

Bonni: [00:00:00] Today on episode number 170 of the Teaching in Higher Ed. podcast I have the honor of speaking with Cathy O'Neil, the author of Weapons of Mass Destruction.

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Bonni: [00:00:21] Welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. I'm Bonni Stachowiak and this is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to improve our personal productivity so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

Bonni: [00:00:50] Back on episode number 130 with Chris Gilliard during the recommendations segment, his recommendation was the book Weapons of Mass Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy. That author of that book is today's guest, Cathy O'Neill. And as a side note Chris also recommended Cathy's Math Babe blog and that will come up in our conversation today as well.

Bonni: [00:01:18] Cathy O'Neil earned a Ph.D. in math from Harvard was a post-doc at the MIT math department and a professor at Barnard College where she published a number of research papers in arithmetic algebraic geometry. She then switched over to the private sector working as a cunt for the hedge fund Deeksha in the middle of the credit crisis and then for a risk metrics a risk software company that assesses risk for the holdings of hedge funds and banks. She left finance in 2011 and started working as a data scientist in the New York startup scene. Building models that predicted people's purchases and clicks she wrote doing data science in 2013 and launched the lead program in data journalism at Columbia in 2014. She is a regular contributor to Bloomberg View and wrote the book Weapons of Mass Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy. She recently founded ORCAA an algorithmic auditing company. Cathy welcome to Teaching in Higher Ed.

Cathy: [00:02:29] Thanks for having me.

Bonni: [00:02:30] I am thrilled to have you here. Chris Gilliard suggested your book on an episode I think it was about six months ago and you were so gracious in accepting the invitation and just thank you so much for spending a little bit of time with us today.

Cathy: [00:02:44] My pleasure.

Bonni: [00:02:46] I will admit that when Chris suggested your book it was one of those that I instantly thought I wouldn't have the background and expertise to enjoy. But yet I've been challenged by so many recent guests saying we need to regularly put ourselves in the role of a learner. So I thought I could do this and I will also say that the title captivated me too. And so I thought I can do this. And from I mean I downloaded a sample first and I thought it's completely accessible and I know that I am one of your audiences that you wrote it for. Can you talk a little bit about some of the problems with people like me who just sort of assume that math is not something that's accessible to us.

Cathy: [00:03:30] Yeah I mean that you are actually the person I wrote this book for. I mean I could have written a much more technical book to tell the you know the engineers at Facebook. Hey like you have to pay attention to what you what you know the side effects of your of your algorithms are. But I realized that you know Facebook has only one algorithm actually has quite a few but it's only one place you know there's actually algorithms that are affecting us and all sorts of ways.

Cathy: [00:03:56] And moreover it's. And we'll talk about this but like it's much more an issue of power than it is of technical knowledge. At the very base of it it's it's sort of like people who are in power using secret formulas to wield that power. And so the more examples I accumulated of sort of bad things happening in the world of big data and algorithms and nowadays we say AI the more I realized this has very little to do with technical knowledge it has everything to do with power. And everyone understands power so I'm going to write this book for everyone.

Bonni: [00:04:29] And what is the goal for that power what what are the powerful looking to do with having control the people who are in power always want to have control.

Cathy: [00:04:38] I think that is the point. Right. But many of the algorithms are brought on in order to increase efficiency. I think that's probably the way they're seen for the point of view of the people in power like we're going to increase efficiency. We're going to maximize we're going to optimize to some kind of definition of success that they choose. Sometimes it's profit like they want to maximize profit. Sometimes it's like how many how many of these cases can we go through like we like to just be extremely efficient.

Cathy: [00:05:09] Sometimes when you're talking about hiring algorithms they're just like they don't want to actually have to have meetings between their human resources people and candidates so they'll just like put a little algorithm in there of a personality test or some kind of resume filter that'll mean that few of their H.R. people will actually have to meet face to face with job applicants. And of course that is a form of efficiency as well.

Cathy: [00:05:33] Now the sort of most important point though about power is that you know that the people in power care about what they care about but they don't care about what they don't care about. So they might care about only seeing one out of every 10 job applicant because they have too many job applicants but that's not what the job applicant care about the job care but that they're being treated fairly and sort of a one of the most important messages of my book is that efficiency and fairness are really very different things. You don't say you don't accidentally get something that's fair just because it was optimized to efficiency.

Bonni: [00:06:07] And you talk about the victims of the weapons of mass destruction destruction. Can you share a little bit about them and also about the standards that they're held to versus the standards of the algorithms.

Cathy: [00:06:20] Sure. I mean I think what my richest example it probably comes from the world of the teaching and public education like primary school secondary school and we've seen lots of you know educational reform stuff going on and it's not so much right now under the Trump administration but certainly under under Bush and especially Obama.

Cathy: [00:06:43] We saw lots and lots of incentives at the federal level to be to hold our teachers accountable. And what that actually meant was almost always the same thing. And it was something called the growth score or sometimes called the Value Added model score for teachers. And I could go on literally for hours talking about the technical details of these scores but the short version is that nobody understood them. They were built by small data

companies secretly. The licensing agreements the contracts that they made with the Department of Education of New York City for example stipulated that nobody in New York City would ever under ever see the formula.

Cathy: [00:07:24] So literally no one in the actual education system understood the formula. And yet they were being dispersed to teachers. They were being you know they're being given to teachers. And if the teachers did badly on them they could lose their tenure or they could not get tenure in the first place. I should say. So they were being used for young teachers as part of their tenure process. And in Washington D.C. these secret scores similar kind of scoring system were actually being used to fire teachers and to give them bonuses depending on whether they're bad or good.

Cathy: [00:07:53] But in any case they were secret. They were statistically flawed and that's an important part of the story is that they weren't even they weren't good. They didn't actually were they weren't meaningful and they were appealable. And when people tried to appeal their score which happened to a specific woman named Sarah was socky way profiled in my book.

Cathy: [00:08:13] She tried to appeal her score. She was told oh sorry this is a mathematical formula and it's fair. So people And you know Sarah pushed back against it because she had reason to believe it wasn't at all fair and it and she was right. But a lot of people make that mistake that they think that because something is mathematical because it's an algorithm it is inherently more fair than some kind of human process. And that's sort of the other big lesson in my book is that there's absolutely no reason to think that algorithms are inherently fair.

Bonni: [00:08:43] You talk about so many different topics in the book and just for listeners that may not have read although everyone needs to go pick up a copy after hearing this interview today online advertising the justice system getting a job personal finances getting insurance politics and college costs recruitment etc.. And one of the people that you quote in the higher ed piece is President Lyndon Johnson you talk a little bit about his ideal and could you contrast his ideal learning happiness friendships other aspects of students for your experience with what things look like today as far as how we measure success.

Cathy: [00:09:24] Right. I mean you know intelligent thoughtful people can have different opinions about what college is for. Yeah and I don't feel like any one person that you know can close the book on that. But I do think that it's definitely more than what is it's made out to be by these silly algorithms that are

measuring that are measuring colleges and of course the biggest most famous long lasting one has been the U.S. News and World Report algorithm that ranked colleges in large part based on their reputation also based on like how many people actually came who were accepted.

Cathy: [00:10:00] How many people applied and that were accepted that we were accepted to apply. I should say all these different metrics which as we all know has deformed and perverted the college admissions system in the last 20 years simply because we we and I blame myself OK I blame all parents. I'm a parent. My son is about to be a senior in high school. We care about this stuff too much. We we ourselves are confused about what college is for. So given that we don't know exactly the answer to that. We rely very heavily on these readymade lists for us that ranked lists of colleges and we think oh if it's high in the in the list if it's ranked highly they will be OK.

Cathy: [00:10:46] And that of course that concern that the parents have and the reliance on these made up scores and I'll say more about why I think they're made up and arbitrary has sort of translated into college administrations saying oh well you know in order to get the best students we need to look good on these college systems and then they've they've gone ahead and done crazy things in order to in order to improve their ranking and I'll say that probably the biggest the biggest problem with the U.S. News and World Report ranking is what it doesn't count as a part of it and informed parents decisions where to send their kid are a part of it that informs kids it's a decision as to where to go to college. Namely the price.

Cathy: [00:11:29] So the U.S. News World Report model doesn't care about price and that means two things. First it means that like Well first the reason they did that in my my estimation is that they wanted to make sure that Harvard and Princeton and so on came up first on their original list. And if they had included price that they would have looked bad. And the second reason the second the second comment about that that omission is that it's meant that as administrators of all these colleges have changed and and perverted their admissions process or their entire college I should say in order to improve their ranking as that's happened their tuition has gone sky high and it hasn't mattered.

Cathy: [00:12:11] It literally is been invisible to to the ranking system. So it's a real problem and I should also add that there have been recently like New York Times and The Wall Street Journal I think both came up with different versions of how to rank colleges. I don't know if you've seen this. Yeah. And they you know

I'm really on the one hand I'm really glad to see that there are alternatives to the U.S. News World Report which is just so flawed. But I'll say look at the Wall Street Journal one at the at least cares very deeply about how much money students make after graduating.

Cathy: [00:12:48] Now I'm sure like a lot of parents care about that too. But the truth is we are. I hope I still hope that we are not a culture that only cares about people striking it rich. And if if we were doing that you know on the one hand I think there's just a very crude way of thinking about education as LBJ would agree with me. And it should be much more about like becoming better people and becoming more informed.

Cathy: [00:13:14] I understand that's a little bit idealistic but another way of looking at why that's just a poor idea is that it means that engineering schools you know MIT or Harvey Mudd or other engineering schools would obviously benefit from that kind of consideration. But not everyone is going to go become an engineer. It doesn't make sense for all colleges to be measured by the same yardstick at the end of the day.

Cathy: [00:13:39] So I mean taking a step backwards in my critique of these ranking these ranking systems is I really wish that we could have a tool and it's not a it's not a list the list is too simplistic a tool that would help us decide what our our priorities were are for our children and to help our children decide what their priorities are and then they could develop their own list if you if you see what I mean. Rather than relying on somebody else's definition of what we should care about because they just they just never get it right.

Bonni: [00:14:15] I have such a powerful memory of about five years ago a guest speaker coming into my class and one of the students asking him how to be successful. And he said well what would you consider success. And this was a really confident young man who always was quick to answer and very clear and articulate and he was dumbfounded. And it's kind of stumbled over his words uncharacteristically and finally said I don't think I know what you're saying really resonates with me where ever or not having those conversations about what success looks like and if we're creating algorithms around measuring things like income we're setting ourselves up for some as you say.

Bonni: [00:14:58] I mean you talk about some harmful unintended consequences and one of the things you share about the U.S. news model is its scale and how it's forcing everyone to shoot for. You say exactly the same goals and sort of this rat race. And can you share a little bit more about some of the

specifics around this rat race. What what what colleges and universities are doing in participating in this.

Cathy: [00:15:22] Sure. I mean I'll say that I'll answer that question. But I do want to comment on what you said which is you know the dumbfounded student comment which is that like it's just an observation I've made actually since the publication of my book Almost a year ago the paperback is coming out with an afterward or I'll add that it's going to be cheaper any longer in a couple of weeks which is that as an observation a lot of the weapons of mass destruction the most destructive the most scaled the most unfair most secret algorithms that are being used and deployed in our in our culture are taking the place of difficult conversations. It's almost as if if you have a difficult conversation that you want to avoid you replace that entire conversation with an algorithm and then you close your eyes and and and all hell breaks loose.

Cathy: [00:16:09] And if feel like that's exactly what's happened right. It's a difficult conversation. What is success is a difficult conversation. What makes a good teacher is a difficult conversation. What makes a good job applicant or what is a good college. And all of these difficult conversations are.

Cathy: [00:16:24] My point is that we actually have to have them. We can't just bypass them with some kind of simplistic crude scoring system that doesn't make sense. Now in terms of answering your question there's been just an enormous long history of of schools just simply cheating on their score and the way they cheat is that they do things like they. They lie about the average S.A.T. score of their incoming freshmen class or I guess they they're supposed to say about the people who applied to it.

Cathy: [00:16:56] There's all sorts of things that they are self-reporting to U.S. news which is already kind of a crazy system where they can't just like say the wrong numbers. So that's happened all over the place. You know Emory college did that there's just been like a C a sequence of schools that have been have been found out doing that for decades. Of course there's probably it's probably the tip of the iceberg so there's probably not nine times as many schools who have been doing that we haven't actually found caught cheating.

Cathy: [00:17:24] And then there's just a series of schools that will game their numbers. So gaming their numbers that means like taking advantage they're not technically cheating but they're they're doing weird things to get her numbers spiked. So they'll do things like invite a bunch of students to apply. That will never ever be able to get in. Just to increase their their metric on like the number

actually will be decreasing their metric on like the number of applicants accepted versus applied.

Cathy: [00:17:52] You know so it'll look like they are a very competitive school because so many people are applying but of course that doesn't help anyone. Right. It doesn't help anyone just like apply to a school that they have no chance in getting in. It's just a disappointment it's a waste of time and it's a waste of money. And that's just sort of the beginning. I mean there are also schools that are basically competing for elite students. Now I wouldn't say like Harvard ever competes for elites and so would be like not the very first tier of schools but the second tier schools.

Cathy: [00:18:20] So they'll be developing they'll be doing crazy things like having beautiful sports complexes for their athletes and for and for their average students as well with things like you know like almost water park type features and like common rooms that are just exorbitantly luxurious and not to mention like fancy fancy dorms and stuff like that all stuff that you know if you ask I think if you asked anyone above the age of 40 do you think it's a good idea to put a bunch of 18 year it into luxury accommodations I think the answer would be a resounding NO.

Cathy: [00:18:52] Like these kids are college students. They're supposed to be poor and work hard. That's that's kind of the point of college like to live almost like a monk. But that's not at all what we're seeing with these schools that are desperate for desperate for like full tuition students.

Bonni: [00:19:07] Would you then talk about what the Obama administration tried to do to create a rejiggered ranking system to address some of these. And but it doesn't necessarily have a happily ever after story.

Cathy: [00:19:21] Well I don't actually know what the status of the tool is. I know that the Trump administration has been taking down all sorts of things and I think that I mean I think the way the genesis of this is that the Obama administration was like they they had a very successful sort of war against for profit colleges. Thank goodness because that's actually another chapter in my book about the way that for profit colleges targeted online students that were vote both poor enough to be eligible for financial aid and ignorant enough to think that for profit colleges were actually good educations.

Cathy: [00:19:55] So but so one of the things they did the Obama administration is like they realized that these colleges had just really deplorable like graduation

rates. They loaded their students with a lot of debt afterwards and their students did not get good jobs. So they were trying to figure out a way to sort of highlight those schools in a sort of simple way. And so they had these ideas of building a new ranking system based on things like graduation rate debt load and jobs. You know whether they got paid pay jobs afterwards. And I think they eventually realize that it's never easy easy to simplify this stuff. Like like I was saying it's like never there is no one way of thinking about this. You really do have to think about and I'm not saying that for profit colleges are good for people. That's not my that's not my point.

Cathy: [00:20:46] But I'm saying that any given metric any given scoring system which which makes for profit colleges look bad will also probably make some pretty good colleges look bad. Pretty good colleges which are like taking a chance on really really poor kids that don't necessarily graduate at a high rate et cetera.

Cathy: [00:21:06] So the end of the day the Obama administration actually built a tool not that unlike the one I was saying I wish we had it was not as developed as I hoped it would be but it's a tool that a parent or their child could go to and try to make decisions like do we want to live in the city.

Cathy: [00:21:21] And it does count tuition considerations and in all sorts of like majors you could choose. You know I think no tool is going to be perfect especially in a in the context of the fact that college pricing is almost entirely opaque like what they can write down is the sticker price of a college education. But like almost nobody pays the sticker price. So we have we have a pretty opaque market actually. It's hard to build a tool that clarifies that market when you don't actually know what the prices are. I mean I think that's probably another reason that the U.S. news model never counted costs because it's really hard to actually know what the cost is colleges keep that under wraps.

Bonni: [00:22:06] We have a couple of questions that came in from Kevin Werbach who I know has interviewed you for his radio show he said about a year ago and he had a couple of questions when we already talked about which is just that you wrote your book for people like me and that there's a problem with the general population thinking that we can't understand the issues. And I would say for anyone who's feeling that way today that that you're likely wrong I think all of us are able to make it very accessible to understand. And then I've just been thinking about it nonstop. And the way he did want you to share a little bit about though the other challenging audience which would

be the technical community that doesn't see a problem that is just math so there aren't problems here there aren't ethical choices being embedded here.

Cathy: [00:22:50] You know I actually haven't found any pushback about the fact that I claim there are ethical or ethical choices in every single algorithm we've built. I haven't gotten a real pushback from that. I just wrote an essay for a libertarian outfit called Cato unbound and they're like my essay that addresses this. And then there's like some some responsa essays by one by a libertarian It's just like yeah this is true this is true.

Cathy: [00:23:15] No he goes on to say that he worries much more about government using algorithms than he worries about private companies using algorithms. I don't I worry about them both. So he has to be a libertarian because he is. But I actually you know and I would have expected pushback there but I've haven't gotten it. And I would I have gotten is more fundamental actually which is. Well there are ethical There are values that we embed in our in our algorithms but my values are different from yours.

Cathy: [00:23:45] I mean that's a different issue right. So you know so Facebook's algorithm going back to that it it optimizes it optimizes News Feed the stuff we actually see on our on our wall for engagement engagement is a proxy for how much time we spend on Facebook which is again a proxy for how much money they make. So the longer we spend the longer the more we click on their ads and the more money they make. So you could just argue that this is their overall goal is to trick you to stay on Facebook for as long as possible. I mean that's might as well be a stated goal of Facebook.

Cathy: [00:24:21] So they're optimizing for profit. Now my point is well that's it that's a value even though it sounds just purely capitalistic. It's it's it's not the same thing. For example as another value they could have chosen which would be we want to optimize for civic civil conversation. We want to optimize for true information. We want to optimize for happiness. There are I mean there's lots of choices they could have made.

Cathy: [00:24:45] They chose the one that profited them the most which makes sense. And and that's what the engineer at Facebook who I argued about that is about like it does make sense for them but I'm not sure it's good for us. You know in a larger a larger point like moving away from Facebook is a lot of the things that are happening in the world of algorithms makes sense especially for the people deploying them and even maybe make sense for us as consumers as consumers we want there to be tough competition on Amazon. And you

know to get the lowest price and we want to we might even want them to tailor their offerings to what we actually like based on our our profile and our on our consumer our consumption history.

Cathy: [00:25:27] But the question I want to ask is you know given that it might make sense to us as consumers. Does it make sense to us as citizens as you know sort of civically engaged well-informed voters. Because from my perspective I don't think it does. I think it makes sense to us as consumers maybe it makes sense to us as people who spend a lot of time on Facebook although there doesn't seem to be particularly good for our mental health. But it definitely does not seem to make sense to us as people who want to know facts and who want to live in the same sort of factual universe as our neighbors even if we disagree with them on politics because that's what I'm seeing happening as a result of these optimized algorithms is that they're optimized on on on profit rather than facts.

Cathy: [00:26:13] We are just cleaving as as a society into our separate little places where our facts are all different. And that's really really threatening to democracy.

Bonni: [00:26:25] One of the other challenges you talk about too is just the lack of transparency about the algorithms and thereby these proxies.

Cathy: [00:26:34] Yeah I mean look where we're talking about getting a job being assessed at your job getting insurance getting credit credit like credit cards or loans maybe mortgages. These are decisions that we care about like if we're if we're told no you're not going to get this you're not going to get a job or you're going to get fired because the algorithm tells us you're a bad worker. We should know what that algorithm is saying and there's plenty of laws by the way that are regulating these things that are not necessarily being applied in the cases of algorithms because on the one hand regulators think that algorithms are fair because they're just humans and all humans think that algorithms are fair so they're just kind of ignorant.

Cathy: [00:27:15] And second of all even if they know that algorithms can be unfair they don't know how to test algorithms because of what you said their opacity and their trade secrets so we have a lot of work to do. We have a lot of work to do. I don't think algorithms are going away. I think we have to we have to develop tools to interrogate them. So actually that's what I'm that's what I'm trying to do next with my life.

Bonni: [00:27:36] I have one more question before we get to the recommendations segment but I did want to mention to people listening that I'm going a link to two of your articles. I mean I'll link to more than two but I specifically found two recently that I think are really worth checking out in the Guardian. You write about how can we stop algorithms telling lies and then just think it's a wonderful introduction to your thoughts around that. And then you mentioned health insurance and oh my gosh I can't resist mentioning that one in Bloomberg that you wrote Big Data is Coming to Health Insurance there's a lot of important things for us to be having those hard conversations about that you said that we're we're often avoiding.

Bonni: [00:28:14] So the last question before we get to recommendations could you share and this is from Kevin Werbach again. Could you share a little bit your thoughts about do you see yourself as a teacher he sees you as a teacher and I sure do too. Not just as a scientist and author.

Cathy: [00:28:29] You know I am a teacher. I am not sort of technically getting paid to teach right now sadly I know someday maybe we'll find a space for myself in academia again and again and have a formal teaching job because I really love I love students I love teaching. I love the whole process. But yeah I sort of feel like writing the book was an act of trying to educate not just a specific class of kids or even adults but like an entire culture about the things that I these problems I thought were urgent and. And you could say under reported. But I would say like not at all reported when I started writing the book six years ago I think I was the only person I knew who was worried about this stuff.

Cathy: [00:29:15] It's a very male dominated white male dominated culture. And I think that's relevant because I think the kinds of exclusions that we're seeing as a possibility and and not just as a possibility but doing some thought experiments I saw as like an absolute fact. We're typically just not affecting the people who are building these tools so like we are building tools that we're having these effects but we weren't thinking very hard about what those effects would look like. And I thought of it as a you know again an urgent matter and I wanted this information to get out to the public and I was like how how I could possibly do this. And I had a blog but there's only so much there's only so many readers for specific blogs so yeah I wrote a book instead. And it's yeah.

Cathy: [00:30:00] And of course it's not you just write a book and that's great and some people read the book but then also people want to talk to you about it. So just this act of talking to you right now. Right. I sort of think of it as my job for

now my job is to communicate these ideas. And it's a real job it takes hours every day. And the great news is that the book has been translated into just a bunch of languages and I'm getting some of it like German my German edition and my Italian edition are coming out in a few days. My Hong Kong edition already came out. It's like very very exciting and that not only are a bunch of people in the States and Canada and the UK listening to these ideas but now like kind of worldwide. Pretty amazing.

Bonni: [00:30:42] It's wonderful and just congratulations on my and I so appreciate that you are teachers to so many of us and it's exciting to see the success. I hope we can spread a little bit of word about it out. Out to all those honors from all over the world and how fun to see all those translations coming out too. It is really fun. This is the part of the show where we get to recommend something. And it has been a while since we've had one of these interviews where we're not at least speaking a little bit about current events it's always hard because we're little but we need to be having a lot of conversations about race and we've had some recent episodes on that topic specifically and of course your book also speaks a lot about race as well.

Bonni: [00:31:23] And I found a wonderful book of a wonderful list of 40 Inspiring Books on Girls and Women of the Civil Rights Movement. It's from a Web site called a Mighty Girl and I really like a lot of their resources on books toys movies for smart confident and courageous girls. And I just love to have everything from little. We have a little 3 year old girl and a 5 year old boy. And I love for them to hear stories about really strong people both men and women. And I love for them to hear a little bit about the civil rights movement. We've been talking a lot about that in our house and you know trying to do the best we can in an age appropriate way about the age of four is where child development specialists say that that's when kids start to notice race and I'll stop her forget we're riding the trolley around those outdoor mall here called Fashion Island worth.

Bonni: [00:32:17] Our friends it's a biracial couple and they're young boys sitting right next to our son and my son starts pulling up his pant legs and try and and the young boy was wearing shorts and saying Mommy look his look at that look at his skin is different than my skin. And I'm you know both embarrassed but just knowing that this is normal and that we need to have these conversations so I found these 40 Inspiring Books on Girls and Women of the Civil Rights Movement might be a way to inspire some of these conversations in our homes that we absolutely need to be having very nice things. And Cathy I'm going to pass that over to you now to recommend whenever you would like.

Cathy: [00:32:54] OK. Well I. Is it OK if I recommend a couple books?

Bonni: [00:32:57] Absolutely.

Cathy: [00:32:59] OK. Well so first I'll recommend a book that's not new it's a book that inspired me to write my book actually it's called *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander and following up on your theme of race it's it's a it's this amazing book that sort of explains the the criminal justice system and all the different points of contact that people have with the criminal justice system when they do and how every single one of them is biased racially biased. And it sort of put it put me in this sort of like light lifetime goal of understanding it in a kind of data centric way. I think the book I would have loved to write and I would still love to write is a book about sort of measuring and quantifying everything that Michelle Alexander says about the race racist criminal justice system and it's beautifully written. I think everyone should love that book as much as I do.

Cathy: [00:33:59] So that's that's a book that's kind of a maybe five or 10 years old two books I've read recently that I've really liked. One is called *The Ideas Industry* and it's written by Daniel Dresdner and he talks about the way ideas become politically important and the and who are the messengers of these ideas and his large point is that we have too many thought leaders right now and not enough public intellectuals and you might not know what those mean but a very short version is a thought leader is someone who was like I had this idea and it's going to solve all our problems. And as soon as you hear that you're like yeah we have too many of those people like they're often in Silicon Valley. Right.

Cathy: [00:34:40] And then we have not enough public intellectuals whose job is to kind of just tear down the worst ideas out there. And so we have too many ideas that are being produced and promised us promised to us as sort of the big fixes and not enough people saying that's a terrible idea. And I love this book partly because I'm a I'm a public intellectual right. I'm saying like big data is not going to solve all our problems. And I like the fact that he says we need more people like me.

Cathy: [00:35:08] And then finally the book that I like the most. This year I read was called *Hunger* by Roxane, Roxane Gay I don't know if you have discussed this on your podcast but like she's amazing and it's about her story of being six foot you know very large plus size woman and just fierce and very honest. And like as a as a 300 pound woman myself really really resonated with me. And it's

just enormously important in just an incredible book that I think everyone should take a look at.

Bonni: [00:35:42] Just the week prior to them hearing this episode with you they'll hear Cathy Davidson recommending the same book but really always fun to hear someone else's what they took away from a read you know. I love it sometimes when there's repeats even more because we get to hear more nuance than what. What a way in which a book connected specifically with someone and then you're just convincing me even more that I've got to move that up my cue to take a read of it just sounds like such a powerful book.

Cathy: [00:36:08] I'll tell you what you're but you're not going to put it down like I picked it up and I didn't put it down until it was done. That's that's how good she is. She's such a good writer. It was particularly a resident for me because I've actually just had a gastric bypass a gastric sleeve surgery in order to address my health my long term health. And so it was just fascinating to read her struggles because there's just so close to mine. But we have very very different very different ways of approaching how to deal with it with ourselves. So you know I might even end up writing a book about not it wouldn't be anything like hunger because it's that's it's it's own book. But another book about about weight and women so whole notion of it's a very it's an important book though.

Bonni: [00:36:54] Well thank you so much and I wasn't sure if I should bring up but as I mentioned there were so many things I wanted to bring up about your book and then I love reading your blog. I'll definitely be linking to that in the show notes as well. And to some of your posts about your surgery so people can see a little bit about that journey and some of the things that you're learning there.

Cathy: [00:37:11] Thank you so much. Appreciate it.

Bonni: [00:37:13] Well Cathy thank you so much for investing your time it's just been so exciting to get to read your book and learn from you and then just to have this opportunity to share your work with others. I really appreciate your time today.

Cathy: [00:37:24] Thanks for having me.

Bonni: [00:37:27] What an honor it has been to get to talk to Cathy today. Thank you so much for investing your time into Teaching and Higher Ed. community and thanks to all of you for listening.

Bonni: [00:37:37] If you would like to help others discovered the show one of the best ways to do that is to give it a rating or write a review on whatever services you use to listen to the show. That's one of the best ways speaking of algorithm to get has to move up in the rankings and help other people see that this show is available. But it's also great if you just pass it on word of mouth share with others about the show and what you're taking away from it. And if you would like more regular updates to not have to remember to go to those shows and you want to subscribe to the weekly e-mail. You can do that at teachinginhighered.com/subscribe and you'll get a weekly email with the show notes and also with a article I write about blogging and teaching. Thanks so much for listening and I'll see you next time.

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