

INTRODUCTION Is it really about race?

Oluo was born in Texas but raised in Seattle. She discusses issues with her friend who pushes the idea that it's more about class than race. But Oluo points out that the wealth gap between blacks and whites is just as bad as it was when MLK was leading marches in the 1960's. Unions are not as strong in the US today as they were then and blacks suffer from both economic and racial discrimination. Until one fixes the school to prison pipeline, discriminatory lending rates, redlining, etc. just working on the class and economic issues won't solve the issues.

While we say that race is just a social construct and many of us believe that to be true the problem is that the vast majority of people don't believe it and they see race as a major issue. Anyone not of their race is othered. This works both ways – many “whites” don't want their children to mix with others and many blacks are shamed by their own if they marry outside of their community.

She talks about the perception that there's a feeling that if ‘the other’ gets more it means that I will get less. It's expressed in many ways. Many in the US voted against the Affordable Care Act because it would mean that “others” would get medical care. They voted against it despite the fact that they would hurt themselves in doing so. Classic cutting off your nose to spite your face.

She has a simple way to determine if something is about race.

- a) It is about race if a person of colour thinks it is about race
- b) It is about race if it disproportionately or differently affects people of colour
- c) It is about race if it fits into a broader pattern of events that disproportionately or differently affect people of colour

She points out that while just about everything can be about race, almost nothing is completely about race. It is important that we are aware of the different factors in any situation of oppression or conflict.

1) What is racism?

She mentions stories at work where colleagues won't accept that microaggressions can add up and be called racist and people who make racist comments can be called racists if they continue to make racist comments. If they work at changing that's another thing. Racists can change their behaviour. The issue is that racism can be expressed daily in small ways as well as in large, systemic ways. It's all racist.

In chapter 2 she decides that her definition of racism is Racism is any prejudice against someone because of their race, when those views are reinforced by systems of power. She suggests that we all use this definition because while it's important to battle racism one person at a time that is not sufficient to fight racism. The onus is on all of us to fight racism in both small and large ways. She suggests linking racist comments to something systemic too.

2) What if I talk about race wrong?

Olou points out that while her mother had conversations about being black in a white society with her and her siblings they didn't really speak about it very much. Olou's mother thought that because she raised black kids that she earned extra points. Olou pointed out that she didn't and when Olou was in her mid 30's they finally began to have a series of conversations about her writing and the work she had been doing. Her mother finally became the ally that she wanted her to be and she dedicated her time at work to advocate for racial equality in her union.

She states clearly: You're going to screw this up more than once. But have these conversations anyway.

Some basic tips to increase the chance that your conversation will be successful eventually, or at least decrease your chance of conversation disaster.

- i) State your intentions – figure out before you start what it is you're trying to say so that the people you'll be talking with can determine if this is something they want to talk about. If your agendas are different and if you're actually having two different conversations what is likely to happen is that there will be anger and frustration
- ii) Remember what your top priority in the conversation is, and don't let your emotions override that. If you feel *defensive* don't continue. It's not about you.
- iii) Do your research Google is there for all of us and we can come prepared by researching terms, etc. on our own. It's not up to the black person you're speaking with to do this for you.
- iv) Don't make your anti-racism argument oppressive against other groups it is fine to be angry and it is OK to express anger BUT it is never okay to battle racism with sexism, transphobia, ableism or other oppressive language and actions. We must be willing to fight oppression in all of its forms.
- v) When you start to feel defensive, stop and ask yourself why Sometimes we need to recognize our own defensiveness and stop and take a breather. It happens to people of all races and it can stop us from hearing that need to be said and it can stop us from saying what we really mean to say.
- vi) Do not tone police Do not require that people make their discussions on the racial oppression they face comfortable for you (more in chapter 15)
- vii) If you are white, watch how many times you say "I" and "me" Too many references to yourself means that you are making the conversation all about you. The topic of racism is not about your personal feelings.
- viii) Ask yourself: Am I trying to be right, or am I trying to do better? It's not about winning. The reason for the conversation is to share and learn. The idea is to do better and to be better. Your opponent isn't a person but the system of racism that often shows up in the words and actions of other people.
- ix) Do not force people of colour into discussions of race The impacts of racism on a person's life can be painful and exhausting. Even if a discussion is important to you, you do not have the right to demand that a person of colour speak with you. There will be other opportunities.

Below are some tips for when your conversation on race goes wrong. Learn how to fail and minimize pain to you and others and maximize what you can learn from the experience.

- a) Stop trying to jump back in when a conversation is beyond saving She recognizes that it's very hard to leave an emotional conversation unfinished, to leave feeling unheard or misunderstood. But it's better to end a conversation before the conversational bridge is burned around you. Step away and calm down. Think about where things went wrong and what, if anything, can be done to revisit the conversation later in a more productive and healthy way.
- b) Apologize A good, heartfelt apology goes a long way to restarting a conversation. Try to see where you screwed up, where you made assumptions, where you got overly defensive, where you hurt someone.
- c) Don't write your synopsis of this conversation as "the time you got yelled at" Your memory of this conversation should be "an important conversation on race that didn't go well" and not "that tragic time you got yelled at for trying and felt bad"
- d) Don't insist that people give you credit for your intentions Don't insist that people act less hurt or offended or angry because your intentions were good.
- e) Don't beat yourself up If a conversation doesn't go the way you hoped it would, don't beat yourself up, but learn from it. Use what you have learned for your next conversation about racism.
- f) Remember that it is worth the risk and commit to trying again Recognize that if a conversation went poorly then you have more to learn and if you keep trying you should get better at it. If you are complacent then you help to perpetuate oppression.

3) Why am I always being told to "check my privilege"?

In this chapter Oluo describes how she learned that even within the black community she had privilege due to her work in the tech sector, her university degree and the arty group she hung out with as a young parent. She asked friends why they didn't hang out with the group she was involved with and one said, "Nah, those are some bougie black folk". It made her take stock and realize the hierarchy within all communities.

Definition of privilege in the social justice context, is an advantage or a set of advantages that you have that others do not.

She explores the issue of her privilege which she points out is not all about her own effort which is considerable.

- A mother with a university degree who pushed her children to also get degrees
- Her own degree in political science
- She's a neuro-typical, nondisabled child who functioned well in the school system
- Security and food in her home so that she could concentrate on her studies
- Grew up in a country that supports the advanced education of women
- Being a citizen she qualified for financial aid (grants and loans)

- Because she has a degree she qualified for management positions in the tech company she worked at
- She's a light skinned black woman who may be seen as more intelligent and less threatening than others (mention educational studies about teachers watching black kids more)

She points out that we want to know that if we do 'a' we can expect 'b', and that those who never get 'b' have never done 'a'. We want to protect our vision of a world that is fair and kind and predictable. It's a natural reaction but it doesn't make the harmful effects of unexamined privilege less real. ([Brenda Lucki, Lindsey Graham](#))

So if somebody asks you to "check your privilege" they are asking you to pause and consider how the advantages you've had in life are contributing to your opinions and actions, and how the lack of disadvantages in certain areas is keeping you from fully understanding the struggles others are facing and may in fact be contributing to those struggles.

She points out that you can be both privileged in some areas of life, and underprivileged in others.

She asks us to think about our privilege, be aware of it and that the possibilities of how we use our privilege to make, real measurable change toward a better world are endless. Every day we are given opportunities to make the world better, by making yourself a little uncomfortable and asking, "who doesn't have this same freedom or opportunity that I'm enjoying now?" These daily interactions are how systems of oppression are maintained, but with awareness, they can be how we tear those systems down. So, please, check your privilege. Check it often.

6) Is police brutality really about race?

She quotes many statistics which are American. I don't know what the stats are in Canada but there are enough articles in our newspapers to show that proportionally our numbers are probably similar.

She comments that you can try and explain away statistics one at a time but her point is that being targeted is not in the heads of people of colour – they are being disproportionately criminalized.

She goes into a lengthy history of police forces to control the "other" and the fact that in many parts of the US members of the police forces were also members of the KKK. She discusses how implicit bias can take over during stressful situations. Both fear of police and the feeling that police protect are valid but experienced differently by different groups. She wants us all to be aware of the issues and she asks white people to join in demanding the right for people of colour to also trust the police.

7) How can I talk about affirmative action?

This chapter is somewhat longer than others because she talks about her history in school, in the work world and life in general. Seattle and Washington state in general is not known for having a large population of colour although since 2017 most of Seattle is represented in Congress by Pramila Jayapal.

Olou points out that as her family moved into less expensive housing the schools she went to had more kids of colour and worse teaching and fewer advantages than more middle class schools. She points out

that in university she was often the only black person in her classes and she only ever had one black professor. At work the people of colour were paid less and had a harder time getting promotions. While she did get promotions she said that many times others told her that she only got them because she was black and not because she deserved them.

Since affirmative action was first introduced in higher education in the 1960's it has steadily been reduced. Here points for why it's still needed are the following:

Argument 1: We don't need affirmative action because society isn't as racist or sexist as it used to be.

Really?

Argument 2: If an employer is racist or sexist, you can just sue them.

Hard to prove.

Argument 3: Affirmative action teaches people of colour and women that they don't have to work as hard as white men.

No.

Argument 4: Affirmative action is unfair to white men because it causes them to lose opportunities to less qualified women and people of colour.

Equally qualified.

Argument 5: Affirmative action doesn't work.

It does but the idea is to end systemic racism and this is just one step towards that.

9) Why can't I say the "N" word?

The "N" word is a very powerful word with a long, negative and painful history. Looking at American history she points out that words have been used to separate, dehumanize, and oppress and the power of those words is still felt today. So blacks can use the "N" word if they want but white people should not. It doesn't mean that we can't discuss the history and meaning of the word but it should not be used as a descriptor. The "N" word is part of systemic racism and if we are working to eliminate it we need to be careful about the language we use.

12) What are microaggressions?

Small daily insults and indignities against marginalized or oppressed people because of who they are. *The cumulative effect of these constant reminders that you are “less than” does real psychological damage.*

Microaggressions are small and can be easily explained away.

Microaggressions are cumulative.

Microaggressions are perpetrated by many different people. They are hard to address because they happen continually and from different people. It can be exhausting and can make one seem hypersensitive and hypervigilant.

Many people do not consciously know that they are perpetrating a microaggression against someone. They can be verbal or non-verbal. They are constant reminders that you don't belong, are not worthy of respect. They keep you off balance, distracted and defensive. They normalize racism.

Some strategies that may work for dealing with microaggressions:

- **State what actually happened** – call it out whatever it is
- **Ask some uncomfortable questions** – I don't get it. Please clarify or Why did you say that?
- **Ask some more uncomfortable questions** – how exactly was I supposed to take what you just said?
- **Reinforce that good intentions are not the point** – You may not have meant to offend me, but you did.
- **Remember, you are not crazy and you have every right to bring this up** “I can see this is making you uncomfortable, but this is a real problem that needs to be addressed”

She points out that if you observe microaggressions take the lead of the person to whom the microaggression is being addressed. They may not want to deal with everyone. If they are dealing with it then support them but don't jump in and assume that they can't protect themselves. *If you have been called out for a racist microaggression and you want to understand and you do not want to hurt people of colour, here are some tips.*

- **Pause – stop, breathe and reflect**
- **Ask yourself: “Do I really know why I said/did that?”** *If you can't think of a good reason, this is a good sign that you should examine this more in yourself.*
- **Ask yourself: “Would I have said this to somebody of my race? Is it something I say to people of my race?”**
- **As yourself if you were feeling threatened or uncomfortable in the situation, and then ask yourself why.**
- **Don't force people to acknowledge your good intentions.**
- **Remember: it's not just this one incident.** Racial trauma is cumulative and it may not be fair if you have to take some of the blame for what has previously happened. Remember that people of colour endure microaggressions daily.
- **Research further on your own time.**
- **Apologize.**

When it comes to racial oppression, it really is the little things that count.

15) But what if I hate Al Sharpton?

The focus in this chapter is on those blacks who are seen as good and the ones who aren't. MLK versus Malcom X. She discusses "tone policing" – being accused of being too angry, too loud, not polite, not the actual issue but the way the topic is being discussed. The person is deemed to be the issue because of how they are expressing themselves rather than the issue of racism itself. This is usually done to the person of colour by someone white.

Some points to avoid tone policing and be a true ally in the battle against racism:

- **Be aware of the limits of your empathy**
- **Don't distract or deflect**
- **Remember your goal.**
- **Drop the prerequisites.**
- **Walk away if you must, but don't give up.**
- **Build a tolerance for discomfort.**
- **You are not doing any favours, you are doing what is right.**

If you are a person of colour who is being shamed or criticized by privileged people for your tone, please remember this:

- **You have a right to your anger, sadness and fear.**
- **You were born deserving equality and justice.**
- **You matter.**
- **Nobody has authority over your fight for racial justice.**
- **You deserve to be able to speak your truth, and you deserve to be heard.**

As others have said too, you are either fighting white supremacy or you are complicit.

If you believe in justice and equality, we are in this together, whether you like me or not.

16) I just got called racist, what do I do now?

This chapter is focused to white people who may be afraid to call out racism in case they say the wrong thing and might be called racist.

If you've been confronted with the possibility of your own racism, and you want to **do the work**, here are some tips.

- **Listen** – try to hear what a person is saying to you without defensiveness
- **Set your intentions aside** –
- **Try to hear the impact of what you have done**
- **Remember that you don not have all of the pieces**
- **Nobody owes you a debate**
- **Nobody owes you a relationship**
- **Remember that you are not the only one hurt.**
- **If you can see where you have been racist, or is you can see where your actions have caused harm, apologize and mean it.**
- **If, after a lot of careful thought, you still do not see your actions as racist and feel strongly that this is simply a misunderstanding, do not then invalidate that person's hurt.**