

## **Transcript of Interview with A'Lelia Bundles By Kit Heintzman**

**Interviewee:** A'Lelia Bundles

**Interviewer:** Kit Heintzman

**Date:** 01/06/2023

**Location (Interviewee):** Washington DC

**Location (Interviewer):**

**Transcriber:** Angelica S Ramos

### **Some of the things we spoke about include:**

Working as an author in journalism, media, and history. Having a television series based on a book, (Self Made 2001) come out in 2020, publicity pre- and mid- lockdown. Giving a talk in early 2020 pre-lock down and navigating contact with audience members; touch, keeping distance, and personal safety at that period of uncertainty. Handshakes. Comparisons between riding the train the day after 9/11 and in March 2020. Having the husband of friend die early in the pandemic; uncertainty about cause of death. Making friends when older. Being a part of a monthly book club of seasoned, accomplished, African American women and having that club transition online; beginning a new hybrid model. Easing back into public events, masking. Testing etiquette and regulations before events. Felicia Horowitz hosting scientists on Clubhouse. The politicization of the pandemic and safety precautions. The manipulation of people under emotional distress. Racial tension bubbling to the surface after the murder of George Floyd. Increased public discourse about the 1921 Tulsa massacre. Conservative backlash. Banning books in American schools that teach about race and LGBTQ+ issues. Father and both brothers died in 2019, recognizing the privilege of being able to travel to see them before they died and attend funerals. The difficulties of consistent safety practices in 2023. Being diagnosed with COVID on birthday; Paxlovid and rebound/breakthrough COVID-19. The Tuskegee experiment as an example of people being denied medicine, and yet some using it to advocate people not take medicine. Having easy access to vaccination, seeing others have slower and less convenient access. Pandemic Christmas celebrations. Parents modeling caring about the wellbeing of others when growing up. Biases in the writing of history; representations of enslaved people as “contented” and “better off” than free Black people because they were “clothed and fed” in history textbooks growing up in Indianapolis; having older family members teach Black history and compensate for the classroom’s lies. Coming from a family history whereby free people of color migrated across America and seeing how one’s own family is a part of American history.

**A'Lelia Bundles 00:00**

Oh my, my name is A'Lelia Bundles. And today's date is January 6 2023. It is 5:08pm and I am in Washington DC where I have lived since 1985.

**Kit Heintzman 00:17**

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**A'Lelia Bundles 00:26**

I do consent to having this released.

**Kit Heintzman 00:30**

Thank you so much for being here with me today. Would you just start by introducing yourself to anyone who might find themselves listening?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 00:37

My name is A'Lelia Bundles and I am a journalist and author. And I have I spent many years as a producer and an executive with NBC and ABC News. I also write about the women in my family including Madame CJ Walker, the early 20th century entrepreneur and her daughter Alia Walker.

**Kit Heintzman** 01:03

Tell me a story about your life during the pandemic.

**A'Lelia Bundles** 01:07

Well, the pandemic it was really kind of watching this rolling disaster happening. Because I spent so many years as a journalist, I was really reading widely about it. And it seemed as if every organization and institution I was involved with was watching very closely because it was having a big impact on things. At the time, the thing that sort of is most sort of salient for me, is a Netflix series called selfmade. Starring Octavia Spencer that was based on my nonfiction book about madam CJ Walker On Her Own Ground: The Life And Times Of Madam CJ Walker was about to debut on March 20. And leading up to that, for the essentially six to eight weeks leading up to that we had many events planned, we had press and media days. And so we were canceling those one by one, as the pandemic was spreading from the west coast to the Midwest to the East Coast, and we were, people were making decisions about whether it was safe for large groups of people to come together. So we ended up having two events in New York in February. And we scheduled a press day big, wonderful media day with Octavia Spencer and the other stars of the of the series on March 12. In a hotel in New York, and that I was supposed to go to the to see A Soldier's Story, that evening with Blair Underwood, who was one of the stars of the net, the Netflix series, and he was starring in a soldier's play on Broadway, I was supposed to go to the play that evening. And March 12 is the day that Broadway shut down. So I really felt the impact. But we had just managed to get our press day in with all of the reporters coming to do the interview. So that was great. The next day, I took the salah train back from New York, to Washington, DC. And the train was almost empty. There was no one else in the car where I was sitting. And then hour by hour, it just became clear that America was shutting down.

**Kit Heintzman** 03:49

What was it like being on a train and having it be so empty that early on?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 03:54

It was eerie, I had never seen a train so empty. And at that point, we, you know, people weren't really wearing masks. There was this sort of, you know, there was one school of thought that said, that mask really won't do very much. And it was obviously long before any vaccines. But that was was like met, people didn't really know that it was airborne that was not widely known. So sometimes people would, you know, I'd been on planes over those four to six weeks before then. And some people had unmasked, but then other people were kind of looking at them like Oh, really, do you need that? And I remember having a conversation with the red cap that morning, and he said, You know, I think it's in the air and I I looked at him and I thought oh, I don't know I'm not really hearing that it's in the air but he actually was right if I have to see that man. Again. I will say I was wrong. But that was really the conventional wisdom at that point that you know, that was people were watching you know, Making sure they weren't touching doorknobs. Because it was more people seem to think at that point, it was more like flu

transmission or cold germs transmission, but not too much an aerosol transmission. So it was very eerie to be to be on the train that day with nobody. It's like back, I took a picture of it and posted it on my Instagram, and Facebook pages because I'd never seen it so empty. And you know, I it makes me think that I happen to have been in New York when 911 happened, and at that point, I was working with ABC News. And I spent two days of every week in New York, I would go back and forth. And I was in New York when 911 happened. And I remember being on the train the day after sort of getting one of the last tickets, and the train being completely full because people were trying to get back home. Today, that was a huge contrast to major disasters.

**Kit Heintzman** 06:00

What did you do when you got home to Washington DC?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 06:04

I think I missed, you know, I'm not remembering the details. But I probably did what I normally do, which is arrive at the train station, and take the metro from Union Station in DC to my house in Upper Northwest Washington. And at that point, it was still kind of surreal. You know, you didn't have it made for me, there wasn't a sense of, I'm really vulnerable as long as I stay away from other people. But I had noticed at the press day, for instance, Octavia Spencer, people were, you know, people want to hug you or shake your hand. And she was doing kind of the Black Panther Wakanda salute like just not touching people. And at that point, I was still I wasn't shaking hands, because we're thinking that it's just like a cold or flu. But I was sort of linking elbows that then later, you know, evolved into just an elbow bump, not even a fist bump. But at that point, it was still we were still navigating, and not really sure what was going on, but just that you probably need it not to be in large crowds.

**Kit Heintzman** 07:21

Do you remember when you first heard about COVID-19?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 07:24

You know, I think I must have heard about it in January. And I think, you know, I'm not gonna this may not be exactly right. But I sort of what the memory that's coming back to me is that I at that point, I was a trustee at Columbia University. And we were having a, you know, one of our periodic conference calls. And one of the board one of the trustee board members lived in Seattle. And at that point, I think this is right. I think Seattle has had, you know, a dozen or so cases. And she was saying, You know what, it's you know, COVID is here, but at that point, it was it was isolated. Like I grew up in Indianapolis, I remember there was, you know, the Indianapolis had 12 case. So you could count, you could see a few cities ad cases. There was the incident in Boston where people had been at a conference. And some people in Boston, maybe they had come to Indianapolis, but you could see, you know, there were a few isolated cities. And so I was hearing about that. But it still was kind of, you know, anecdotal and incidental. There also was a trustee who is originally from China, who was big, who was talking about what China was doing and as, you know, as a university with a large medical school and with people who are epidemiologists and people who are doing things with infectious diseases, that was it was a conversation about, well, what does this mean but it was still so isolated and anecdotal that we're just thinking well, maybe it's going to be contained. Maybe people can still, you know, avoid where you know, the places that seem to have the largest breakouts but that might memory is that probably in January, I began to hear about it because I was on a Columbia University trustees call with a person another trustee who lived in Seattle.

**Kit Heintzman** 09:24

To the extent that you're comfortable sharing, would you say something about your experiences with health and healthcare infrastructure pre pandemic?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 09:33

So yeah, so I am I am really you know, fortunate that I am able to afford good health care and that I have that I have health insurance so you know, at this point I'm on meds I have Medicare because I'm over 65 and then and supplemental so I, I don't I've not had any personal you know, obstacles in terms of healthcare I have, you know, I have good The positions, but I obviously am aware of other people having those challenges.

**Kit Heintzman** 10:08

Pre pandemic, what was your day to day looking like?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 10:12

So I work at home, I have worked at home since 2006. So that part for me, was not different. I wasn't I wasn't going to an office and had to stop going to an office. So I was already working at home already doing a lot from home. But I also was traveling a fair amount. And you know, that obviously came to a halt. And I was also going to, you know, public events. I mean, that was, you know, at least I don't, you know, I don't know the frequency, but let's just say once a week, or at least once every other weekend in Washington, DC, there are lots of receptions. And so I was, you know, on boards, and going to meetings in person and going to receptions in person. So that was that, you know, and traveling. So my life was, you know, even though I was working at home, my life was one that had some, a lot of social interaction with other people in person, my book club, a group of 11 women, we have been meeting every month since 2009. So we were meeting but we began to have our meetings on Zoom.

**Kit Heintzman** 11:26

What was it like transitioning those meetings on to zoom?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 11:30

It was challenging, because everybody is not as technically savvy. There was a lot there was a lot of, I can't make this work, your unmute are all of those things. And, you know, and it is a group of women where, you know, between, you know, 60 and 80. So different people have different levels of comfort with, with technology. And I think, you know, before then people like Skype, they might some of them might Skype with their grandchildren, for instance, or maybe FaceTime. But zoom was this kinks were still being worked out. So there was that was a transition with, you know, with the more is sort of more professional groups, where we had had conference calls. Before that were audio, we began to have a zoom calls. And those went pretty smoothly. Because there was a technical person who was making an app.

**Kit Heintzman** 12:34

I'm so curious about this community of women in your book club is, is there a little bit more you would say about sort of the demographics of who was there how you were connected? But I'm also so curious if anything changed about the content of what you're looking at, in relationship to the pandemic or anything else over the last few years?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 12:54

Well, yeah, this is, this is a good question. I you know, and I have to be, you know, be careful, because I don't want to betray any confidences, but what I will say my, my book club is a really special group of women, all African American women, all really accomplished. And we started meeting in January 2009, you know, within a few days of Barack Obama's inauguration, and we have really bonded, and it is, I think many people think that, after a certain age, it's really hard to make new friends. And we, in when this group came together, some of us knew each other beforehand. And but you know, maybe at least half or two thirds of the people I might have met before but didn't really know. But we have really created a great community, and a great support system among among the members of the group. And so we really look forward to our monthly meetings. And it's a very, sort of, you know, not no rules. I mean, that was that was our mandate. At the beginning, the only rules are the hostess, selects the book, so that everybody gets to pick their own book, and provides the meal. And we would meet in each other's homes. And that just, you know, we would talk about the book for 10 minutes, 20 minutes, sometimes a little bit longer. But the most important thing is that it was a sisterhood, and that we were getting together and we would talk about politics and, you know, talk about lots you know, what's going on in your life. And so, it is a really important support system. And the meeting getting together it's almost, it was very rare for anybody to miss a meeting and in person, obviously, people are traveling and family commitments or professional commitments, but for the most part, it was really, you know, nine times a year except July and August and December. We have met for more than a decade, but the pandemic was really tough. In part, because some members were less comfortable with the technology. And also in the group, you know, a number of the women are single. And so the isolation that came from the pandemic was very, has been very difficult. And, you know, especially the members who have grandchildren, they couldn't see their grandchildren, there was a, you know, I could feel the anxiety and the concern, you know, how do I visit my grandchildren, I want to, you know, one member in particular, was, you know, just really distressed that she couldn't hug her grandchildren. So I could, you know, there, there were depth, there were definitely, you know, difficulties for some of my, some of my book club members. So it did, it really affected us. And, and there's, you know, there's still no, you can't turn this off, right. So I'll tell you, we might just write something that I remind me later, and I'll tell you something that I'm not comfortable sharing, you know, for posterity. But it but it has, you know, and then we, when we began to meet again, in person, the protocol was very careful, we, a couple of us have homes that are not really large. And a couple of us have, you know, a couple of the members do have large homes, and so we would meet at the homes of people with larger spaces, so that we had the opportunity to, to spread out a couple of times, we did kind of a hybrid with a member who, you know, still wasn't comfortable, wasn't comfortable coming. So we have, we have adaptive, but I can, you know, I can see within this group of this tightly knit group of women, that there has been a real impact, because of the inability to get together in exactly the same way that we used to.

**Kit Heintzman** 17:11

I'd love to hear anything you have to say about that space and support between women, while all of this was going on.

**A'Lelia Bundles** 17:20

You know, very important that we checked in on each other. And we did a couple of a couple of zoom meetings, you know, that were separate from the the actual book club, but it was very important that we had that, that connection with each other and people, you know, different members who are people who may one member may be closer to another. So there people were definitely checking in on each other. And some and a couple of people were getting together separately, you know, a couple of members had some health challenges during that period

of time, but that, but this group, among the members were providing support to each other. So yes, that was very, very important.

**Kit Heintzman** 18:06

You mentioned the woman who had wanted to hug her grandchildren. I'm wondering, did your relationship to touch change at all over the last few years?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 18:15

Yes. You know, and I'm thinking about this, you know, in that sort of January to March rolling tsunami that was coming, I I will answer the question specifically about how it's changed. But in that rolling tsunami between January and March, when people were not quite sure how to navigate. I had a speech in Ohio. And so I was talking about madam CJ Walker, and you know, this, which is the thing that I normally do, and people always they want to hug you, you know, it's like, it's so nice to meet you can I and I am I've always been, you know, try to accommodate hugging. But I also know that I'm very susceptible to colds that, you know, being on airplanes being you know, being in crowds of people. And so I'm not really an even though I'm a hugger with people that I know, I'm not really all that excited about hugging people in a crowd when I don't know anybody because, you know, they may not know that they are affected with something. So I remember in at this event in February, before things had shut down, I was kind of saying, Well, you know, thank you so much. And I was really trying to avoid again. And and you know, some people don't understand that they think that you're being you know, stuck up if you don't want to look like No, I'm just trying not to catch a cold. But I was I was able to sort of navigate that. So that was kind of the beginning of keeping my distance what Then there was, you know, a year and a half to two years when I really wasn't seeing people, I wasn't doing the in person events, and some of that has started again, and when the I did a book event in Richmond, Virginia, and it was at a women's club, and they had put a plexiglass, you know, screen up so that when I'm signing books, there was, you know, so I was like, I appreciated that, and people were wearing masks, but we are now moving into a space where fewer people are wearing masks, you know, there's, they're not as many barriers as there were before. And so I'm finding myself having to figure out how to navigate that. So I now I really, I don't hug people, and it's easier to not hug people that you don't know now. And, um, you know, for two years, I didn't have a cold, I was really happy. Because I used to get a call, I think every two to three months. So I was like, This is great. Call COVID Forget over, I'm glad not to have a cope. But I I will, you know, elbow bump. And I just say to people, you know, let me elbow bump. And you know, and there. Sometimes people are a little, you know, sort of uncomfortable with that. But I just try to take it a light thing. But I'm really like that trying to shake hands, and I am a SERIOUS hand shaker. I know I have, I really believe you know, that my mother taught me shake hands, you look people in the eye. And when and many times when I've, you know, when I speak to kids, that was always something I would be meeting children, you know, they were in a line and they give me this kind of limp handshake because I don't think anybody's really taught them, you know how to engage and with confidence. And so I always say, Oh, you've got to squeeze my hand, you've got to do that. So I've been there like teaching people how to shake hands. And now I'm, you know, not comfortable doing that. So that has really changed. And I think that is it is really important when you're meeting people, and especially when you're, you know, meeting people, obviously, you're meeting people because you don't know them. But when you are in a in a group, sometimes people you do know that you're saying hello to them. But I think it it sets a tone. When you touch somebody when you shake their hand. I mean, that's different from a hug, which is, you know, almost culturally different. But handshake is more businesslike, more, you know, sets a tone establishes sort of equality and in a sense of you're looking in somebody's eyes. So that's, that's changed a lot.

**Kit Heintzman** 22:49

I'm curious other than the pandemic, what have been some of the social and political issues on your mind and heart over the last few years?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 23:00

Oh, the, you know, it's it, it has been a stunning stew of politics. The fact that George Floyd was murdered, within a couple of months of the pandemic meant that all these inequalities and a lot of the racial tension really bubbled over bubbled to the surface. And I think that the combination of the way COVID was politicized by people denying, you know, major political leadership denying that COVID was an issue, a fight over wearing masks, a fight over whether people should take it seriously. And then the health disparities that became so evident with people who did not have access to health care, that is created a huge fissure. And it is, you know, as a journalist, as a person who is a student of history, it really is a huge tragedy that people have been people sort of vulnerabilities have been exploited and manipulated around this issue that a public health issue, which is what this is, has been turned into a political issue and it spills over, you know, now it spilled over to not just mask mandates, but now it spilled over to school boards with banning books and not teaching about African American History and banning books about LGBT kids and community. So what started as a public health issue, where I think we all should rally around How do we take care of each other? How do we protect each other became a political issue and now has morphed into an issue that where people are, you know, I think gullible and allowing themselves to be manipulated to the point where you see, depending on the politics of an area, there are higher death rates among people who were in denial or allowed themselves to believe. misinformation about COVID.

**Kit Heintzman** 25:30

What does the word health mean to you?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 25:32

Well, [inaudible] health, is health is, is broad, because it's both your physical health and your mental health. And it is both things are important. And obviously, both things have have had been impacted by, you know, by this pandemic.

**Kit Heintzman** 25:54

What are some of the things that you want for your own health and the health of people around you?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 26:02

Interesting, so to be able to have access to good health care, and I'm, you know, I'm fortunate that I do have access to that, to be able to live where one is not full of anxiety. And there are many people whose lives are anxiety filled, and they cannot escape it. And I'm very fortunate and grateful that, that my life is one where I am in control of my life in that sense. I mean, obviously, you can't control catastrophic illnesses like cancer, but to the degree that I can live my life every day and not be afraid, and not have anxiety that I am, I am very fortunate. And then it is having access to healthy food that is, you know, that is really important. Everybody does not have access to in food deserts and depending on where you live, so so, you know, I just feel like I'm, you know, I'm so blessed. And so fortunate that I can, you know, meditate every day and have healthy food and go to the doctor and do preventative health care that I get my checkups. And from all of my doctors every year that I'm you know, I'm very committed to that. But I know that that's not the case for many people. And you know, and I think about

when I think about the pandemic, and you know, very early on one of our good friends, the husband of a very good friend died, you know, very early on. And, you know, I don't know the circumstances, but that was when there was unclear what people had people weren't being treated. This is somebody who is, you know, who does a professional person who had lots of resources, so why that person slipped through the cracks, I don't know. But then there were other people who had extended family members, who, you know, were still having to go to work who really weren't protected and to be able to see, you know, people getting sick people dying, that everybody you knew had some body close to them who had died. And, and for me, it was there was kind of a sort of interesting juxtaposition. Because the year before, in 2019, my father and both of my brothers had died within 18 weeks of each other. And so that was just like, right, it was a body blow, but my dad was 92, he had dementia, and, you know, was he had lived a really long, productive life, and he still knew who we were, but you know, that was, we knew that was coming. And then a month or so later, my other brother, my, one of my brothers who had had lung cancer, had been diagnosed with lung cancer. six or nine months before, died in June. We knew that was coming. But I had been able to spend time with him. He was in Indianapolis, I'm in Washington, DC. He was some good friends of ours made him move in with them. While he was going through his treatment, which was a great relief for me that I knew he was, you know, there were people in the house, and I would go back every three weeks for chemo. So I was able to do that. And then my other brother had some other health problems, but he died suddenly in August. But that year that 2019, I was mobile, I could jump on a plane, I could do the things that I needed to do. I could be with my brother who died of cancer. I was in the room with him for the last week of his life. And when I watched other people, they couldn't see their loved ones in nursing homes. They couldn't see them and In hospitals, they had to do their funerals remotely. And I just My heart broke for them because that, that being able to say goodbye to my brother in the last week of His life was, you know, just such a, you know, both transformative and gratifying experience, I think. And I think, you know, his knowing that there were people there with him meant a great deal. It means, you know, when you're leaving this earth, you don't want to be alone. And I think that's so many people during that early period, especially before the vaccine, were alone when they died. And that's just so tragic and so sad.

**Kit Heintzman** 30:55

What does the word safety mean to you?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 30:57

Safety, being up being able to wake up in the morning and know that there's not gunfire outside your house, that there's not somebody who that they're not bill collectors coming to get you that there, you know, that there is that you don't have to worry about what's in the next room. And I you know, and that's people have different levels of safety and lack of safety. And some people have households with domestic violence. And obviously, that was something that became a really intense issue when people were forced to be in the same house, you know, in close spaces during the pandemic, where they might have had an escape valve under different circumstances. So I'm, you know, safety as safety as bodily safety, and mental safety and safety, from anxiety and safety from harm.

**Kit Heintzman** 32:03

Thinking in the sort of narrow biomedical context of safety from the virus, what are some of the things you've been doing to keep yourself feeling safer and how have those changed over this really long period of time now?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 32:18



I'm definitely wearing a mask in anytime I'm in, you know, large public spaces. And I remember, because I spent a lot of time in New York on Columbia's campus, seeing some of the international students prior to 2020 wearing masks. And I would look and say, oh, you know, that's, that's probably a little overdoing it when I look back and think they knew exactly what they were doing, because they had experienced SARS, you know, in some of their home countries. So I am definitely a wear the mask on the airplane on the metro in the grocery store. And I think I always will do that. So that is not changing. I have gotten a little lacks about wearing the mask when I'm, you know, at a function with other people at a dinner or at a reception. Every sometimes I will and I think that I don't know if maybe it's a false sense of security if that I'm in some of those situations, I think what these are people who are vaccinated and they're being careful, but you know, it's always somebody who's not so you really, it is a false sense of security. I think when I I'm starting to do more public events not a whole lot but more where I don't really know people and you can't control the crowd and so I will continue to wear a mask then and I'll continue to elbow bump rather than than hug so yeah, so I'm I'm being careful but you know, it's inconsistent and and I actually I, I got COVID in June, like no, I I took I got the vaccine as soon as it was available. Got the booster. I think I had even gotten the you know, the next booster, but out of the blue, I got COVID and was diagnosed on my birthday, which is really annoying. But I really wasn't that sick. I had some sniffles you know, a little bit of a sore throat so I did not really get a serious case. And then I took packs with it. I talked to a friend who's been doing internal medicine it was only my doctor I did a telemedicine appointment with her partner cuz she was traveling wreck they that person recommended Paxil that I took it I had a with the rebound. So I got some, you know, but it was still it was really good. very minor, you know, and now I've had the third booster and looking to see when do I get the next one? So again, I don't know, I have no idea where I got it. Sometimes people will say, Oh, I was at a wedding. And I know there were people who weren't vaccinated. I just I have no idea. But that means it's important to be careful. That's why on the airplane, I was on the train this morning from New York. And hardly anybody had on a mask. And I'm like, You people are crazy. Even if it's not COVID, there's strep throat and all these other things are happening now.

**Kit Heintzman** 35:38

How did you come to decide to get vaccinated?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 35:42

Oh, just absolutely. There was no question to be vaccinated. I, you know, I get a flu shot every year. I've had oh, gosh, what is the shingles, I mean, you know, if it's possible that, you know, pneumonia, if it's possible to get a vaccination, I'm doing it. There was also another, you know, another element to sort of my education during this period of time, that audio app clubhouse had started during the pandemic. And Felicia Horowitz, who is married to Ben Horowitz, who was a big tech guy in California, Felicia was hosting a weekly conversation on clubhouse. And for the first several weeks, she had a couple of scientists who were among the people working on a vaccine. And so they were giving all kinds of scientific information about the spread of the virus. And I was, so I had the, you know, the opportunity to listen, and so I knew that the kinds of things the, the DNA sequencing and those kinds of things, so I was, you know, I wanted to be, I wanted to make sure whatever I could get that would, you know, sort of fortify me against this. And at the same time, it was very difficult to watch people getting misinformation and believing myths and being misled about what they what the vaccine would do. And this this kind of, oh, wives tales, and obviously, then coupled with kind of the misinterpretation of the syphilis study at Tuskegee, where that was, you know, what got it got turned on its head by people who either are easily misled people who are gullible, or people who want to sow dissent among people, where the syphilis study at Tuskegee was the absence of people getting medicine, people being denied medicine, versus people getting something but

there is a, you know, obviously a real reason for many some communities in America to distrust the medical profession. But I think when you when you think and read carefully, and try to educate yourself, there's, those myths don't really hold up. But a lot of people are not like me, you know, journalists who read widely and really look for information people believe sometimes, you know, what they hear on talk radio, or they believe what a family member said, or somebody who's trusted in their community, and that person may not have very accurate information, but that's a person they trust, and people believe the people they trust.

**Kit Heintzman** 38:42

When you decided to get vaccinated, how accessible was it to you?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 38:46

Very easy. You know, in Washington, DC, when people were the city government was on board immediately. We were fortunate that we have good internet access. You could log on to a website, make an appointment, and I got one of the early appointments. My neighborhood listserv was you know, sending the information. So we signed up right away, you know, but the I think that very first week, people were waiting in line for hours at a time. My, my significant other was when I went to one of the first appointments and he had to wait a long time. A week or so later, when I had my appointment. I was prepared. I had a little seat to sit on. I had, you know, hand warmers. I was overdone. And then I went to the place and I got in right away. So yeah, DC was your and now. And I say that, interestingly, that this was another example of disparities because of access to high speed internet for people who did not have that and who didn't have their own commute, computers, it was much harder for them to get appointments and people who were more affluent, and who were more well connected, were able to access those appointments and that that began to even itself out. But initially there was a great deal of disparity between who got the appointment based on their access to computers and technology.

**Kit Heintzman** 40:26

You'd mentioned taking Paxlovid, what was that like?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 40:31

You know, I just, you take that, so I had no, I had some ambivalence about Paxil there because it's like one thing that the vaccine it's like, just get the vaccine if this is going to help you and I did and what everything that I was reading, said, Yes, it was rushed through, but it didn't seem like there were, you know, major side effects. There was enough. I, I at least convinced myself, it was okay to take it. Perhaps a bit. I had read some things about the break through this sort of rebound. COVID. And, you know, was it really necessary? So I made an appointment, it was a telemedicine appointment with my, one of the people in my doctor's practice. And we, I told her my symptoms, she made the she and I told her I was getting ready to travel and you know, another week or so and what should you know, what was her recommendation? And she recommended that and I was still ambivalent, so then I called a good friend who has been an internal medicine doc for five decades. And I said, So tell me, you know, what, what is this? And he said to me, I said, what, what is, you know, what do you think about COVID? He said, This is what he said to me was, we really don't know. And I think that was, you know, and he was being honest with me, where they're, you know, when you know, I watch Fauci and all the other people and you get the updates, and people were trying to explain what was going on. And he said, this has been the transmissibility of this virus and its various variants, is something that we really don't understand that the next time it's worse than the time before. And we've never seen anything like this. And, you know, so that's why you take a vaccine, but it was but his, you know, sort of admission to me that they really do not know why it does what it does and why it's

so highly transmissible was a you know, I don't know that it was a revelation. But it was important for me to know that. And so that, so I said to him, I said, Well, what do you think about Paxos? And he said, Well, look, you know, I'm a doc. So I recommend that you take the medicine, that's what Doc's do. And so while I still had, you know, some ambivalence about taking it. You know, he's a smart guy. And so, I guess we go, you know, we believe in our doctors, but so I decided to, I decided to take it. I mean, I didn't have any, you know, particular side effects from it. But as I said, I did have a rebound breakthrough case. And I think, and I don't know what the numbers are on that. I think that it seems to me that several people I will say, almost there, but it seems to me several people who took it also had rebound symptoms. So I don't know that it made them not worse. If it you know, cut it down from being worse than it might have been, but that was my decision.

**Kit Heintzman** 43:49

You talked about a bit about what had changed at sort of big celebratory events and spaces. You also mentioned that you got your positive COVID test on your birthday. I'm wondering what smaller, more intimate celebrations looked like over the pandemic for you.

**A'Lelia Bundles** 44:09

So well, I was good. I wasn't really doing much to celebrate my birthday, we were going to probably just have dinner at home, but I was going to an event at Sixth&I the synagogue in DC that has a lot of lectures. And I was going to go here a friend who had a new book, and I was really looking forward to that and seeing people so that was in some ways going to be my birthday celebration. So I really hated to miss that event. You know, the smaller things, but you know, because I don't have children. And so that means I wasn't, you know, like, feeling like I needed I didn't have the same yearning that friends of mine who have children who have grandchildren that they were really feeling deprived and isolated. So I did not experience experience that but wait for Christmas. Normally my significant others family gets together, he has four siblings and nieces and nephews and his sister usually hosts, you know, Christmas and opening presents. And in 20, December of 2020, we basically dropped the we took the presents to the door and dropped them off. So that really did change that now this year, we got together again, with everybody. But we had, you know, essentially two years of really keeping a distance.

**Kit Heintzman** 45:37

Do you remember one of the sort of like, early encounters of first getting together with someone outside of the household again?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 45:44

So I think that was probably my, my book club that we got together at one of the friend's homes, who has a large house and a really large screened in space, and she had heaters, so that we could get together, I think we wore masks for that, you know, that first encounter. And we sat apart from each other. So that was but we, you know, we still were in the same space with each other. And that was, you know, an improvement over over being on Zoom.

**Kit Heintzman** 46:25

Do you think we've learned anything for the pandemic?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 46:29

Some of us have learned something from the pandemic. And some people have not learned anything from the pandemic. I mean, it really is, you know, it's the polarization of America. You know, and then that's not count, you know, kind of what's going on in the rest of the world. But specifically about America, it has just shown the cleavages in our society and our politics and how people have put that have divided themselves into, you know, different sides of the, the ring or the arena, where you, you know, there are lots of people who, you know, who believe that it's a myth, or who still believe that if you get vaccinated, they're all, you know, side effects that actually aren't happening. But they believe somebody who said that you're going to whatever the, you know, list of things that may be, and there are other people who, you know, who think, well, I need to, if I take care of myself, I'm also helping take care of you. I mean, that's kind of my, you know, my one of the lessons for me, is that, I want to make sure that I'm doing everything, to keep myself healthy, to keep myself vaccinated to keep myself from being sick. Because that's respect for you. Because I don't want to infect you. So that's a key takeaway from me. And I, I wonder about the cavalier way that that people can sort of dismiss the fact that they might infect somebody else. I would, I actually was at a dinner last night in New York, with about 15 people. And, you know, this is another way we didn't wear a mask. And this was I made the assumption that this was a group of people who would be vaccinated and who, you know, who would take seriously that they needed to be vaccinated. And the host, said, one of the people who was supposed to come had actually flown in from the west coast to come to the dinner, but had a cold, he had developed a cold, and he called the host, and he said, I don't know what the protocol is, you know, but I have a cold, it's not COVID. I've tested for COVID. What do you think? And the host said, I would rather that you not come. Because this was a group of people who really didn't know each other. So you know. So I think that there, I think that there are some people who, you know, really take it seriously and really take seriously the fact that they might, you know, be a harm to other people and want to not be harm to other people. There's another event that I did go to a few events, especially earlier this year, when I think there was a no another variant had, there was a resurgence. And I have been to things and I'm thinking actually, over the last 12 months or so, where you had to have a COVID test before you went. So I went to an event that Forbes magazine had last December, and you had to have you had to submit a negative test within 24 hours before you arrived and so there and people still were wearing masks in that event that I went to a conference in Las Vegas. that Black Enterprise Magazine did it was a big Women's Conference. And I think, yeah, I think you hit you, I think I don't know that you had to submit a test, but you had to, you know, sort of affirm that you'd had a test. And then I've done a couple of video shoots, with camera crews. And in all of those instances, you had this, you had to take a test before you arrive. And so I, you know, I'm very happy that a lot of the people I interact with take this seriously enough, that they require me and others to take a test to show that it's that they're negative.

**Kit Heintzman 50:41**

I'm gonna go back to something you had said earlier about learning and sort of cementing ideas that practices you do for yourself, impact other people and seeing that dynamic between that. I'm wondering if you can identify some of the places earlier in life where you learned to value that where you learned to value taking actions for yourself and consideration of the collective?

**A'Lelia Bundles 51:10**

That's a that's a that's a good question. I mean, fortunately, I have I had parents who were really smart, community minded people. And I do think there is there is something about, you know, the leadership lessons that I learned growing up watching my parents, how they really interacted with the people around them the respect that they had, for, you know, family members, for people with whom they worked. People who work for them, that they're

that I you know, if I think about why is it that I would think it's important to respect other people and to care about other people's well being, it's because I had parents who modeled that for me. And, you know, just in the being in the, you know, working in corporate America for 30 years. I, you know, I don't know how else to think about this, except there are people who are jerks who really don't care about other people. And that's kind of the jerkiness manifested itself. With people who are like, well, I don't really care, you know, or who people who got aggressive with people who were wearing masks who would try to shame people into not wearing masks. And, you know, that, for me is insane. But that's the jerkiness of people who I think don't respect other people there. It's kind of bullies and on power trips. And, you know, I'm, you know, that's the way I view that, that, you know, like, I have to do what, what I think is best for me, and what I think respects other people, and if you're a bully, telling me well, you know, you're stupid for not work for wearing a mask, you know, why are you You know, why are you lame for wearing a mask. It's really like none of your business. And that's my choice. But and it's very, it's interesting to me. Now, in the Amtrak. I noticed that, you know, there's signs and there are announcements on Amtrak that says masks are no longer required. But we welcome. And essentially, we welcome and encourage people to wear masks. So yeah, no, we're not mandating that you wear a mask, because we know that there are lots of lawsuits that said you couldn't do that. But they also are modeling the message that don't don't try to bully somebody who's sitting next to you if they have on a mask.

**Kit Heintzman** 53:51

How are you feeling about the immediate future?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 53:58

So many levels. Personally, I'm fine. Personally, I have lots of projects that are keeping me busy, that are going well. And I'm, you know, very fortunate that I have things that I enjoy doing that I have, you know, a good support system and good friends and, you know, people that I like being around and I live a life of low drama. So I'm very grateful for that, you know, on a much bigger level, the politics in America is really concerning for me, the polarization, because I think that, you know, people who don't care about democracy have have a lot of leverage right now. And that seeps into public health, that seeps into women's reproductive rights, that seeps into things that are really important to me. In, you know, intellectual interest and education, the stories that I care about the way that American history is taught the books that are available to people. So, and I think the pandemic, really opened up some of those fissures and made people use those, you know, use the mask, mandate, I use the fear of vaccines to stir people up and in a political way that then began to make them fear, you know, creating fear around some of these other issues. So the, the pandemic and George Floyd's murder all happening together, the response to that has created a huge backlash. And I do remember I remember that during that sort of after, you know, the march was America shut down. George Floyd in May. And then around that same time, there was a lot of conversation about Tulsa, the Tulsa massacre. And those things all came together. And because of the because I talk about history, I was doing a lot of zoom speeches. And that was after George Floyd, a lot of the DEI conversations within corporations began to happen. And so I was invited to talk about madam Walker to talk about history or to talk about journalism. And you know, during that moment, there was this all this conversation about what we're it's a racial reckoning, and people are paying attention and the number of people who really didn't think they had any connection to George Floyd or to violence against African Americans. were receptive to hearing that. But just as people were receptive, there were people the backlash began. And I remember being asked on several occasions, what do you think things will really be different this time. And I said, you know, I'm an optimist. What believe that things will be different. But I've lived a long time. And I have seen how people can you know how some people will manipulate a situation and use that leverage. And the backlash is, it's very much

a cycle of American history, whether it's the Civil War, and reconstruction, and Jim Crow and the civil rights movement, and the pushback on affirmative action. And, you know, on integration of schools, that this is the cycle that America goes through that when they're when there's progress on that front, whether it's up on the front for civil rights for people of color, whether it's rights for women, that there's always a undercurrent that is pushing back on that. And so we do this dance back and forth. And I want it to be optimistic. And I do think that a lot of people sort of realize they began to pay attention to inequities in the society and a lot of people are still paying attention to that, but a lot of people have been sort of frightened back into their, into their corners.

**Kit Heintzman** 58:19

What are some of your hopes for a longer term future?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 58:22

You know, I wish America would get out of this cycle, this cycle of people, that it's sort of a zero sum game, that one group can't be, can't have, can't live a full life and can't have all the opportunities because it takes something away, but it's perceived as taking something away from another group and that I really wish that in America, we would reckon with the accurate version of our history instead of covering it up, that we are now you know, we we dealt with slavery and civil war, and then the last cars and the Confederate laws cause trying to push back and pretend that there was that slavery was just fine. So, for instance, my history textbook in Indianapolis in a in a wonderful way, I got a wonderful public school education and one of the best schools in the state. But as was typical in the mid century, mid 1900s. The textbooks taught a version of history that said, slaves, not enslaved people, as we now say, but slaves were literally contented. My high school history textbook said that and better off because they were clothed and fed. So that's what I learned in my otherwise excellent public school education. Fortunately, I had a grandfather who knew history who was a lawyer whose parents whose grandfather had been elected to state office in Arkansas during Reconstruction, whose parents were college educated. His father was valedictorian of his class and at Lincoln University in the 1880s. So I had somebody else countering that, but not enough. And so now I write history everyday, which is why I care so much about the lessons that people are learning. But what I fear right now, is that in the same way that the daughters of the Confederacy, were able to advance this curriculum of the last cause, and that slavery was benign. We are now in a period of time where there are political leaders who are essentially doing the same thing like, Oh, don't talk about that. We don't want to learn that version of history, we want to sugarcoat things. So we're still in this cycle of covering up what the accurate version of history. And we saw, we never faced that. And people are afraid to face it. But those of us who want the story told, are not trying to make people feel guilty, we're trying to say, recognize that this happened. So we don't continue to do it. But as long as we keep covering it up, we will continue to do it. And then it and it is the pandemic is just an aspect of that. That it is a set of a mindset that says let's pretend that everything is alright, let's pretend that our world over here is perfect, and that there aren't any problems. And you know, you will be fine. And even to the detriment of the people who are being told this, that they're dying at a higher rate, because they're not getting vaccinated, because there's a mindset that keeps them imprisoned.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:02:03

May I ask what it felt like when you were much younger to be reconciling with this version of history you were being taught about your ancestors in school, and having a loved one intervene? Like, what did that What did that feel like for you as a young person?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 1:02:24

So that so the intervention the lessons from my grandfather actually came after I had, you know, been in that experience, but so I just, I have a memory of being in my history class, and being the only black kid in the class. And this was the lesson the only time black people were mentioned, and just sort of intuitively knowing that this wasn't true. But I didn't have any facts. I didn't have any ammunition to fight back. And so part of the reason I do what I do every day is to make sure that other younger than another generation does have the ammunition to fight back, and that other kids that white kids have the information so that they're not perpetuating the inaccurate information. But yes, it was, it was very uncomfortable. I mean, I still when I think about that I didn't have a pit in my stomach that I am being told something that diminishes me that makes me less than that says, Oh, you were contented. Your ancestors were contented. They, you know, they were happy with the way they were treated. And therefore, you know, therefore what I you know, I don't know. But it was really later because my grandfather was, oh, he was so proud of his family. So he beat the fact that he had told me that reconstruction was different from what I was learning in my textbooks, meant that the seed had been planted. Now had I known more, I probably would have majored in history. In college, even though the History Department at Harvard wasn't necessarily teaching what my grandfather was teaching at that point. It was a pretty biased history department. But But I was fortunate the combination of the seeds that my grandfather planted along with the fact that during the 1970s, when I was in college, that was when sort of a key cohort of African American women, especially African American scholars, in general, were beginning to do dissertations and to do this scholarly research that was bolstering African American Studies and Women's Studies. And so you know, that that period of time that decade was a real turning point, in scholarship in assist, especially in elite institutions that had before said, No, you can't do women's history and the history of people of color is insignificant. It's not worth scholarly Press. suit. And that began to change during that decade. So the combination of my grandfather giving me a narrative about my own family. And being an coming of age, during that period of time where the scholarship was being taken seriously, has given me the tools that I that I need. And you know, and through the time, because I've done all this family research, you know, I know, the branch, the various branches of my family and their accomplishments. So Madam CJ Walker is the person I write books about. And that's a sort of a singular story. But there are other members of my family, who were free people of color in North Carolina during the 1830s, who migrated to Indiana, and what they were free people of color in North Carolina in the 1700s and early 1800s. And who migrated to Indiana in the 1830s. But to great, great, great grandfather's who were in the Continental Army. So I didn't have that information when I was growing up to knowing that you are part of the American narrative, that you have a place there, I think it is, for me, that sense of ownership, and a sense of confidence about pushing back. And so it doesn't, even though I personally have that connection, it's not just me personally, it's that there is a community that has contributed to America. And so that, for me, that's important. And it's important that that future generations know about these contributions and know how they fit into the narrative, and have a sense of ownership. I think people when people feel disenfranchised, no matter who they are, it's very easy to manipulate them.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:06:49

What do you think scholars in the humanities and social sciences could be doing right now to help us understand the pandemic?

**A'Lelia Bundles** 1:06:58

Yet, with the hopes that they're not going to be arrested for teaching facts, has kind of been an issue right now. Because even facts are politicized. And so I think this is the real fear, you know, I read Chronicle of Higher Education. That's one of the subscriptions that I you know, overpay for, but really do want to understand what's

going on in higher education. So I think it is. And I think that scholars in social sciences and the humanities have to keep trying to teach what they teach, they may not be able to teach it in some university systems in places where their voices are being silenced. But you know, the good part about this era is that information is out there, you cannot stop the flow of information, you may not be able to teach it in a classroom, if the governor has signed into law, something that says you're you're not permitted to talk about these topics, but there are, fortunately are organizations that are pushing back. And there are documentaries that are being made every day, there are still outlets that are teaching this. And so I just think people have to as pep, as people have always done, whether it's you know, underground railroad, whether it's freedom schools, that people always find a way to share that information. And there's a huge pushback on sharing that information. But scholars have to keep doing that work and presenting the facts. And those facts seep through.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:08:43

This is my last question. I'd like you to imagine speaking to a historian, the future, someone far enough away that they have no lived experience of this moment. What would you tell them can't be forgot about, either the pandemic the last few years more generally, or some kind of intersection of what would you tell them? They're curious about now. What do they need to know?

**A'Leia Bundles** 1:09:09

That that we, specifically America, because it's there's a whole the rest of the world. I mean, I've let me I will say that and I want to answer this. I remember, in the early days of the pandemic, watching that map that was on the Johns Hopkins website, and watching the number of cases and China and America, Italy was you know, had a big spike and, and Russia had almost nothing and you'd like he knew that was a lie, that they just weren't reporting, but just sort of looking at the whole world was experiencing the pandemic, to varying degrees. And for us, the flu pandemic of 1918 Is was far enough away, I didn't counter that in some of my research for the books that I write. And that sounded really horrible. But, you know, but you knew the people who had survived, I didn't, I didn't really know, you know, there was nobody in my family that I knew of from my research who had died do it. So it was kind of abstract. But this was very real, because you saw that all over the world, people were being infected. And literally hundreds of 1000s of people were dying. And I was in a bit of a cocoon, I could come I was in my home, I could go to the grocery store and wear my mask, my life really did not change that much i Yes, that was going to fewer events. But you knew that that there were many people who had no escape from it, people who had to go to work. And so it was a real, I mean, this period of time, for somebody who's 100 years from now, to know that the world was frightened. People were dying, people were exhausted, people were afraid. And then there and at the same time, there were people who were exploiting that fear, who were manipulating people who were intentionally giving them misinformation. And that it was very hard to watch, especially in America, where you knew that the people often who were giving that misinformation, were doing it for political ends. And so we have endured this for three years. And there are now people who are trying to take care of themselves and others. But there are still people who are believing myths and who believe conspiracy theories. And they have, and it has now morphed into not just COVID not just this particular public health crisis, but it has morphed into almost an ideological and political mindset.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:12:15

I want to thank you so much for the generosity of your time, and the beauty and thoughtfulness in your answers. Those are all the questions I know how to ask at the moment. So I'm just wondering if there's anything you'd like to say that my questions haven't made room for, please take some space and share it.



**A'Leia Bundles 1:12:35**

No, I, you know, I went on and on. But thank you for doing this. And, you know, it's it is to be able to reflect on this time, and I will say this that I am speaking, you know, my experiences are experiences from, you know, a place of privilege, I'm very aware that I am a really fortunate person, and that I've been able to navigate this without, you know, major harm that I'm that you know, that there are people I know who are depressed, who are isolated, who are having a mental health issues. And it is and it's very hard to, to watch that because there's not a lot that you often can do about that. And I know that I just feel fortunate that I've been able to navigate that, but to you know, to be able to come out on this end with, with friendships intact and and to see the world kind of, you know, sort of getting back in getting back on on its feet, but that there are now now we now have all of these fissures that are there and people who, who already were suffering and whose lives who just become you know, more difficult, more difficult and more isolated and more complicated.