsibility and what's other peoples' responsibility. Healing's about setting boundaries. Healing is about unpacking the things you've learned and then trying to unlearn those

things. Healing is a much larger, broader process that sometimes happens in community and sometimes doesn't.

And so, um, yeah I'm, I'm feeling more and more drawn to figure out my own healing through counseling, through reading, through journaling, through setting up altars for my ancestors, and really figuring out what might it mean to fully embrace the idea that I'm a healer and a builder but that maybe healing might come more naturally if I, if I embrace it. I think healing is a slower process and so I think about building.

I am an absolute extrovert and so building takes energy and you're moving, you're moving, you know you're setting this up, you're connecting this person, you're introducing this person and you're doing all these things that's in motion when sometimes um, what I feel like I'm learning is that healing is a very different frequency and it requires you to slow down and it requires you to reflect and it requires you to dig deeper and when you go deep I think about digging deep into ground that's hard right? Because like we've all been socialized in a certain way when you're trying to dig into hard kind of ground you don't just get in there and start shoveling and the earth just starts you know, coming up.

You know, when you're digging in hard ground you have to start slowly and you slowly dig at that thing and you slowly dig into that thing and it keeps, you keep going, you keep going so, it's a different frequency. Healing's a different frequency for me than building is and so that's been a I think a painful in some ways but necessary process for me to kinda start thinking about and transitioning into.

[Music]

Lissa: Is there an urge to fight because that's what everyone else is doing? Is it an urge to fight because that's what you feel like you're being called to do and transition into something else? And if that is the case then I think the next piece I would want to try to unpack what that person is – but there's multiple ways to fight. Like everybody doesn't have to necessarily be out marching. There's multiple – this issue requires multiple ways to come at it and multiple ways to fire at it. It wasn't created in one way and it won't be taken down in one way and so, I think just kind of unpacking like what, what is it about what you think you naturally do is not fighting right?

So, I think in my space I would argue what we did today in our community healing circle is about fighting because one of the analogies I used in the group today was that if someone, if a soldier

goes to war because we are in a war. Let's be real clear about that. We are in a war. So, if a soldier goes to war and gets hurt that soldier then comes back to whatever hospital, whatever home and heals and then potentially goes back out into battle right? And I think as people of color we are socialized and conditioned to believe that all we do is struggle in battle and that there is no season of healing, that there is no coming back healing and then going back into that thing and keeping at it.

And so, I think for me I would want to really sit down and have a conversation about what aspect of healing is also not actively a part of contributing to the larger fight in the larger vision and goal of something different. Because if we get to the other side and we're all battered and wounded and incomplete and hollow, it's not gonna matter. It's not gonna matter. And so, we all have these different gifts for a reason and we don't all have the same gifts because we need multiple things. We're educators, we're people who are fighters, we're people on the frontline behind, behind making the meals. You meet people everywhere right?

I meet people that they're able to translate all of these messages to the kids and help them unpack their feelings and help them figure out what it means to be actively a part and rooted in this bigger thing. So, I think we all have different skills and so to not, um, not get stuck in the hype that there's only one way to come at this thing and if you're not coming at it that way you're not down or you're not involved and you're not doing enough. Because I think we all have a part to play. And so it goes back to like what are you actually being called to do and what is doing the calling right?

Is it society that you feel like I'm watching TV and I feel like I should be there or is it something deeper like no actually I am being called to do something different than what I've been doing. And then by all means like let's unpack that and figure out what that is. So, for me in this season it's not my fighting is starting to look like healing work. Um, that's not on the frontline. That is not out in marches. We've seen so when people come back from the marches and come back from the protests there is someone there to unpack that with. There's someone there to start to really talk about okay, so how are you feeling about it? How are you sleeping right? Are you eating? Um, and again, I just think we meet people at so many different angles of this thing and there's, there's, there's no um, there's no special trophies. Honorable mention activists. You know, like I think again we all have a valuable part to play and it's gonna look different for everybody and everybody's contribution is needed.

And so, for me it's like when I go to bed at night and I wake up in the morning do I feel like I've, I've done something. What has – ten years from now, 20 years from now I want to be able to look back and say that was my contribution. That's what I contributed.

Dr. Johnson: I'm glad that you also mentioned the role of those who helped to frame the context and the post discussions. I know we have a few folks who are listening who have heard my broken record as of late, but when we look at some of these organizations and some of these companies who have made the blanket statement in recent weeks before we did this taping, my question is the same. Who there at your organization is prepared for the follow up question?

Female Speaker: Hm-hmm.

Dr. Johnson: Who's going to lead a sit-down talk after everyone has digested what they've seen for the last several weeks? Who is that person? Are they there? If they don't exist why aren't they there?

Female Speaker: Hm-hmm.

Dr. Johnson: And then on top of that consider the emotional currency that you are now asking someone to give to be that person. And so, there's so many more discussions that have to be had.

[Music]

Valencia: Well, one, I want to really thank Lissa for everything that she said and really drawing a beautiful connection which takes me back to the conversation I had with my post-doc because part of that conversation was recognizing the walking wounded and how ineffectual you become and how you risk infecting other people and the importance of valuing the role of healing because it's impossible to do this work and not be wounded and not be injured.

I also appreciate that recognition that there is an ancestral linkage to healing. I think as teachers we are automatically healers. As a physician I am automatically a healer and we need to see the role and be active and deliberate particularly with our teaching and our mentoring that we create and foster and build healing into that work. And I believe that my season will be a season of fighting but I'm fighting to preserve the space to heal and the space to build. I'm not fighting just to fight.

[Music]

Male Narrator: This episode of Insufferable Academics was produced by Dr. Johnson and coproduced by **Graphica Note**, musical support from Deemo. Connect with IA on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter or visit us soon as Insufferableacademics.com or on YouTube for more updates and behind the scenes insight.

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