Interview with William Jackson (Village of Wisdom)

Lissa Harris

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Lissa Harris: Could you start with introducing yourself and your organization, and talk a little bit about the problem that you're trying to solve?

William Jackson: My name is William Jackson. I am the founder and chief dreamer of Village of Wisdom. I'm also a husband and a father of two beautiful girls, a son and somebody who loves the south. I grew up right outside of Atlanta, Georgia and now live in Durham, North Carolina, a city rich in black history. Village of Wisdom works with black parents to create culturally affirmed learning environments.

We like to say, we protect Black Genius. We're leveraging black parent wisdom to create learning environments that black children can feel seen in as whole humans and can feel intellectually challenged, but also affirmed around their racial identity, their blackness. Made to feel good about being black and feel good about being a learner, at the same time.

The power play of it, the issue that we're really attacking here, is that a lot of the evidence-based practice or research that is out on education in the country has been done, in a best case scenario on black people, and in a worst case scenario not even with black people in mind. That stuff gets put up on our national websites, like the Institute of Education Sciences or the What Works Clearinghouse, as evidence-based practices, which means that schools have to choose curriculums that align with those, "evidence-based practices." Funders fund to those evidence-based practices and ultimately, what ends up happening, is that a lot of those evidence-based practices see black children as a deficit, as somebody to be fixed, as opposed to the true genius that they have.

We train black parents to create their own evidence, to create their own research informed practices, so that money can start to flow to culturally affirming practices that see black children as fully human, that affirm their blackness, and make them feel good about being learners all at the same time.

Lissa Harris: Are you working directly with families? Could you talk more specifically about how you engage with the folks that you work with, what brings them into your program, and also, how do they benefit from the work that you do?

William Jackson: Yes, great question. I would say that there are about three to four groups of beneficiaries for our work. One, there's philanthropy, so that they can fund better work. Two, there's researchers, so that their work can be more accurate, and the knowledge that they create can be more useful, which is a benefit to them, and obviously, to us. Educators, folks who are seeking to improve educational outcomes, and improve the minds of young people or help to grow those young minds. And obviously, the last one, and the one closest to our heart is the black family in general.

We work with black-parent families, specifically, to support them and leverage their wisdom so that those other beneficiaries can benefit from their wisdom. One great way that we've recently come up with to describe our programming is through, essentially, a dream-ship model, which is essentially a fellowship. It's a paid learning opportunity for black parents to get trained in our overall framework, which is the black-genius framework, and then also, the culture of care, which is how we engage with black folks. One, hint at the different elements of learning that black people tend to appreciate, and then, two, having a culture of care is essential to any learning environment.

Learning environments are challenging regardless of how affirming you make them. Learning itself is an experience that tends to be uncomfortable for people. We're saying that it doesn't need to be unnecessarily uncomfortable, that's what the culture of care is about. In the first year of the Dream Step Program model, folks learn about those things in our four program areas. In the second year, they're put in an experiential learning experience in one of our program areas, whether it is the research area, the area where they give constructive feedback to educators, or another area that focuses specifically on holding space for black parents. One of the last areas is actually creating learning environments outside of schools, leveraging art and cultural practices, like music, to draw attention to the genius of black folks historically and into the future.

The last element that we do for these parent leaders who come through this fellowship program, that we call the dream ship, is we are starting to pay parents for rest. We think that this is really important because, I have this saying that I'm taking from Tricia Hersey who wrote an amazing book called, The Rest is Resistance. She's part of the Nap Ministry. Essentially, my thoughts here are inspired by her. That is, tired minds dream tired dreams. If we need new dreams and new ideas to form a better world or more equitable world, then we need to make sure that we're invested in the rest of the wisdom of black parents, so that they can have more expansive

dreams and tap into their full-wisdom ingenious, so that we can imagine new ways of doing education that would benefit black children. But not just black children. There's a lot of things that we're trying to solve globally and it's a shame when we think about how many kids don't get to fully live into their genius because they haven't experienced an education or educational opportunities that help them develop that. Are we missing out on the next climate justice invention that needs to be invented, so that we can enjoy this planet for a longer time, or the next political invention that will help us live in a more equitable society?

Lissa Harris: Are you working with school districts? Are you working with community organizations on the ground? How do you connect with parents and connect with people in the community? What does that process look like?

William Jackson: Originally we did a lot of connecting with black families at community events across the country. We used to host our own festival called the Black Genius Fest. We attracted a lot of parents that way during COVID and, as technology has become more a part of our lives, we've used social media - like Facebook - as a great place to connect with parents. We have a group called Black Parents Connect Durham that has around 4,000 parents in it and it is a space where they can come, share advice with each other about community resources. Where are they sending their kids to school? Where are you getting your child's haircut? Where is the dance class? Who's teaching swimming?

Black parents especially, love that information coming from other black parents, because they know that they're thinking about the things that they have to worry about in this country, and the things that they would be excited about. Building a digital community, but also building a local community, are the two ways that we connect with parents. We actually don't have to go through schools, we have our own independent relationships with parents and we're seeking to build on that. When we invest in parents in this way, they tell their friends about the work, so we've built a little community of people who know about our work.

Lissa Harris: How do the insights that you are gathering through these methods flow into schools and into the education framework more broadly?

William Jackson: One of the ways that information flows is by knowledge creation. A lot of people like to say that knowledge is power. I like to say creating knowledge is actually power. When you create an evidence-based practice, and then that practice ends up in the What Works Clearinghouse, or a resource library we're creating, people look to that reference and start to make decisions like that. In the education space, there's a theory called socio-emotional learning, and the group behind that is CASEL [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning]. That group has influenced education across the country because they've forwarded a

framework that they said was good for individual learning. In many ways, we're trying to leverage that same model where people put research out there, and then they try to replicate that research.

People read that while they're going to grad school, or while they're in undergrad, and so we have reports on the research portion of our website where people come and read that. We also try to translate that research into practical things on our Instagram feed and social media, and we're creating tools that people can use in digital spaces, like our black-genius planning tool. We're creating our own resource library, which will actually have not only reports of evidence-based practices that have been approved by black parents, but also breaking those strategies down to be social media ready. Basically, graphics or short video tidbits that help to explain what folks can do. People are picking that up all across those different platforms. We also do traditional professional development with certain school-partners that we are working with to try to help teachers, specifically, leverage these frameworks and personalize that for the classroom.

Lissa Harris: What makes your approach distinctive from other organizations that are working in this space, working on similar problems?

William Jackson: I'd say that we are potentially one of one who's working to train black parents to be researchers in education. If that's what you want to do in America, you're probably coming to us, because I'm not familiar with anybody else who's made that their thing. We're led by some really amazing black women on our team who do this work. Amber Majors is a researcher on our team that does a lot of the community driven research and design work, along with Dawn Henderson, another black woman. Both of these are black parents, so not only are we engaging black parents to do this work beyond ourselves, but we are black parents ourselves. I have a PhD in research and education research, and everyone on our team is black. And then, a lot of folks are black parents as well, 13 folks on our staff and our board.

One, it's who we focus on, but then it is, two, we are very reflective of the population that we are focused on. Especially, when you start talking about research, that makes us pretty unique on top of things. For example, participatory action research is something that is growing in popularity, but is not what I would consider what most people are thinking about when they think about top-tier research. We're actually looking to change that. I like to say that, "If your research isn't rigorous enough to live up to black parents' dreams, then I don't know if your research is really rigorous." Those are some of the things that make us unique.

Lissa Harris: And that must have implications for trust in the community, the fact that your researchers are reflective of the population that you're going into, and trying to get insight from?

William Jackson: Yeah, exactly. I think it's both a visual thing and then also saying that you can't judge a book by its cover. Certain books might look enticing, and they should be things that should be trusted, but then, when you read the inside of it, you find out that it's no different than any other book. It just happened to have a black covering. That's why the participatory action is so important, because if we're training folks to do research alongside us, and we're following their insights, then not only are we portraying trust externally, we're doing trust and process. Now you don't have to trust me to bring up the insights of folks who are closest to the problem, because the process actually mandates that. It's less about us and more. And then and more about the process, too.

Lissa Harris: Can you share an example, and this can be as small or large scale as you want, but can you share an example of your work that illustrates the impact of what you do?

William Jackson: We recently adopted this community-based participatory research and Dawn Henderson, from our team, calls it community driven research. When we first decided to do this, I had the thought that I was tired of hearing people talk about needs assessments. I wanted to hear about people's dreams. What are the dreams that black people have for creating culturally affirming-learning environments? Learning environments that saw their children as full human beings, that pushed them, but also happened to be online, because everybody was doing stuff online during the pandemic.

I realized that we were actually making a power play, which is something that I'm really interested in. Power is important in this world and how things get done. It helps us make decisions, it is how we make choices. After training the parents and preparing them to ask this question, what are your dreams for black children? They also ask that question to black children themselves, they ask it to other black parents. What really stuck out to me is when they asked teachers because, in our country, the conversation about education is usually one way. Teachers tell parents, "Here's your child's grades, here's how your child did, this is what you need to know, this is what they're doing." It is not the parents working from their own expertise, since they are experts of their children.

Seeing three black moms in a Zoom room with five white teachers, and they asked them, "What are the dreams that you have for black children?" It was a realization that was a power dynamic shift, which is a powerful thing. It is the creation of knowledge in the hands of black women asking that question to folks, who typically have power over them in changing that power dynamic. Those black women took the findings and insights that they made and, by the end of the process, they had taken over the whole analysis and research process the way they wanted to present it. They created the PowerPoint and they were presenting this information to board

members of school districts, to chief executive officers in those school districts, and other educators.

You have 20 to 30 people on the phone, and they are making decisions that are probably impacting the lives of 50,000 people. They're asking these black parents for their advice on what they should be doing in the middle of the pandemic, and that's what we mean by creating knowledge is power. When you create a new evidence base, you can inform the decisions of lots of people. Even though we were only working with five black-mama researchers, those moms impacted the lives of potentially over 50,000 black children, not to mention the other children in those school districts in the triangle area of North Carolina.

Lissa Harris: Can you talk about what insights or lessons that other people, who are working on problems in this space, could draw from your work? How could people learn from your work?

William Jackson: There's a lot of people working in the education space that are probably leaning into culturally reaffirming practices. Our Black Genius framework was co-created with black parents and it lays out the things that you should pay attention to when you're engaging, not just black students, but also black parents. It talks about paying attention to their interests, which is not groundbreaking stuff. Implicit biases work by making us ignore those things.

It is important to make paying attention to other people's interests and building a trust-based relationship with them explicit, and paying attention to social justice. These are items that we know are important, because not only do we get it from black parents, but every time we ask parents, "What's most important to you in education?" They say stuff like, "I want my child to trust these teachers. I want to see more black history, and I want my child to learn about things that they're interested in." All three of those are things that we see in a Black Genius framework, so without us even asking, that's what we hear back.

I would say, "Go read our Black Genius framework, black paper, check it out on our website, see how you could integrate that into your work." Glenn Martin is actually the person who talks about the people closest to the problem as being the ones who have the best solutions, and Bryan Stevenson took that to proximity and just blew it up.

You can't just be proximate. You got to have relationships. And instead of trying to empower people, position them to have power. And if you position them to have power, you have positioned them to make the insights. If you position them to make the decisions, then, I think, we'll be better off as opposed to trying to be a conduit for something that just sometimes doesn't work, because things don't need to be conduit. Folks need to be able to have that impact on their own and we have to position them to do that, just like we've been positioned to do these

things. I want us to move away from empowerment, and I want us to move towards positioning people to take advantage of power.

Lissa Harris: This is echoing a lot of what folks have been saying in these interviews, who work directly with folks that are in communities, even across people working in very different places and on very different problems. How do you measure your success? What's the evidence that you're making progress, and what metrics are you looking for?

William Jackson: We look at stuff like how many people are referencing our work, how many times is that showing up on a foundation's blog. We got the Stanford Social Innovation Review for our work. Folks have highlighted this stuff in Forbes, anything that's impacting people's thought processes about the role of black parents.

We have three goals. One is to build a black-parent army and one of the ways that we're measuring our metrics is how many black parents we have involved in this work. Two is translating stuff from research to practice, so we look at things like how many evidence-based practices that black parents have validated have we put out into the ecosystem. With our last Keep Dreaming Toolkit, which was the first translation work that we did, led by Amber and Dawn and other people on our team, the toolkit got shared with more than 18,000 people. Obviously, not all 18,000 of those people are using the toolkit, but some of those folks are.

Finally, we're trying to change the conversation about rigor criteria and success. When you define rigor as only randomized control trials, then that's only going to lend itself to a certain type of research. When you think that rigor only comes from Harvard and Princeton, and some of these upper-echelon institutions, those institutions have amazing efforts to try to diversify their student bodies and their researchers, but they also are well known for the issues that they're having in those spaces. If money is literally going to those institutions, because they're held as most rigorous, they are oftentimes are most distant from community, and that means that community doesn't have an impact on what is considered rigorous.

When we fund the most rigorous work, that creates an inequitable impact that I don't think a lot of people are talking about. What we would like to see is more money going towards research that is done in a community driven way. That's something that we're thinking about how to measure and assess. A lot of that goes back to the degree to which this information is being covered and shared out, and how many times our work is referenced, because that is the currency in the knowledge creation space.

Lissa Harris: I feel like we saw so many examples of that during the worst of the pandemic, where you saw people not trusting research, and people not trusting the scientific community. I wonder if there's a parallel there to what you're doing in the world of education?

William Jackson: I think it's also how narrow it's been defined. When you say that traditional western medicine, and it's a very scientific way, which I think, is a misappropriation of the word. It makes people immediately distrustful, because you're as dogmatic as the other entities. We know that there are benefits to eastern medicinal practices. We know there are benefits to indigenous medicinal practices. When you throw all of those things away as not strong medicine, even though there's evidence that stuff works, that makes people immediately distrustful of you for the same reasons that you're mad at the other folks, which is dogmatism.

Grounding work in community driven ways alleviates some of those dogmatic issues, and then it actually is more rigorous, because it's not necessarily about what you believe or your particular training, it is about what is revealed in practice with folks closest to the ground. I think if more people were connected to some of these efforts, then there would be more people vouching for it. What does that mean when you can actually go to the community member, and I can touch that doctor, I can touch the person who's saying that thing. I'm more likely to trust it because this is somebody that I know.

Lissa Harris: Sometimes, we learn as much from things that don't work as things that do. Is there something you can point to that you tried didn't work, that you learned something important from?

William Jackson: There's a lot of things that we tried and didn't work. One of the things that we tried a couple of times, and it was a challenging outcome was, was trying to work in schools without really paying attention to the leadership, and the power structures' desire to make the difficult decisions necessary to do this type of work, because there's going to be repercussions. We see this right now in America with what's going on in Tennessee.

The second that certain portions of the white community become uncomfortable, they will leverage the inequitable amounts of access they have to power to thwart things that are for the public good. In Tennessee you have two black senators pushing for gun control in a state that, I think, is probably majority white and rural, and you got people pushing against it, for kids who don't look like them. Why? Because of a certain group sensitivity to sharing power.

What we learned in working with schools is that we didn't have an understanding of – and this isn't always white folks, this is other people, too – their lack of desire to be uncomfortable, and maybe make some people uncomfortable who are unwilling to change themselves for the betterment of everybody. If the school leadership isn't willing to potentially make some staffing changes, because those staff don't want to observe the full humanity of black students, it's an institutional power thing. The role of institutional power is to influence and say, "That's unacceptable here. We are making structural changes that will make it uncomfortable for you to

exist if you hold that mentality, as opposed to you being able to bully other people inside of that institution. To either push them out, or to make them feel like they can't do the work safely."

We came up with a framework called the Institutional Levers of Power, that really helps us assess, and helps school leaders assess, are they willing to make changes in the areas of better clarifying how power works? Who is the person accountable for this particular equity initiative that you're one of? What is the amount of resources that you've given to this person to make that thing happen? Can you name the strategy specifically, not all the different tactics that you're using, but the strategy that helps to organize the tactics? And then, finally, are you assessing that? Do you have a way to hold that thing under an impact measurement, to then go back to the person who's accountable for it to say, "Should they keep their job, or should they be asked to do something else?" Those experiences have been super informative to us in terms of who we even choose to partner with in the future, because we have limited resources and we want to maximize our impact.

We shouldn't spend our time in spaces that aren't willing to make those decisions. Not only are we thinking about those types of assessments, but also thinking about a phased approach. We're not going to get to that level of engagement with that much energy expended, unless you've hit these checkpoints, that then allows us to feel confident that the power brokers are actually willing to do what's needs to be done, when people with less power than them are doing that work in spite of the challenges that come with it.

Lissa Harris: Could you talk a little bit more about the challenges that you haven't really been able to overcome? That can be political opposition to your work, public reception of your work, or trying to replicate or scale some of what you're doing. A

William Jackson: I think the existential challenge that's facing everybody who's doing this type of work in America is political. States have the ability to control education in ways that are really harmful to this type of work. With folks, like DeSantis and others, who are quite clearly passing legislation that is directed at encouraging more hate in our schools, and removing important parts of our history. We're not even talking about hardcore work. We're talking about just discussing the realities of slavery in ways that aren't apologist, or maybe even talking about African history prior to slavery. These things seem to be not allowable and so, that's a challenge. It hasn't necessarily hit us as much yet, because we don't get a lot of funding from school districts, which is something that we would want to change. But it is an existential crisis, when we think about future revenue earning pieces.

The other challenge is learning how to run a liberatory organization, an organization that's focused on the health and wellness of black folks. That's a lot of our work externally, and then,

I've had some amazing board members, like Brittany Bennett and Randi Towns, who supported us through difficult times when we had a lack of infrastructure in place and we didn't have a lot of things to replicate, came back to bite us because of internal issues. Folks like Aya Shabu and Taylor Mary Weber-Fields on our team, along with others who are just amazing black women, who really pushed us to think about how we create processes.

This isn't about me as a black man trying to empower them to make decisions. We need a process that makes that very clear. Creating those processes have made us a better organization, but there's still so much for us to learn, and sometimes it's so much for us to create, and sometimes it's stuff for us to unlearn. That's a challenge when there's not a lot of financial research resources, knowledge, resources on what that type of stuff looks like.

A lot of times, the genius and the wisdom that has been created around that stuff has been burnt, removed, pushed to the margins. So it's difficult to find information and there's a lot of recreation going on, probably that doesn't need to happen.

Lissa Harris: As a really hot political issue in the spotlight, the pushback against teaching black history, and black experience in the classroom, it feels like it got really large very quickly, even though I know this is something that's been a struggle for a long time. Have you had to pivot or change what you've been doing in response to this issue as it has suddenly become a matter of intense national controversy?

William Jackson: I'm going to take this question two ways. One is to point to another existential crisis that you just reminded me of, which I think is a big issue in a space for everybody. A lot of the way that folks have tried to attack it is through talking about anti CRT [Critical Race Theory] work or lifting up equity or DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion]. Those are a lot of the trigger words that folks are looking for, where a lot of my colleagues are receiving hate mail and online threats, and getting docs by politicians. It hasn't happened as much to us. We've only shown up in one Fox News report because we were associated with Stacey Abrams, in a way that we can't even claim association. Since we talk about black liberatory work, because we talk about the things that we want to see, it hasn't been as evident for folks to come after us.

==The other thing that is an issue in this space is that traditionally in America, there is a segmentation or division between nonprofits and the political action sector. Some of it is the laws are written in a way that it disincentivizes, and even makes folks leery of, engaging in that work. We need to be having a conversation with the political machinery of this country to figure==

Lissa Harris: Could you talk a little more about how your org, specifically, is pushing for systems level change in your field? What tactics are you using to push change on a broader level?

William Jackson: This goes back to the power dynamic thing that I said. The powerplay for us is to create evidence-based practices, so that individuals can then fund those evidence-based practices. What do I mean? Think about a CZI or Hewlett Packer Foundation or Gates or Hilton Foundation, we're talking about entities that have multiple billion dollars funds and they're giving out hundreds of millions of dollars every year but they only fund evidence-based practices and organizations. We can't get the money because they only fund evidence-based practices, but none of those evidence-based practices are culturally affirming. If we can get Duke to adopt some of the practices that we see as culturally affirming, now money flows not to just organizations, not just to us, but organizations like us.

When we unlock potentially millions of dollars to fund more organizations that are doing this kind of work, that's just a different type of power play. There's all kinds of important parts of advocacy, but again, knowledge is power. Not to mention the Department of Education funds similar things, again, evidence-based practices. If you give the Department of Education, who gives out hundreds of millions of dollars every year in public dollars, a new framework for evidence-based practice now, who can benefit from that in our communities? How does that benefit our folks? We live in a capitalistic society, it's driven by money, so if we're not having a conversation about how money is being used or misused, then, I think, we're missing an opportunity, whether we agree with how that is all structured or not.

Lissa Harris   What do you think is most needed from other actors and partners in this space to work on systems level change, whether it's school districts or non-profits governments?

William Jackson: If you want to create an evidence-based practice in this country, typically, that means, you have to create a measure. How do you create a measure? You have to get funding for that measure. Who makes the decisions about funding for measures in the research space? Other researchers. And so, if other researchers are saying that your work isn't rigorous, because it's community driven, then, the organizations, like me, can't get money because the researchers are the decision power brokers.

We have to have conversations with those researchers to expand their aperture. One, you can't have this implicit bias if you're going to be a researcher and entities need to be screening for that. I get that it's supposed to be peer-reviewed and all this other stuff, but what's happening in your application process, especially if you're supposed to be funding equity things? I saw this dispersed as a PhD student. I couldn't get into conferences, and now, if you can't get into conferences, then you can't get your papers in a journal. And if you can't get your papers in a journal, then you're less likely to get money for your measurements, even if you are doing the thing that doesn't even exist yet.

All of that stuff has to change. Our whole system around scholastics in academics in this country is very driven to this, they call it the publish or perish paradigm. What happens is people are writing things to get citations on a foundation of research, especially in education measurement that has a straight line back to eugenics. I'm not talking about a curvy line, it came from a white guy trying to come up with a measurement system to privilege other white guys so that they could get better jobs. That was less than 150 years ago so, the generational jumps we're talking about are maybe eight or nine, before you're tied back to somebody who was clearly a racist. Those are the people who form rigor so it's not surprising that somebody like me had a really hard time getting approved for the American Educational Research Association proposal.

==As long as people are getting tenure off of this idea that they publish as much as they can, but then their research is all done on university entities because they're trying to do it as fast as possible, it's on these young college kids and not on people who are actually in these communities. All of that stuff is an incentive structure that is designed to basically create a research basis that is going to benefit a whole bunch of white middle-class kids and the kids who need that benefit the most in this country aren't going to realize that, because you've created a whole structure around that stuff. We have to think about that structure and create a new structure that has different incentives if we want a different outcome.==

Lissa Harris: Can you talk about how you see your work evolving over the next five years?

William Jackson: Right now, we are about 95% funded by institutional philanthropy. It's a blessing, but it is also not sustainable. It's not the best model for long-term funding. You don't want to be that dependent on one type of revenue, so, one big thing that I have my sites on is diversifying our revenue streams and coming up with more earned revenue models that align with our work. Doing some of the work that you talked about before, in terms of essentially licensing our framework, online courses, certifying teachers.

In everything that we're doing, we're trying to position that black-parent army to be recognized as thought leaders in the education space, because it does two things. One, that means that now they're, potentially at least, a part of the conversation of who creates evidence-based practices. I think that makes us ask different questions at really important times, when decisions are being made about how money is being spent, which is huge, because you can't do anything without money.

The second thing is that when you Google education thought leaders blindly, and you see five black moms show up, what does that do to you as an educator? Now, when a black mom sits down with you and tells you that their child is not interested in their classroom and they don't trust you, you don't hear somebody who, for whatever reason, you can't see their full humanity and their wisdom. You think in the back of your head, "Oh, yeah, Brene Brown said that vulnerability is key and trust is key to loving learning and creating." Maybe you don't even think about Brene Brown, because you're thinking about Joy Spencer, and Nadiah Porter, and Denise Page, and Courtney McLaughlin, all of these folks that are black-mama researchers who helped us shape this stuff. And you're, like, "Oh, yeah, I remember somebody. They looked just like you and this is what they said."

When our societal norms change, the types of conversations that everyday people are having with their educators, or the people who are educating their children, hopefully help them deliver better education. We're doing it both at a ground level through a systems approach, but then at another level of systems approach, which is going after the money and trying to make sure folks have the resources they need to do the type of work that needs to be done.

Lissa Harris: We've covered so much ground today, and I want to thank you for your time. But is there anything else that we didn't talk to that you thought was really important to add?

William Jackson: When I think about all of this work, and when we say Black Genius, the genius element is the idea of social justice. We think about that through the two sides of a spectrum, to not be polar about it. One is, are we creating new systems of equity and justice? If the current system is not working, then you have to create another system that will work. Otherwise, we are most likely to replicate the system that we just came out of. You can see this in countries that have revolutions and they overthrow people to end up right back in a similar situation. That's the other side of the work, the genius is to dismantle systems of oppression, to poke holes in that.

That's what we're seeing that's happening in Tennessee right now. They literally are putting this on the worldwide screen. How much are we creating learning environments where folks get to pursue that? My parents did an amazing job of raising me. They made me believe that all scientists were black when I was growing up, and that black folks were brilliant. That was the

benefit of growing up in the Atlanta, Metro community, because that's not hard to find, you get it everywhere. But what I did not understand until much later in life, and in a somewhat haphazard way, was my role in creating a better world. Not to say that my parents didn't do that, but in a very specific way, how much are we talking about structures?

How much are we challenging kids to dream up a new way of doing things? Making new inventions, making new policies, making new laws, making new everything. If we aren't having that conversation with all kids from a very early age, what we're doing is we're setting ourselves up for a haphazard finding of a calling that somebody could have been investigating a long time ago. If this is something that I fell into 15 years ago, I'll be 40 in two years, what would've happened if I was really not meandering to find this, for the 10 years before that? Let us get this time back. Let us invest in Genius. Let us invest in the ability to create new systems of equity and justice, to enjoy a world hopefully for a much longer time because, otherwise, we'll eat this world alive and then we won't get to benefit from it.

Lissa Harris: I know I said I was out of questions, but I did want to ask. You keep coming back to the phrase Black Genius. What's the importance of that word? Could you talk about the word genius, and what it means to your work, and what it means to people when you say that word?

William Jackson: There's a couple ways we talk about it. One is intellectual curiosity. You have to be intellectually curious, and you need to be racially affirmed at the same time, because there's a lot of people who are intellectually curious. Arguably, Hitler, was intellectually curious, but he didn't care about people, he didn't care about humanity. So the affirmation of self is important, because when you see humanity and yourself, then that means you see humanity in other people. That is what holds us accountable morally and spiritually to do what I believe are our universe given, God given, talents for this world.

What has happened is that kids are being persecuted in schools for making a beat on a table that you could never make in your life, and they're doing it at seven. And so, what happens when you cultivate that genius? What impact might it have on the world as opposed to throwing it? They are made to find other avenues and they're operating outside of their purpose. Humans have a lot of questions about why we are here but, to me, most people find some sense of center when they're working in their purpose." So, that's what we mean by Black Genius.

It is about the individual, but it is also the benefit that you get from that individual operating in their genius. Everybody has seen that. Has been lifted by that as a human. We have to recognize it and this idea of Black Genius is creating new systems of equity and justice. We literally have a world on fire right now. There's 8 million black children in the U.S. right now, so we can't throw

away 80% of that Black Genius because we're not investing in it in schools. What does that mean for the eventuality of the world, when you get that many chances to create a better place?

Lissa Harris: This is a great place to wrap up. I want to thank you so much for taking the time to speak on so many aspects of your work.

Lissa Harris is a freelance reporter and science writer (MIT '08) based in the Catskills of upstate New York. She currently writes about climate, energy, and environment issues from a local perspective for the Albany Times Union, her own Substack newsletter, and various other digital and print publications.

* This interview has been edited and condensed.