Tanya Domi:
Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering ground-breaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting-edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi:
Tsedale Melaku is a sociologist, post doctoral research fellow at the Graduate Center CUNY, and author of the 2019 book, You Don't Look Like a Lawyer: Black Women and Systemic Gendered Racism, which reflects the emphasis of her scholarly interests on race, gender, class, intersectionality, workplace inequity, diversity and organizations. You Don't Look Like a Lawyer focused on how race and gender play a crucial role in the experiences of women of color in traditionally white institutional spaces, and specifically for black women. Doctor Melaku's work has been featured in numerous publications, including the Harvard Business Review, the New York Times, Bloomberg Law, and Diverse Issues in Higher Education. Her interdisciplinary research on women in the workplace unites three strands of significant sociological inquiry. Diversity in the workplace, women in positions of leadership, and the impact of intersectional identities on advancement opportunity. Welcome to the Though Project, Doctor Tsedale Melaku.

Tsedale Melaku:
Thank you for having me.

Tanya Domi:
Well, welcome. I've been following you the last couple of years and you are a 2016 alumna of the Graduate Center in sociology. And in the nearly four years, you have been working since you graduated. You have leveraged your knowledge in your book, You Don't Look Like a Lawyer, by bringing your perspective as a black critical scholar on black and gender work. And you're bringing it into what I think is, for better or for worse, it is a zeitgeist moment in the country with regard to sexual harassment, the Me Too Movement and Black Lives Matter. That aligns with the broader discussion and a badly needed discussion of structural racism and sexism in America. The past year in America has brought these issues to the forefront, to the credit of so many activists ensuing a national conversation.

Tanya Domi:
It's a difficult one, no doubt. The current president has also assisted in forcing a public confrontation on these issues as well. So, what are your thoughts about this moment, given the work that you have clearly been committed to?

Tsedale Melaku:
I think that this is a very difficult moment obviously for so many people who have been impacted directly, just with the incredible loss of life in terms of COVID, but also racial upheaval and what that has meant for communities of color, and specifically the black community. How just the abject brutalization of black people continues to be in the forefront, even when we're hunkering down and trying to keep safe from an actual virus pandemic. So, racism continues to be the virus that proliferates and really is pervasive in the lives of black people. I think this moment has shone an incredible light on what systemic racism actually looks like in America and how that really does tie in directly to our history here. So, in
this particular moment people are clamoring and trying to engage in conversations around race and racism, particularly in organizations.

Tsedale Melaku:
And as you know, my research is situated in organizations. So, it's fascinating to me, to be here and to engage in this kind of work while we're in this moment and recognizing that even though we're having this discussion and it's so important, that we need to be able to take the discussion and move it forward to actual action so that it leads to progress. And that people don't end up with what I'm starting to feel and see right now, this racial fatigue around having these difficult conversations and trying to address and name the problem for what it is. Obviously I'm excited to be a part of that, I think we have a long way to go. But we're in a moment where we can actually hopefully see some transformation. There could be some change that comes about just from recognizing, naming the problem, and then doing things to resolve those issues.

Tanya Domi:
Right, to manifest those issues and policies and practices.

Tsedale Melaku:
Absolutely. But also recognizing that it's not going to happen overnight. This problem didn't come up overnight. So, it's going to take the time that is necessary, incredible amounts of time, in order to address these issues. There's a lot of foundational work that needs to be done at this time in organizations. And CUNY and other academic spaces, industry spaces where we're not only naming that problem, which is systemic racism in a lot of ways, systemic white racism more specifically. But also, engaging in terms of what are these theoretical frames that as a sociologist we talk about in depth? What is it about intersectionality, what is it about colorblind racism or systemic racism? Where we need to understand the terms used, the theories in which they're based, and then how that actually applies in organizational spaces.

Tsedale Melaku:
In particular, where I work. But also on the streets. How are we making those connections? We're always putting out statements about racial equity and social justice in the streets. But how does that apply in the organization? How is that reflected in the experiences of the BYPOC employees that occupy those spaces? And I think that's where we need to make that connection, instead of just talking about the problem outside of our four walls.

Tanya Domi:
Right. I think that we have to give a lot of credit to the activists who between their work are marching, but also COVID just lays bare the structural racism in America. And also let's talk about just for poor people in general, how COVID has really pulled the drape back. And I think a lot of white people have been shocked by some of these revelations. I mean, I'm not making any excuses, but their children are marching. These are multiracial efforts when you see the Millennials and the Gen Zoomers out on the street, they are marching because those of us who are older or at risk, or I would be out there myself. But they're bringing it home and they're saying to their mothers and fathers and their neighbors and their friends, "This is not okay."
So, there's ... That in itself gives me optimism and it has to be, as you're articulating, is has to be harnessed and brought inside, into institutions. And I think that that is the moment that we're at. And I'm not sure in looking at the past, reviewing the past, and I grew up during the '60s and during the racial justice movement. That was definitely one that did provide hope. But it was a different set point. We're at a new set point. Crises provide opportunity, they provide opportunity. And what you're talking about is in your scholarship bringing it inside, as you just said. For our listenership to know about you, I just want to say when you enter into the academy and submit to the arduous process to earn a PhD, many times people's personal experience informs the field they pick and the topic that they pursue. And in that vein, can you tell us how you came about to write your book, You Don't Look Like a Lawyer, and how that happened? And share that with our listeners.

Tsedale Melaku:

Definitely, Tanya. Thank you for the question. Before getting into the PhD program, I was working in a law firm as a corporate paralegal. Out of my undergraduate experience I wanted to go to law school. I didn't want to take any breaks, but a really good friend of mine suggested that I come and work her firm for a year and just explore what that would look like for myself. I did, I got a job, which was exciting. And then six months into that job I decided absolutely not, this is not what I had anticipated. It's not the civil rights work that I was gearing up for and thinking that I'd be a part of. It was more of a corporate environment where we're doing mergers and acquisitions and just the kind of work that I never really thought about in terms of being a lawyer.

Tsedale Melaku:

But what got me really being in that space was that there was only one black partner, and this was in 2003. Today there's still only one black partner in that firm. And at that time, there was only on black associate. And I wondered, in a firm of over 500 associates at that time in the New York office, how is it possible that you only had one black associate in the group that I was in? And it disturbed me. So, I immediately decided ... that coupled with the lifestyle of being a corporate attorney was not something that I was interested in at the time. So, I engaged in getting into a graduate program in sociology. My undergraduate degrees were in sociology and Africana studies, with a minor in psych. So, this was the natural step for me and I was excited about that.

Tsedale Melaku:

So, I started the program and I started working full time at a different firm. While doing my research and just engaging in the program, another brilliant woman said to me, "Why don't you look at law firms? You have so much to say about them." And this was Doctor [Shilman 00:10:40], Lynn Shilman actually told me that. And I did. I turned my gaze at looking at law firms. And one that I was in, in particular and engaging in. Why is it there are so few black associates as a whole, but black women in particular? And in so doing, I ended up doing a study where I examined the experiences of black women lawyers in the top 25 firms. And I was able to get-

Tanya Domi:

The top 25 firms in the United States or in New York?

Tsedale Melaku:

Top 25 firms in the United States.
Tanya Domi:
Oh, very, very interesting.

Tsedale Melaku:
And of the top 25 firms, I was able to get 20% of the population at the time to participate in the study. And that was about 22 associates, 22 lawyers. So, that just tells you how very few black female partners and black female associates are actually present.

Tanya Domi:
Actually out there.

Tsedale Melaku:
Yes. With that, of course once I completed my dissertation and graduated, I had the fortunate experience of meeting one of my race scholars who I've long admired and was offered an opportunity to turn my dissertation into a book. So, I wrote You Don't Look Like a Lawyer: Black Women and Systemic Gendered Racism, to reach a much broader, wider audience about the experiences that black women are facing. Not just in law firms, but what that means speaking to black women in white institutional spaces and then women of color as a whole. That's how the book developed.

Tanya Domi:
So, there's that saying, "If you can't see it, you can't be it." And that seems to ... It's a powerful comment. I mean, there's only 22 black women partners and associates out there. I mean, that is just remarkable. And clearly they aren't going to law schools to recruit looking for them. I don't know what that's about. Somebody who does the hiring is clearly not thinking about why diversity would be important in their respective firm.

Tsedale Melaku:
Absolutely. Let me just clarify. At the time the study was being conducted, there were 104 potential participants that could've been in my study. I started in February. From February to March, that 104 had dropped down to 96, which speaks to attrition. Those top 25 firms and the 22 that I was able to access directly, I can only self-identify participants from company websites. Because calling firms and asking them, "Could you please pass me the contact information for your black associates?" Doesn't really work, although I tried. But gaining access to that population, by the time I'd reached saturation essentially, I had 20 associates, black female associates, and two black female partners.

Tanya Domi:
Oh, okay.

Tsedale Melaku:
That was 20% of that population. But more so, what it means for black women who end up getting recruited, so gaining access to the space. But then end up having to leave because they're not gaining access to professional development-
Right. So, they're attriting out.

Tsedale Melaku:
Exactly. So, the attrition rate for this population is the highest amongst all groups and all racialized groups in particular. So, it's important to think about that. And even if I look at that data now, it's still very low. There hasn't been much movement, which is important to think, when we think about progress.

Tanya Domi:
That segues in nicely to my second question because you started alluding to when we spoke yesterday, you alluded to the last 40 years of diversity research. And you're clearly authoritative on it, using it in your research. So, what does that tell us about our past and how does that inform this moment? I mean, what do you think are the big takeaways on that research, diversity research? What really comes to you? What really presses up against this moment in terms of that research?

Tsedale Melaku:
I think when we think about diversity, equity and inclusion in particular, for me, I can't help but think that they have become buzzwords and catchphrases. People are using these terms ad nauseum really to talk about something that they want in this space, but actually hasn't manifested just yet. And diversity research has been going on obviously for decades. So, for it to now in this moment catch fire and everyone be in conversation. Pamela Newkirk just wrote a book that came out a year ago, Diversity Inc. So, diversity research, diversity ... Not research, but diversity work has now become a billion dollar business.

Tanya Domi:
If you did a word cloud you would probably see it would be one of the top words.

Tsedale Melaku:
Absolutely. I think in the process of having this push for diversity, we've actually lost the importance of what this diversity means. And for me, it's important for us to take a step back and actually name what diversity are we thinking about here? Because law firms and organizations can argue that they are diverse, because everyone is diverse. There's a diversity to everyone. There's diversity in age and religion and class and race and gender, and all the varying categories that we look at when we think about identity. But what I haven't seen, is racial diversity, and specifically black people in these spaces.

Tsedale Melaku:
Now, you can take law firms, and that's where my research has been situated in, so of course I know what those numbers look like. And just to give you an example, in the last 10 years if you look at the National Association of Law Placement data, their 2019 diversity report actually showed that in 2009 the percentage increase was only .10% of black associates in a 10 year period. That to me is not progress. Right?

Tanya Domi:
Agreed. Agreed.
Tsedale Melaku:
And we're thinking about progress in terms of not just recruitment, but actual retention. How are we developing people once they get into that space? You can translate that to academia, right? Black faculty members who are in full time tenure track or full time positions in academic spaces are less than 3% of the total population. That does not inspire confidence when we're thinking about what does diversity, equity and inclusion mean. When we think about recruitment, this argument that there is a narrative around pipeline issues. That is a false narrative and it's really used to justify those low numbers.

Tsedale Melaku:
So, [inaudible 00:17:30] shift in terms of how we engage conversations around diversity, equity and inclusion, and actually name those issues. I'm targeting racial equity here, gender equity. We need to say it and then work towards making that intrinsic to organizations, versus websites that we can put up that have the very few BYPOC or people who identify themselves as marginalized and so end up being in those positions. Think about that New York Times article. I think that was a very important article. After that original article came out, there was a follow up. Even that article pulled out the various BYPOC individuals to be photographed. If that is your representation, if that is how you are signaling-

Tanya Domi:
Measure. And how you measure too. Right?

Tsedale Melaku:
Absolutely. Then there are real hard questions that need to be answered and asked, quite honestly.

Tanya Domi:
You just mentioned the academy, so I think in an article that you've been quoted in about having these conversations in the academy are not necessarily a safe space to have them. And that right now as we discussed yesterday, the Graduate Center is currently engaged in a diversity and inclusion initiative under Professor Martin [Ruck's 00:18:53] leadership and recommendations have gone forward. I happen to be on one of those committees creating safe spaces, and these recommendations from the various committees have now been sent to president [Geryl 00:19:07] for her review. This is an ongoing process that's underway. Why is this a vital and important moment for the Graduate Center and in the academy itself with activists on the street, with people opining, people like yourselves writing op eds in tier one media.

Tanya Domi:
You've been in the Harvard Business Review, you've been in Bloomberg. This has to come inside the academy. And you have people like yourself in the academy researching on racism and structural racism and sexism. What is, in your opinion, given you're a graduate and you've done everything you could do in terms of education, what in terms of a triage of priorities, what do you think's the most important thing for higher education on this topic right now? And how would you rank those priorities and why?

Tsedale Melaku:
There's so much we can discuss around this one question.
Tanya Domi:
True.

Tsedale Melaku:
Yeah, I mean I co-authored an article with Angie [Beeman 00:20:14], Doctor Beeman who is at Baruch. And specifically it came about because we were talking about our personal experiences in academia and how we felt oftentimes silenced, overlooked, marginalized in a way, as women of color. And then this was happening at the very same time that George Floyd was murdered. So, the reaction of academic departments and institutions is really what pushed us to think wow, within the academy people are reacting in such a way and putting out these statements. But it's not really reflected in the experiences of those who are in those departments who are feeling silenced, who are feeling as though the aggression that they have experienced have not been addressed and have oftentimes been overlooked.

Tsedale Melaku:
This really related directly to the research that we both do. I'm examining the experiences of BYPOC women in white spaces. So, it was interesting for me to just take that look at my own personal experiences and marry the two in a way to engage in how is it that oftentimes we are silenced when trying to have conversations that make others, and those particularly who are in the privileged position uncomfortable? And then how can we move forward from there?

Tsedale Melaku:
The three things that I would suggest right now, and I think are urgent for CUNY to address, but particularly academia and white institutional spaces. One, you need to look at your BYPOC employees and faculty and staff who are there and recognize that when they are experiencing aggressions, it cannot be only a way to just recognize that the problem is there and not actually address the problem. Which means rooting out what those problems are. So, having hard conversations is the primary place for us to begin engaging in this kind of anti-racist, anti-sexist work. That's important.

Tsedale Melaku:
I also think we need to open the door for black faculty, absolutely. I don't think we have enough. We absolutely do not have enough within CUNY. At the Graduate Center specifically, I graduated from there. So, I value this institution and I believe that CUNY as a whole and the GC in particular has a responsibility not just to its students and its staff and faculty, but New York City. We should be the representation for all other academic institutions in terms of looking at who we value in those positions, and particularly those positions that are privileged in this sense. So, being a faculty, a full time faculty at the Graduate Center is an honor, it's a [crosstalk 00:22:58].

Tanya Domi:
Most prestigious, the most prestigious.

Tsedale Melaku:
So, I want to be able to look up and see folks that not only look like me, but are doing work and not just doing the diversity either. I want the work that they're doing to be valued in their field, and then not have them feel that they are going to be overly burdened with managing a significant level of the invisible labor of maneuvering the space and centering that diversity effort. That's another area that I
think is critical. So, let's open up the door for more black faculty. Because we are out there, we exist, and a lot of them are right here. I think [inaudible 00:23:37] and they can do that.

Tsedale Melaku:
The other thing I think is important in this moment, I'm teaching an incredible class on the evolution and expressions of racism right now. And I've had an amazing opportunity to engage in this very conversation with my students. And we need to center this work. We need to center race work, and value it in a way that allows it to be embedded within the curriculum in general. That means putting the resources where they need to be. And this filters out to the first two points that I brought up. So, if you are centering this work and you know that there are faculty who do this work, dig into the resources that are available within the institution to bring this forward.

Tsedale Melaku:
And by valuing that, by centering amplifying their voices, you're only going to make CUNY look good, but you're also going to really create an enriching environment for students and staff and faculty to be in community. And I think that is very important. We need to start doing that. My students are amazing, they have incredible questions and they're experiencing this moment of immense tragedy and pain, not just in their homes but on the streets. And they're the ones that are out there protesting.

Tanya Domi:
Right, they're living it. They're living it.

Tsedale Melaku:
They're living it and they're protesting. They are doing the work, the good trouble work that we all need to do.

Tanya Domi:
Absolutely.

Tsedale Melaku:
And they need to be guided in a way that allows them to know that they're not only supported and valued, but that this work is valued. And that CUNY sees that it's value. The value is coming in, in the ways that they're supporting that. Whether it's resourcing it, supporting the faculty that are already doing this work, the staff members that are doing this work. I think recognizing that you already have an incredible pool of people here is critical. And then giving them the ability to do what they do best is important. So, more black faculty, more faculty of color, please bring us in here. Engage in having these conversations more deeply. Name the problem for what it actually is. And then drive that with in the way that we're embedding it in the curriculum is important. Those are my things.

Tanya Domi:
Okay, those are good points. This kind of yields to a discussion on allyship. Because we can talk about those priorities, but when we're living and working together to realize them really does call on allyship. You recently published a brilliant article in the Harvard Business Review with three other colleagues. I thought it was really interesting that the men were affiliated with the Naval Academy. I thought that was interesting. Because I actually served in the military and I still say to this day it's the most integrated
institution in America. Not necessarily in leadership, it's fallen short a bit, without a doubt. But it is to this day one of the most integrated institutions in America.

Tanya Domi:
You talk about allyship and one of the things that happens is I think when there's one black person in the room, there's a propensity by white people to sit there and go, "Oh, don't really know what to say." So, they sort of look around and say, "Well, what do you think, black person?" And it's been very interesting to work with Martin Ruck in this process that we're engaged in. Because he's like, "Okay, it's not going to all be black people leading this, white people are going to have to step up." That's a really good lesson on allyship. Why don't you talk about what your piece was trying to focus on and how do you view allyship? How should allyship be centered in this discussion, in this effort to be anti-racist?

Tsedale Melaku:
Absolutely. Writing this piece with Doctor Beeman, with Doctor Smith and Doctor Johnson has been a fantastic experience for me. And what we do is, we define allyship as a strategic mechanism that’s used by individuals to be accomplices, collaborators and co-conspirators. These are individuals who are actively fighting injustice. They're promoting equity in the workplace and other spaces as well. And it's really done through supportive and collaborative personal relationship. And in so doing, you're also committing to public acts of sponsorship and advocacy that are specifically used or intended to drive improvements, really systemic change in the workplace and other spaces that engage culture, practice and policy. We want to get to the root of those issues. We want to go to the foundation. So, we need to be able to engage in this way.

Tsedale Melaku:
Now, allyship, we try to also recognize that we got to push away from performative allyship. And this is where that hard work starts to come into place. We have to become more invested in doing hard work, troublesome work. We have to recognize that we're not exempt from the various problematic behaviors that create the tension that lead to aggressions. And that again, as I mentioned before, it's not going to happen overnight. But it’s something that we need to focus on in order to make this moment more transformational. What allies really do, is they're deploying privilege. They're deploying the privilege that they have and they're taking risks in order to make those changes a reality.

Tsedale Melaku:
What are some of the things they're challenging? Racist ideology, practice, racist structures, racist policies. And these are things that are upholding institutionalized racism and white supremacy in organizations. So, you're going to target not just racism, but all the isms. It's incumbent upon an ally who is someone is directly invested in making those changes.

Tsedale Melaku:
What are some ways that we discuss that we can do this? The first is just being intentional. Absolutely being intentional about working towards racial and gender equity and making that intrinsic to the academic space, let's say, if we're talking specifically about an academic institution. It's about supporting your BYPOC or other marginalized individuals who are in that space in order to foster critical mentor relationships, but even more so ones that translate into sponsorship. You mentioned Doctor Ruck, Doctor Ruck is not just an ally, he is a sponsor to me. He is someone who's not only supported by
academic journey, but after graduating really pulling me in, really engaging. I lost my chair five months before I defended. That's an incredible blow that most people-

Tanya Domi:  
Oh, God. That's really terrible when you're doing a PhD. Oh, boy.

Tsedale Melaku:  
Absolutely. And my chair was Doctor Jerry Watts. And he was the most amazing human being. The person with the most incredible intellect, kindness, just everything embodied in this man was something that I have and will continue to strive to work towards. So, having-

Tanya Domi:  
I'm sorry, did he pass away?

Tsedale Melaku:  
He did pass away.

Tanya Domi:  
Oh, that's just so terrible. It's like a double blow, right?

Tsedale Melaku:  
Yeah. And it was a loss not just to the academic community, the Graduate Center, but all of the students who felt that he was family.

Tanya Domi:  
That he mentored, right.

Tsedale Melaku:  
I think about this and I think about what Doctor Ruck did. He invested his time in me. And it wasn't just him, there were other faculty at the Graduate Center, Erica [Tschido-Childs 00:31:36] was another amazing ally, sponsor, Doctor Bennet. There were a number of folks who really stepped up in order to make sure that I would not fall through those cracks. And I think that's what an ally, sponsor, mentor does. They're there making crucial decisions to support you. They're finding leverage in diversity. They're pushing that in order to drive an impact in the organization.

Tsedale Melaku:  
Another thing that allies need to really think about strategically here is how they're being proactive. Speaking up, that's the first thing you have to do. You speak up when someone is experiencing a racial or gender aggression or any type of aggression or discrimination. Speak up in the moment. Turn this into a moment where people can learn and recognize when a problem is happening and not an after the fact moment. Because those moments don't actually help the person aggressed, but it only helps the person who is now feeling emboldened and empowered to say something after the fact. And it doesn't help anyone but that person feel better about their inaction. So, I think that's a critical space for us to think about.
Tsedale Melaku:
And then I'm also going to amplify other women of color. And in this particular ask here, is knowing when to be proactive and not working from a sense of guilt or shame, but really a true sense of comradery and solidarity is important. This involves-

Tanya Domi:
Solidarity action, yeah.

Tsedale Melaku:
Absolutely. It involves continued support of BYPOC and other marginalized groups, even when they're calling you out on your own individual problematic behaviors and practices. And this is something that is discussed heavily in Doctor Beeman's forthcoming book, Liberal White Supremacy. I think that speaking up even in times when BYPOC or whoever is not in the room to recognize an aggression happening is critical. Because you're setting the tone. That's what an ally accomplice does. Raving, being a raving fan. This is what Doctor Johnson and Doctor Smith really talk about in their book, Good Guys. Being a raving fan of those folks who you know don't necessarily get access to opportunity. If they're not in a room, call them in. Have them be a part of those meetings. Open the door so that they can sit down and lean in. You can't lean in, if you're not in the door. So, those narratives also play an important role in what allyship looks like.

Tsedale Melaku:
Another good place I think is important, and this is part of the learning that needs to happen when we're doing this kind of work, is recognizing that anti-racism doesn't equal absolution. So, not using anti-racism as a tactic to actually absolve yourself from your own issues, whether it's a vice, your type of prejudice that you may have. Recognizing that intent doesn't actually matter is also very important. Just really focusing on impact and the impact on the person who's been aggressed is critical. And then just taking risks. You have to be able to take a risk, regardless. Even if it means that it's going to impact you negatively, you're taking a risk, you're setting the tone.

Tsedale Melaku:
This speaks directly to privilege and the system of privilege that just manifests for particular groups. And if we don't push past that, if we don't recognize privilege just as much as we're recognizing marginalization, then we can't really move forward in this discussion and the conversation kind of stops because people feel as though they're being targeted. It's not really targeting, it's really giving you an opportunity to see ... and that's why intersectionality is critical, how other people are experiencing these systems of oppression. How multiple identities interacting, overlapping, combining does create disadvantageous outcomes for particular groups in relation to others. So, it's recognizing that.

Tanya Domi:
I think these are all just really great ideas for people to really think about. But I would also throw in here, and I think this will also dovetail with your current project. But what happens when systems that have been set up under Title IX and EEOC and all the workplace compliance to the law, and what happens when they fail? I think this is a good moment to sort of dovetail to your next book project, and you're already writing a second book, the Handbook on Workplace Diversity and Stratification. It sounds like of course it's very organizationally situated, employers I would imagine are a good target for this book, and
institutions clearly. But we all know about the infrastructure to deal with racism and to deal with sexism. And yet a lot of people still feel very short changed, despite those structures. Does your book talk about these structures?

Tanya Domi:

And is this the moment to maybe review all these structures that have existed forever? I mean, they've existed a long time. Title IX was passed in 1972, the EEOC has been around for a very, very long time. You add in the civil rights provisions in 1964, Civil Rights Act. And yet lots of people feel marginalized and probably have been discriminated against nonetheless. Why doesn't it work?

Tsedale Melaku:

Yeah. This is a fantastic question. I think when we're considering some of the measures or structures in place to mitigate the experience of those who are discriminated against, oftentimes people will feel as though they are silenced, even through that process. Going through the-

Tanya Domi:

Indeed, indeed.

Tsedale Melaku:

So, going through the structured process, collecting all the evidence or data that you have to support your claim of having gone through a racial aggression or a sexual aggression or any type of aggression, and then being met with, "There's not sufficient evidence to support your claims." Meanwhile you have not only endured the scars of having to be in that space and mitigate those aggressions, but-

Tanya Domi:

And usually it's a hostile work environment.

Tsedale Melaku:

Absolutely. It is absolutely a hostile work environment. And violence, you are experiencing various forms of violence, even though they may not necessarily be physical, there is an impact to those experiences. And oftentimes it leads to high blood pressure, stress, anxiety.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah, there are physical consequences for working in a highly hostile work environment.

Tsedale Melaku:

Absolutely. And one in which you don't feel as though your efforts to address these issues have actually been considered thoroughly and thoughtfully. That disconnect between the structure and policy and measures that are put in place and your experience with it really does perpetuate inequality. That's the crux right there. That's the intersection that we're missing when we're having these conversations. So, what happens to all of those individuals? They're left to deal with their own traumas. And oftentimes they feel as though they're pushed out. And if you really look at data, whether it's in law firms or in academic spaces, the attrition rate is so high oftentimes because individuals don't feel as though their issues are being addressed directly.
Tsedale Melaku:
One thing I would say is important for those who are in those Title IX positions, those officers or EEOC officers or supervisors, when someone is telling you about the aggressions that they are facing and experiencing, the easiest thing to do is listen. Not to minimize those experiences. Not to explain them away or diminish their lived-

Tanya Domi:
Right, their experience. Right.

Tsedale Melaku:
Right? And then recognizing that everyone has a side. There's always two sides to a story, and then there's the truth. But if you see that there's a consistent way in which an organization is pushing out BYPOC from their space, people are leaving and they're leaving feeling aggressed. And they're telling you about their grievances right before they exit and you're not actually addressing it, then you are complicit within that system. We can't have declarations and statements of solidarity if you're not actually listening to the people who are experiencing the problems in your space. There needs to be accountability. How do we get accountability? That means you need to start having these conversations about race and really racism and how it translates in the experiences of those who are marginalized in this space. So, that's a very important place to be.

Tsedale Melaku:
This book that I'm working on is very important to me because I think that in a lot of ways this handbook really does focus on understanding both the present day and future implications of workplace diversity and stratification. I have a theoretical section, I have an empirical section, I have one where we're looking at key sites of contention. And then I have one where it's more of a practical diversity in the larger context engagement. I've pulled in a number of scholars from varying disciplines to center the theoretical foundations that look at diversity scholarship and race scholarship in particular. I cannot hide or [inaudible 00:41:26] from that. So, I'm very, very excited to be able to engage with these varying scholars and practitioners. Those who are actually on the ground.

Tanya Domi:
Actually doing the work.

Tsedale Melaku:
Doing the work. And what it is that they're seeing in terms of the diversity efforts in organizations, but also how they have engaged in that space as a diversity expert and then the language that they're using. I'm really excited and interested to see how it all culminates and comes together. Because I think it's going to be a rich book that is going to provide a guide for folks who are interested in really learning more deeply about diversity work, but also diversity research, which spans into human resources, sociology, psychology, business management, all of those varying disciplines that impact that way that we're thinking about diversity, equity and inclusion today, but also workplace stratification and what that actually means moving forward. I'm excited.
Well, it sounds like again, you are ahead of the curve and we wish you good luck on this project. It sounds very exciting. And when you get it done, Tsedale, we'll have you back to talk about it.

Tsedale Melaku:
Thank you so much, I really appreciate you taking the time and inviting me to be in conversation with you about this topic.

Tanya Domi:
I can't wait to publish it and share with the Graduate Center community and beyond. Thank you again for being here today. Thanks for tuning in to the Thought Project, and thanks to our guest, Doctor Tsedale Melaku, a post doctoral fellow at the Graduate Center, CUNY. The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolf of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi, tune in next week.