

Media Representation of Women of Color

An Open Conversation with Ijeoma Oluo

April 30, 2018 - Transcript

Amy Nelson: My name is Amy Nelson and I am the CEO and Founder here at The Riveter. I am thrilled to welcome you all here tonight and this is normally the part of the evening where I would tell you about what we're doing here. But, tonight the stage belongs to our two amazing guests, Ijeoma Oluo and Ruchika Tulshyan. We are going to have a powerful conversation tonight and we're really honored that we are able to have it here. Thank you so much to both of you for coming.

Ruchika Tulshyan: Thank you so much, Amy. I'm Ruchika and this is Ijeoma as Amy mentioned. I wanted to actually start off by thanking Amy and The Riveter. For many of you, I'm sure you've heard because of the big controversy that has actually precipitated the need for this conversation more urgently than it always was needed. Amy called me last week and said we're going to be hosting Sally Kohn and I feel very uncomfortable.

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There are no two sides to this story. There's just one and I'm on the side of women of color. I'm on Ijeoma's side and I think this is ridiculous. To take a stand ... I get asked all the time, "How can I be an ally?" This is a great example of being an ally, of using your privilege and platform to raise the voices of women of color. Thank you so much to Amy and The Riveter.

I'm going to introduce Ijeoma though, really, she doesn't really need any introduction. Ijeoma is *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* best-selling author of *So You Want To Talk About Race*. I'm so excited to have it here. If you haven't read it, please read it. It's an amazing, amazing book.

Let's just jump straight into it. We're at a time when the #MeToo movement has really gained momentum. It's almost gone mainstream and the voices of women and women of color, some would argue are pretty well represented. What do you think about this?

Ijeoma Oluo: I mean, I would say that's not true. I would say that even the voices of women, in general, aren't well represented in this. We've barely scratched the surface of what's been happening to women since time immemorial.

Ijeoma Oluo: We still are in that position where we're having to build that perfect case of the perfect victim and the perfect monster before it's something people are taking seriously. Right now, we're really only seeing very high-profile people facing some relatively minor consequences after decades of pretty blatant abuse and people are already saying, "It's too much."

There's multiple layers to this. One is, recognizing that, while it is never okay and the harm it does is real to a woman or anyone, anywhere it happens, only certain women get to rise to the level with which people will care when it happens.

The worst of most abuses end up falling on women of color and on disabled women and on trans women in our society and women with the least amount of resources, the least amount of voice. What I'm not seeing ... and I saw some with the Time's Up with their funding, which was really wonderful and I do want to give recognition for that.

But, what I'm not seeing is this broad translation of, what does this mean for a hotel maid, who has their immigration status over their head, to stay silent about what's happening to them? How does this translate to a young woman of color who is trying her best to keep the only job she was able to get and she's at an entry level at a position somewhere.

I would say that what we're seeing right now is, if society is going to care about women, it's going to care about certain women and, even then, only at a surface level. That's really where it ends.

It's been interesting too, to see who gets held as a hero in this movement because it's just the women who are being heard ... but not the women who weren't heard or the women who lost everything or the women who had to continue and suffer in order to feed their families.

It was really weird, the other day on Twitter a journalist was thanking all of these white people for bringing down R. Kelly. As a black woman, one of many black women who has spent years ... over a decade yelling about R. Kelly and frustrated and upset that nobody cared enough about black girls to do something about the fact that he's been openly preying on them for decades ... and who took a lot of abuse for that. It was really weird to see, "Thank you, Rose McGowan for bringing down R. Kelly."

Ijeoma Oluo: What that does, then, is it doesn't teach the lesson ... when you say, they're the reason why we're talking about it now. It doesn't teach the lesson that we could have been talking about it a decade earlier. We could have saved dozens of young women had anyone been listening to the black women that were shouting about this for decades.

Ijeoma Oluo: We'll find that in any neighborhood. What we're seeing ... right now, what I want to see is less, "Let's find enough perfect victims to hold up on a pedestal and enough perpetrators to mildly punish," and more, "Let's look at the patterns. Let's look at the systems and start with the people most impacted" because they're going to find anywhere that there can be abuse perpetrated. It's going to fall on them and, if we want real, lasting change, you have to really start there and ask, "What's happening to you? What are you seeing?" And really start to make things better for them.

The thought that, if we start at the very top, and the most privileged, and made things better that it will somehow, magically make things better for everyone else just doesn't work. But, if you always start at the bottom of this list, this hierarchy, and meet those needs, you're always going to catch everyone else. Literally everything befalls on more marginalized women in our society and I really hope people will start paying attention to that.

People keep saying, "Why is this happening now?" They don't realize how often and how much risk marginalized women have been taking forever to try and defend themselves and their families and to be heard.

Ruchika Tulshyan: One of the main things I keep getting asked about, and I'd love your opinion on this, is when women rise, all women rise. Why must we be troublemakers and talk about the experience of women of color separately? There are some very, very clear feminists who don't talk about women of color at all in their work, but they've still made a dent in feminism, and in the feminist movement, so why do we need to break this down?

Ijeoma Oluo: I think it's important to realize that all women rise only when all women rise. That's just kind of how that works and that silence is far more divisive than discussion.

A lot of people like to assume that because they're privileged means that they can ignore the suffering of others and ignore the way they're hurting others. That there isn't a problem and there isn't a divide.

It always amazes me when I hear from privileged women, or what we call white feminists, when they say “you're being divisive,” as if the divide ... as if I was stuck like glue to them. And, then, the moment I decided to say something, I came unstuck. I'm like, "Look, you may have thought that we were buddies, but we're not."

Ijeoma Oluo: I think that there's this myth that because we share one oppression that binds us. That the people that we share that oppression with can't also be our oppressors in another. When I'm looking at who's harming me, who's making me unsafe, day in and day out, I have very little distinction between white men and white women in society.

As we look at what happened in Starbucks, right, that was one white woman making a phone call because she felt uncomfortable. The solidarity starts when you actually decide you're going to stand for all women. That means you have to look at all women and listen to all women and incorporate their needs in to what you do. It doesn't start with you forcing less privileged women, less powerful women, to pretend like your goals are theirs. That divide will always be there and it has absolutely no change of being exposed if you don't talk about it.

What the people are saying is they would really just rather that marginalized women carry that entire burden in silence. That's not a movement. That's not feminism.

Ruchika Tulshyan: Perfect segue into why I think a lot of people are here. I really want to hear your side of what happened with Sally Kohn's book, the entire debacle. We're talking about bad journalism, not fact-checking and, in some ... and, literally fabricating quotes. We're talking about bad PR, denying of wrong-doing in any way and then, the worst part of it is, really, pitting two black women against each other. I'd love to hear your take on what happened.

Ijeoma Oluo: Yeah, sure. Is it alright if I swear here? Alright.

It's been ... this whole thing has been really surreal. It hasn't been shocking and, yet also, you're just like, "What episode am I on of this horrible television show?"

I try to not get in personal beef. I almost never have personal beef. You almost never hear me mention anyone's name explicitly when it's not, like, The President and, even that, I try not to mention. I'm trying to reclaim my time.

I have woken up, in the morning ... I think it was the day after Amina had talked about what was happening. If you aren't familiar with what Amina had said, she had ... Aminatou Sow came forward when Sally Kohn's book, "The Opposite of Hate," was released. She had been quoted in the book and taking a cab ride ... which Amina says was actually an Uber ride ... as saying some fairly, what people would say, inflammatory words about white people. Basically stating something along the lines of, "If a white person's racist, don't I have the right to kill them."

Ijeoma Oluo: Amina said that, when she found out, before the book came out, that she was going to leave. Then, at some point ... at this point, she reached out to Sally, said, "Listen, I did not say this. This is incorrect, you could have asked for proof. You never got my permission," and asked for it to be removed.

Sally Kohn insisted that she had gotten permission and had been taking notes the whole time they were in this cab ride.

Ruchika Tulshyan: On her phone...

Ijeoma Oluo: Yeah, on her phone, while they were talking. Coming back from the event ... they just happened to be sharing a cab ... and had put it in truthfully. Amina kept asking, and even had a phone call with the publisher, and then Sally was like, "It's my first book. Some mistakes were made. I'm sorry," and agreed to take it out of future editions of the book.

When the book came out, Amina's quotes were there and Amina, being a public figure and a black woman, felt very unsafe having such a volatile quote attributed to her.

Ruchika Tulshyan: And, it was actually also, in response to trolls, when you have online trolls. You can almost imagine the layer of danger, right?

Ijeoma Oluo: And, especially, in this day and age. As someone who is ... who received, who still gets occasional, petty messages about the time I went to Cracker Barrel a year ago ... I can attest to the fear with which racism will attack.

She went public and had receipts, had records of emails she was sent, all the ways she'd been trying to resolve this. Then, Ms. Kohn immediately issued this kind of vague apology online and then, her publisher donated \$500 ... which, if you understand how much money you put in to publicizing this book ... where, like, Patrick Stewart is holding it up and Shonda Rhimes was throwing her an opening party ... to the charity of

her choice. But, then, immediately they simply started insinuating that Amina was lying and that Amina had said these things, Amina had given permission.

Ijeoma Oluo:

In the morning, I was looking at this and, of course, as a black woman, as a writer, and in publishing, I was interested. I didn't know either party personally. I was late. I had to go to a talk and I was like, "I will read more about this when I get back."

When I get back and do y'all know Jason here. Yeah. So, Jay's a friend of mine and he was on the train, I guess, and he messaged me and said, "Did somebody reach out to you and let you know that you're in this book?" I thought, "Maybe," because I really gotta...you know. So, my first response was, like, "I'm not sure. Let me do some searching," because I don't want to say no and chance ... you know, she could have emailed me 10 times and I wouldn't know.

I did a search for her name, then a search for her email, then a search for everything on social media. That's when I realized she had been following me for a while on social media, sharing my work, but no correspondence with her.

I still wasn't really alarmed. I get quoted in a lot of work. Then, Jay was like, "Yeah, uh...," like trying to be real smooth and tell me about it. He doesn't like to start drama. He was like, "So, I just think you really need to look at this. I'm gonna send you some screenshots when I sit down on the train." I was looking at it and I was like, "Oh shit." I had this alarm bell that went off.

There's a thing that happens when you are a light-skinned black woman talking about race, especially if you're, like, a Pacific Northwest, college educated, light-skinned, black woman ... is that, oftentimes people will try to make you in to something you're not to fit a white supremacist's narrative. I end up battling that fairly regularly.

So, immediately, this thought was, "Please, don't make me the good, black person. Please, don't make me the good, black person." I can deal with anything as black person, right? I'm used to that but it's the abuse of who I am and it harms black people more, actually, to make me in to the good, black person.

Then, he sent me this quote and ... inevitably, I thought, maybe it was some weird thing about my book or ... no, it wasn't. She started to use

this exchange I had on Martin Luther King Day three years ago, with a stranger.

Three years ago, Martin Luther King Day ... I don't know if you all know ... if you're any somewhat prominent black person, whether you gear up for Martin Luther King Day because what happens is trolls search for keywords for Martin Luther King Day. They look for the most popular tweets about Martin Luther King Day and they, basically, fill all your mentions with hate, pictures of lynchings, the N word, all sorts of stuff, all day long. So, the day that you're trying to honor Dr. King, you have to know that this is gonna hit you hard and that there are people who dedicate all their time to this.

Ijeoma Oluo:

After a couple of years of this, I decided, for this year, in honor of Dr. King ... that, if these people were gonna force this hatred on to me, I was gonna force his work on to them. Basically, whenever this would happen, I would respond back with a quote from Dr. King. It was a really labor-intensive process. It wasn't fun. Almost everyone responded back with, you know, weird shit like this.

But, one person, we just kept going back and forth. Then, eventually, he was, like, "What do you want from me? I'm only 15." And, I'm a bully. I'm the mom of a teenager. I said, "My son's almost 15, how does your mom feel about this?" Anyway, it turns out, he said his mom was dead and we have this conversation about appropriate ways to express yourself online. I was in mom-mode. I'm a mom. He was like, "You're really nice. I'm sorry," and he left.

It was weird. As someone who gets hate all the time, I was, like, "Huh?" I screenshotted it, and I shared it with friends only. I didn't want it to be a thing. I hadn't told anyone I was doing this. This wasn't a thing I was ever planning on writing about. I wasn't planning on making it ... this was very private. This was for me, personally, so I just did a friends-only Facebook post.

But, of course, that doesn't matter. That's not how the internet works, so that went viral. This is such a long story, y'all, I'm sorry. It went viral, and it was really annoying and awful because then, suddenly, everyone with a flag in their profile picture and a crying eagle or fish that they hunted, was sending me friend requests and being, like, "You're the answer to racism! We want you to know we're not racist." It was horrible. It filled up my friend requests to the point where I couldn't accept more and I left it there. For three years, I haven't been able to accept friend requests because I was like, "I'm not touching it."

It was really shitty. It got picked up by a bunch of national click bait firms and then, every year, it gets recycled. So, every year now, not only am I gearing up for racism, I'm also gearing up for this onslaught of old white people who just discovered that social media exists who are saying, "I love how patient you are with hateful racists." I'm like, "That, I'm not."

Ijeoma Oluo:

In the meantime, I have this whole body of work that is primarily focused on getting people to stop thinking about intentions and start recognizing and respecting the humanity of people of color. Part of that starts with not expecting us to take shit in the hopes that, eventually, racists will just tire it out.

For 400 years, they haven't and, even if they do, this can impact the system. I'm trying to get people to think about the systems of racial oppression and what really does harm us, day in and day out, and it isn't because I walk by a white person and they think a racial slur in their head. It's because when they act on that, an entire system of power enables them to continue to do things like that without consequence. That's really what's impacting me and millions of other people of color in this country.

Part of affirming who we are, part of stopping this is the basic irrefutable recognition of our community and the idea that we don't have to earn it, that we don't have to have these discussions when there's a black body lying on the street of whether this kid was a straight-A student or not, whether they ever smoked weed or not. It doesn't matter. They're a human being and we are a human being and, fundamentally, this country has not treated us like human beings and, as human beings, we have a right to equal process. We have a right to equal representation. We have right to jobs. We have right to housing. We have right to safety.

Anything that we do that says that we just need to try a little harder to earn our humanity, reinforces white supremacy. This is a backbone of my work. I write about it constantly. Even if you've never read a thing I've written, if you followed me for 5 minutes on Twitter and watched the way I respond to racists, you would get a good idea that I ... if anything, you would know that my philosophy is not, be nicer to racists. But, in this book-

Ruchika Tulshyan:

Actually, I disagree because this is a deep and tense, emotional labor-

Ijeoma Oluo:

It is a tense emotional labor!

Ruchika Tulshyan:

-and it had to be ... you've been so patient.

Ijeoma Oluo: -that I was paid for, which I think is very important, because I would not have done it for free. What Ms. Kohn did in her book was, she basically took this quote from the Amina, which made no sense ... no sense. I read it and was, like, "There's no way she said that."

Ijeoma Oluo: As black women, we don't even get to pretend that we can kill anyone, ever. There's no way you can say that to a white woman, especially, ever. Completely dead drunk I wouldn't say that to one of my best black friends because we'd be, like, "Girl, I can't even look crooked at people without risking arrest." It's not happening.

It didn't make any sense. It just didn't sound like a natural thing anyone would say. Then she says, "Well, I prefer Ijeoma's approach," and the approach she sets up is this conversation I had with this kid ... not my work, which she had been following for years ... and, which is the exact opposite of what she is proposing. And, she goes through and explains about how I had shown how real connection can be made by patience. She makes this weird analogy of how it's similar to when people say she looks like Justin Bieber and laughs it off and, honestly, that is not similar to having someone send you pictures of hanging black bodies.

Then, she ends saying something like, "I get my friend Amina's anger, but I think we would all do better to be more like Ijeoma." It was so disgusting because ... first off, A, if she was more like me, that book wouldn't have been written and she would have reached out. She would have recognized her power and privilege in that situation.

To be used like that ... against another black woman, and to have another black woman painted as the angry, black woman, and to have me painted as the reasonable one ... when what I was doing was actually self-harm, honestly, that had no measurable impact on structural oppression.

The work I do day in and day out has a much bigger measurable impact. Without thinking of the fact that I spent that entire day taking abuse to get a 15-year old to say, "Sorry." I don't even take that from my own kid and I love him. Then, to be made in to this ... and the irony too, of the way in which Dr. King has been misused and Santa Clause-ified and have the teeth taken out of how truly radical he was and used to shame other black people. So, then, where my one day of honoring his words is also passed back down. We get this layer, upon layer, upon layer of grossness.

Also, recognizing I am a light-skinned black woman and Amina is a dark-skinned black woman, and the thought of how hard I worked to be aware of that privilege, and how hard I know ... how much harder I know it is for

darker-skinned black women to say their truth without being labeled as angry ... and how I can say a lot more without being called angry nearly as often ... and, then, to just see, "Here's your angry black woman. Here's your good black woman." I was really upset, so I wrote about it ... just a Facebook post, and it was clear, it wasn't, like, "I hate this woman." It was, "These are the problems I have. These are the serious issues. This is the harm I think it does."

Ijeoma Oluo:

I didn't hear a word back and I still haven't. Then, people started tagging me in posts of that interview she was doing, saying how sorry she is, and how much she's learned, and how she's apologized and is going to keep apologizing. And, people are trying to be, like, "Well, she sounds like a real ally." I haven't heard a word from her. I haven't heard a word and, then I replied back, tagging her as well. Haven't heard a word. Nothing. Time and time again. Multiple stops.

Then, my friend was watching her talk about this issue and, then, she wouldn't even say my name. She literally said, "I'm not gonna say her name," when asked about this issue. She went from following me, sharing my articles whenever it suited her, to misusing my work, refusing to take accountability ... all while trying to sell a book about connection and accountability ... and, yet, she can't have one awkward conversation with me. It's been frustrating.

Then, to hear from other black writers I know that they knew Sally, considered her a friend, and then they all got a form letter from her saying, "About the allegations from Aminatou," ... and, it was a form letter, as if black women don't talk.

We're, like, "Hey. Maybe if you want us to feel like you appreciate black women, maybe don't send all your black friends a form letter about this issue impacting my friend.

So, that's kind of where it is. It's been over two weeks. She continues to give interview after interview, saying that she's really sorry. Still refuses to say a single word to me about it, or acknowledge me in it.

Her apology ends up being part of the further exploitation of black women. It's frustrating to me, as a writer, to know that ... you can ... that any white woman could write a whole ... could start a book off with a chapter about what black women need to be doing about racism ... and, in 2018, that would be seen as acceptable.

It's frustrating to me that more of the people supporting her aren't seeing the problems with this and speaking out. It's frustrating to hear people tell me that she must be a real ally, even though the basic steps of being an ally, and the basic steps of showing accountability in our social justice movement, she's completely skipping. And, it's frustrating to see how many black women work every day to try to affirm the basic humanity and don't get heard, and never get paid for their work. Yet, this book that's, kind of, co-opting and twisting our words is having this star-studded opening.

Ijeoma Oluo: It says a lot about publishing, a lot about the world ... and, whatever it says about Sally Kohn, that's between Sally Kohn and whatever she worships ... but, what it says about the rest of the world, and what it says about voices we value and, really, how our movements are linked to both our values is really what concerns me the most. I mean, if I run in to her, I will be more personal. I am upset with her, but I'm more upset with what she represents.

Ruchika Tulshyan: So, her book party and, really, a star-studded event was actually canceled. Is there any justice there, at all? What do you think about that?

Ijeoma Oluo: Yeah. I mean, I think that ... Yeah. There is and, I'm glad. I'm not glad that her party got canceled. I'm not glad if she's sad about it. I don't like the thought of other being sad ... believe it or not ... I'm not. I get no glee or joy from that. I know how hard it is to be a writer. I know how excited we get about these things, but I'm glad that ... whether or not it was fear of looking bad or because people honestly believe that this was a step too far ... that it got canceled. I am glad to see that people were asking people they admire, "Are you sure you wanna support this?" That's really what did it because this was all out there and nothing was being done.

It wasn't until readers of my work and listeners to Amina's podcast started saying ... and, we didn't ask for that. I didn't ask for it. I wanted ... I was more worried about the general narrative ... but, were just saying, "Hey. Are you sure that you wanna be associated with an event that's debasing and harming black women?"

Yeah. I am glad about that part. I'm sad it came to it. It shouldn't have come to that ... it really shouldn't have. It could have been such a great opportunity. As unfortunate as it is that this whole thing happened ... it wouldn't have undone the harm ... but it could have had a silver lining in honest conversation and honest accountability and modeling for people what that looks like. It wouldn't have killed her. It wouldn't have ended her.

The consequences that she's facing right now are the consequences because she refuses to take accountability. That makes me so sad every time that opportunity is missed because, I think, if there's one thing our society needs more of, it's the idea ... it's the confidence in knowing that it will not kill us to admit that we've done wrong and we've harmed people. And, in fact, it will kill other people if we don't.

Ijeoma Oluo:

That that step, as painful as it is initially, goes away. Then, you're a better person and you're living your values more than you were the day before. That entire opportunity, not only did she bypass it, but she sped past it, in refusing to embrace it. That's why it ended up coming to her thing being canceled. That's sad, but she played herself. That's it. It's not me. I hope that, for the entire discussion ... I hope that if people watch this and see...

I almost feel bad cause I tell this to my kids all the time. "Look, do you see? Now you're grounded forever. You could have been grounded for a week, but you just had to keep insisting that this didn't happen or you hadn't done this. You had to lie about this. You could have taken some accountability. It would have been done. Yeah, it would have sucked, but now it sucks a whole bunch more and now we're both mad. We both wasted a lot of time." It feels weird to feel, almost, like I'm nagging her and nagging America to be, like, "Look, we could have not been talking about this right now. We could have just been hanging out and having wine but, instead..."

To cling to privilege that hard is just ... it's not ... especially, if she was just a conservative writing a book, I wouldn't care. But, she was literally writing a book to try to teach people to not be what she's doing right now.

Ruchika Tulshyan:

While you take a sip of your wine, which is well-deserved... I'm just wondering, there's so much emotional labor involved in this. Why do you do this for?

Ijeoma Oluo:

It is. Today, I was really tired. I write about race and it's really tough. It's really tough when you're living it. I think, a lot of times, when white people engage in these conversations, they don't fully get that. That we're engaging with our own trauma in the hopes that we make a difference. And we keep pouring it open and saying, "Maybe if I show this one. Maybe if I show this one. Maybe if I keep opening this up." Then you never get to heal, but you're just hoping that maybe, then, that means the next one will come.

I do this for a living and it is not fun. It's rewarding, in many ways. When I can hear from other ... especially from other people of color, and especially other black women ... about ways, in which, it may be making their lives easier or giving them hope. But, it's not fun. Not a single day of it.

Ijeoma Oluo:

I do it because, even if I'm not doing it, I'm still a black woman. You know? It wasn't fun not writing it. It wasn't fun being in a cubicle and having people make racially insensitive comments all day ... and knowing that I have to modulate my voice ... and knowing that I had to never get too excited and ... knowing that I was never fully accepted and ... knowing that my sons weren't safe, my brother wasn't safe, that I wasn't safe. That's not fun either and I couldn't talk to anyone about it without getting fired.

So, with the privilege to be able to say what this is like and to be able to give voice to it, is also a responsibility. There's probably a little hubris in that, in that I do definitely feel like, "If I didn't say this, what if it doesn't get said? What then?"

I do have faith in other black people, other people of color, to talk about what they're saying but I also know that, if I step off a platform, they don't just automatically hand it to another black woman and say, here you go.

So, I have this, like drive. I have this worry. When I try to take a couple days off, I wonder what's happening in the world that people are not talking about right. What are they missing that I need to talk about? What if something big happens and I'm not there to put that piece in to get this group of people looking at it in a different way? Like I said, that's a mix of duty, and it's a mix of hubris. It's a lot of things. I know I'm talented at it.

But, at the end of the day, leaving it and saying, "I don't wanna deal with the trolls and I don't wanna deal with diving in to it," then, basically, I go back to where I was before. To where, in order to live, I was trying to act like it wasn't happening as badly as it was and I was living a half life. And, that's not a way I can ... I could've lived like that, longer but, now that I'm not, I can't go back. I'll just get fired from every job I have. Cause, basically, I'm unemployable at anything else.

That's why I do it. I'm grateful to have a platform. I'm grateful to have talent. I wish that I lived in a world where I could put these talents to

something else, something more fun. That would be a sign of progress, but I can't. Right now, this is what I do?

Ruchika Tulshyan: As I was thinking about the work that you do ... obviously, I devoured your book. And, then, I devoured it again and, then, I assigned it to my class and everyone's loving it. I was thinking about this statistic I read a few years ago and it keeps coming up in my mind that 3/4 of white people in America do not have any friends of color. I think that's really concerning for me, if I think about it, at the root. It's the violence, the betrayal, all of that is horrific. What's also horrific is going in to the workplace, going in to a shop, going in to a restaurant and always feeling like you don't belong there ... and, certainly, in Seattle. I think one of the things I'm most excited about is when you talk about expose the liberal racism that we face here in Seattle. You know? Could you tell us about that?

Ijeoma Oluo: I've said this before, and I think it's clever, so I'm going to quote myself forever. Living in Seattle is like seeing a slavery movie with a white friend. You're watching it with them and they're ... it's horrific and you're traumatized and they're saying, "I would have freed all the slaves." And, you're like, "Bitch, you barely made it because of traffic." That's kind of what it's like in Seattle.

We have a lot of people who can go most of their day without having to really meaningfully interact with people of color and say, "I'm the most progressive, anti-racist I know," because they don't even have to be made uncomfortable. They've never been tested. They think that they're warriors and, the moment you're, like, "Hey. That thing that you said. That was racially insensitive." They're, like, "How dare you! I'm a freedom fighter," and they haven't done anything other than vote Democrat, which doesn't mean much to black people, in concrete terms. Voting Republican does...

It's frustrating because the amount of people who tell me ... people walk up to me and tell me they don't have a racist bone in their body and I just constantly wanna say, "How do you know? How do you know? You've never been tested." It's definitely hard to find out that you've harmed someone. It's hard to make allowances for a culture you're not used to. It's hard to challenge assumptions and, if you have the privilege to never have to do it, it's very easy, then to just guess that you would be great at it.

The truth is, when you are in a place like Seattle, you have this large white population that assumes that because they don't run in to enough

people of color to make it awkward, that they're doing great. They assume everyone's doing great and they don't understand that, even because of the fact that every white person around is confident and cocky, that any person of color stuck in that room is screwed.

Ijeoma Oluo:

They're dealing 10:1 with white people who are coming with the assumption that they're perfect at this. Their whole identity is wrapped up in being good at this, and being the perfect liberal. Every interaction, you're doing these calculations of, "Do I burst this person's entire life bubble right now by explaining to them why they can't touch my hair?" And, you're, like, "Really. Oh, my God. We have to have this conversation?" And, you're guessing. You're, like, "Okay. Do I risk this entire relationship? Do I risk this job?" every single time.

Because I've been to ... I've been face to face with vehement racists and, when they say something racist and I say, "That's racist," they're, like, "Yeah." And, that's it. But, god forbid you even hint that something a comfortable liberal says might be racist because that reaction then is, like, "I will destroy you!"

I mean, I criticized safety pins ... which was a bad idea, yo. A bad, lazy, lazy idea. And I had white women with safety pins in their profile picture trying to get me fired from jobs. I mean, can you ... I didn't call their kids ugly. I didn't even come up with the idea. All they did was, change profile picture and that was enough. They were so invested.

I wish people understood that. If you're walking around and you've got it great because you've never had a difficult conversation on race ... because it's never ended in screaming and tears ... chance are that means the exact opposite. It just means you've shown that you're not someone to be trusted and the people of color in your life are not telling you the ways that you're harming them. Or, they tried to, and you didn't hear it, and they gave up.

Ruchika Tulshyan:

I have so many more questions. I have one question that I really wanna ask and then I do wanna open it up to the floor. Where do we go from here, right? What's gonna drive sustainable change, especially the way women of color are treated in the media and beyond?

Ijeoma Oluo:

I would say, the most important things I'm focusing on now, is getting people to divorce themselves from intention when it comes to power and privilege. Stop thinking, you mean well, therefore you do well. That's not how that works. If you are walking by, and you flail your arms and punch

me in the face, saying you didn't mean to punch me in the face doesn't make my face not hurt.

Ijeoma Oluo:

We have to realize that we live in a system that, in order to perpetuate oppression just requires that you do nothing. So, the nothing that we do with all of our good faith ... while we're telling our friends we love them, is harming them. I think we need to let that part of our ego go. We have to both recognize how widespread this problem it is. How easy it is to be a part of the problem, so that we don't think it fundamentally changes who we are.

But, it also doesn't absolve us from the responsibility. I would say, that's the first step ... I think that's the biggest ... I think where we're at right now, this weird backlash we're seeing to identity politics is basically privileged people being told to face that they aren't who they thought they were. Privilege allows you to think that that discomfort is more important than the safety and well-being of the people that you're hurting.

In order to get past that, we have to realize that what we think about ourselves as people ... and what other people think about us ... means nothing compared to what our actions do. And, once we start getting used to that and, I would say, start seeking that out ... seek out the harm you're doing. Get used to the way that feels. It hurts every time but, then, in that you see where you can make a different choice.

Instead of looking at the systems that we interact with, you will never be able to make a meaningful difference in systemic oppression if you're not willing to look at where you've been an oppressor. Because, that's the only place we have power to make the change.

If I had the power to end racism, I would have ended racism and, I think, every person of color in this country would have. That means that where you have power, and where your neglect of that power has been doing harm ... you have the ability to make change. If you're not willing to face that, you're never going to make any meaningful change. It is an absolute requirement that you set your intentions aside and look for where you're doing harm ... not so you can flog yourself for all eternity. That doesn't do anything but make me uncomfortable.

But, so that you can say, I was uncomfortable when I interviewed this person of color for a job. I thought it was attitude. I didn't realize that was rooted in white supremacy. Now I know. Now, I need to find out how to make better decisions when I'm hiring. If you're not willing to sit and

think about that, and realize that your intentions ... that even if you weren't aware of what you were doing, it doesn't matter ... you're never going to make another choice.

Ijeoma Oluo: That's really where I think we need to go. I think that's what that push back is about ... that people don't wanna see themselves as part of a system. We all want to believe that American myth that we're all self-made and that everything we do is a conscious choice ... and that people are succeeding because they want to succeed and people are failing because they want to fail. That all you have to do is want to be good, and you'll be good.

People don't wanna realize that the foundations of the country that they love and keeps them safe has been brutalizing and terrorizing people of color for centuries. But, you gotta ... if you don't wanna be a part of the problem.

Ruchika Tulshyan: So, I'm gonna invite questions from the audience. I would like the first question to be from a person who identifies as a person of color. Then, the rest of the questions are put to the rest of the floor. So, first question, please?

Female 1: Do you remember that I met you at Starbucks a few days ago.

Ruchika Tulshyan: Sorry, do you ... I-

Female 1: Thank you. The first question that was asked from the audience is, "I don't understand why someone would call me a racist." That was from a white colleague and, I was infuriated by the question because I felt like she missed the whole point of your talk.

I'd like some advice from you on how to build meaningful relationships with, specifically, white women. I have an innate distrust just from past experiences and I'd like some advice on how to get over that. Also, what signs should I look for? How can I better educate my white girlfriends on how to be a good friend to me?

Ijeoma Oluo: Yeah. That's a really good question. I would say, first of all, you don't actually have to get over your distrust anytime soon. That's earned. I think what we have to realize, in our relationships as people of color is, unfortunately, in whatever bargains we make, we're setting a precedent.

I had to learn, when I started doing this work, and I'd decide I couldn't let anything go. That that's the person I was going to be, and it was going to

cost me a lot of friendships. And, it did. It cost me almost every friendship I had and that was heartbreaking. To grow up here, in Seattle, and to lose 90% of your friends.

Ijeoma Oluo:

It wasn't even me confronting people. It was just me being openly a person who doesn't take that anymore. That changed the rules that we had set up. But, what ended up happening, then, was absolutely everyone else who came in to my life knew. And, it doesn't mean I'm never harmed, because it doesn't mean that knowing someone's not gonna take racist shit means that you're automatically gonna be aware of all the racist shit you hear.

It does mean that you know that, if you're entering into a relationship with that person, at least part of you knows you're gonna have some conversations. I have a better success rate now, even though I have a much smaller group of friends. And, I will say too, there were people who came back. Three, four years later. It took 'em that long and some people I was, like, "That's good for you. I hope that you'll do better with your future black friends. I'm not that friend." Some people I did welcome back. I didn't thank anyone for the work.

I would say that, first off, understanding that we have the right, even if that right isn't recognized, to set our boundaries and that, if it isn't recognized or if that is found offensive, that's on them. They will have to come back to that on their own personal journey.

Something I would say, when I have conversations ... and I even, I have a white mom ... I have awkward conversations about race with people I love ... when I have these conversations, I've learned that I always have to start with what I'm hoping to get out of the conversation, whether that's coworkers ... and, even, when I'm talking, negotiating contracts for writing or ... I've had these conversations with my publishing team.

I always start with, "Look, this is why I'm having the conversation," because the number one thing I've learned about these discussions when you're having them with white people is that, if you don't set the framework, you have people of color who are saying, "I need you to hear me and see me and stop harming me," and the white people who are ending the conversation saying, "I need you to understand that I'm not racist." Those are two different conversations and you will never get to a solution.

When I enter a conversation, I say, simply, "Here is a thing I need you to understand, because ... and I am taking a risk on you. I care about you

and I feel like you would want to know." And I do that whole preemptive guilt thing, "I feel like, as my friend, you would want to know that this is harming me, because I know you love me. I know you care about me," or "I know you respect me." Then, I wait until I get a sign up, until I get a nod or I get a, "Okay. Yeah. I wanna know," because I can always pull back to them. And, if people start to get in their feelings, I can say, "Wait. Hey. Remember. This is what we're talking about. Do we need to come back later, when it's a better time for you to have this conversation? Because this is the conversation right now."

Ijeoma Oluo: I feel like I am worth, my humanity is worth, those conversations being serious. It's worth that commitment. That's really the way that I look at it now. Sometimes, if I'm just upset in the moment, I'm upset in the moment, and I have every right to be. I don't think that it should ever be on people of color to maintain these conversations a certain way for it to be successful. If there is harm being done, that harm is the harm, and it won't switch to the harm being that you got upset. You know? I think we always need to remember that we have that right. I always try to remind myself ... and, it's easy for me to forget. I have found myself especially being on tour talking about this book because I'm traveling the country talking about race with a lot of white people.

Ruchika Tulshyan: Where were you just right before... You wanna talk about-?

Ijeoma Oluo: I was in Little Rock, Arkansas. So, yeah. I'm on a book tour. It's been interesting and I've found myself saying to myself, as someone is challenging me and I'm starting to doubt myself saying, "You are a 37-year old woman. You know what's bothering you. You know what's wrong and you know how to say it." And, I just keep saying that to myself because it's easy to forget.

I would recommend entering in to those conversations with purpose. I also recommend, too ... I am a big fan of, when things aren't heated, having conversations and saying, "Hey. This happened the other day. I thought you might be interested," and, really, go in this way, because, I feel that sometimes, when people have stepped away from it, it helps.

I, sometimes, will share articles. I will do whatever ... and people walk up to me now and they're like, "Look. I just started handing your book out. I got tired of having these conversations and I was like, 'Read chapter five. Come back to me in an hour.'" Which is, how I hoped it would be used. If anything, I hope that this will save actual, real-life, humans of color from having to have this conversation for the hundredth time. Laying that groundwork down.

Those are the things I recommend and, I also would recommend to ... this is what I told my agent, who is a mixed-race person of color who was having a lot of troubles and she's in college at that age where, I think, you start to get those really big hurts, you know ... and I said to her ... because she was really devastated with a conversation with someone that ... it hadn't gone well, someone she cared about deeply. I just said, "You can't hurt yourself for everyone."

Ijeoma Oluo:

These conversations ... and, I'm not being pessimistic, I'm being realistic ... will go wrong 80% of the time, if you're lucky. So, then, you need to recognize that you're acting out of love, when you have them. Whether it's love for yourself, because you just can't not have that conversation again ... or love for the person that you're talking to ... or love for your community.

But, if it's not for one of those reasons, save it because tomorrow, you'll have another one and we can only hurt ourselves for so many people. It really does have to shift culturally. The burden needs to be on the people who have the comfort of privilege to catch their breath in between these hits ... to do the work themselves. And, there's nothing you can tell your friend that can't be found in a book. There's nothing you can tell your coworker that can't be found in a book ... that hasn't been said. There's nothing I can write that hasn't been said a thousand times.

Then, I just have to decide. I'm investing love ... even if it doesn't sound like love when it comes out of my mouth, I'm investing love either in myself or, I'm, like, "You know what? I'm tired today and I love myself enough that I'm going to risk this conversation," or "I love my kids enough, I'm gonna call the school and have this conversation." "I love the people of color in this office enough, I'm gonna have this conversation." And then, some days, I'm, like, "You know what? I'm just gonna eat my lunch." And, you have the right to do all of those.

I would say that, if you do have friends who do get it who are white, get ... part of getting it means looking for ways to lift that burden off of you, as well, and start having those conversations instead of just patting people on the back and saying, "Oh, that sucks."

Ruchika Tulshyan:

Thank you for reminding us that the boundaries that we need to set for each other are so important, especially when you're doing this work and going through the world every day, dealing with all of this.

One more question, yes?

Female 2: Thank you both for sharing tonight. This has to do with your new book. I just got it. I work at a very mainstream organization in the environmental community. I'm the only person of color on staff. We are starting a book room and your book is the first book we're reading. We're discussing the first few chapters.

Female 2: This is not a paid thing ... sorry ... we're discussing the first few chapters on Friday and, as of now, I'm planning on going. I'm wondering if you would have any advice for me if there's ... I guess I'll just leave it open ended.

Ijeoma Oluo: Yeah. I think it sounds like you're a little nervous about entering this as the only person of color. That's fully reasonable and, I would say, one thing I definitely say with a good speaking, corporate environment, which, this woman, here, can probably attest to, because I said it when I was at Starbucks, as well, is ... I never leave a conversation on race in any corporate environment without reminding the white people in the office to, please not corner the black person that they know in the office and force them to have painful conversations when they're trying to get through their day.

A lot of times what happens when companies are well-meaning, like, "We're gonna talk about this," is, "Oh, no. Everyone's gonna look at me and want me to, like, 'you'll tell me, right, if I did a racist thing,'" Then everyone's staring at you and you're like, "No. No, I would not."

I would recommend, essentially for anyone, any supervisor or anyone involved in this book club to talk to them about putting in ground rules that respect your boundaries and your humanities ... and recognize that you're one person.

I have a really good friend, Jenny Forester, who does poetry readings, and spoken word readings, and literature readings in Portland. She's a white woman, dear friend of mine, and she likes to, really, do her best to try to provide space for marginalized woman, in particular, women of color. Then, she does a women of color reading night.

One thing, I absolutely love, that she does, is she reads out a list of ground rules. She knows that Portland, like Seattle, is going to have a majority white audience and, so, she says, "You're here. You're in this space. Women of color are opening themselves up to you in a way that you really haven't earned and here's how you be respectful of that. You don't interrupt them. You don't shout out if something is making you uncomfortable. You don't walk up to them and ask them if they know any

other people of color that you happen to know in the literary world. You don't take their stories and make it about you and say, 'I know exactly how you feel because, even though I've never been black a day in my life, one time I went on vacation to China and I was the only white person. It was weird,'" which, oh my God, please stop doing that!

Ijeoma Oluo:

I have a chapter in my book about my hair and about being really put on the spot in a really unprofessional way about my hair and, I can't read that book ... that chapter, because every time I do a reading, and I read it, I get a line of white people coming up to tell me that they understand because they too have curly hair. And I'm, like, "Did you not listen to anything I said?" It was like they heard curly hair, "I have curly hair." Connection, and then they cut and stopped listening.

I would say, reach out to the ... it is important that your company, if they're going to be reading this book and discussing this book, that they do so responsibly. I would definitely say, "Hey, I'm the only person of color. I want these conversations to go well and, these are the things I need if I'm going to feel safe participating." Really get that written down, and discussed, and agreed upon, if you're going to have it. You don't have to have the conversation. You don't, but I would also say ... I don't trust other white people on your own to have that conversation and have it go well.

It's, whether or not you want to be that person, or whether you want to leave it up to whatever other unfortunate person of color comes along, at least, not initially. I do think white people need to be having these conversations with each other, but I just don't think you have the groundwork laid down yet to just go ... run free. Even if you have my book, and it's a great book. Get those rules. You have every right to ask for them and, I think ... especially too, because it's written in my book about the burden these conversations place ...

So, if you get any pushback, then it's really easy to say, "Look, this book literally talks about how hard it is for me to have this conversation, so I need these things. And, I need you to understand, there's 1 of me, there's 10 of you. You're dealing with hypotheticals.

You're dealing with the fear of maybe being embarrassed. I'm dealing in my trauma and I'm dealing with how I'm going to be seen by a collective whiteness in this space. I'm dealing with my work reputation and dealing with my ability to get by day to day." And, really, lay those basics, so think of that your boundaries are ... and, think clearly of when you're going to disengage. What you're willing to discuss, what you're not and know that

ahead of time, so that when you're flushed and, if it gets to that ... I hope it doesn't ... I hope this conversation is lovely, and pleasant, and wonderful. But, if it gets to that, you know, "That one's my limit."

Ijeoma Oluo:

I end up having to do that a lot of times, when I know I'm in tricky spots. You know what, I'm not gonna have the, "What about black on black crime" conversation. That's my shut off point and that's when I stop engaging.

And, also, realize too that you have every right to demand genuine and well-invested conversation. You have no responsibility to entertain trolls. You have no responsibility to entertain people who want to gaslight you or who want to silence you or want to make it too difficult for you to have that conversation. You have every right to leave that, at that point in time.

I didn't write this book for people who didn't want to engage with that honestly and you don't have to have this con- ... there are enough people who will engage with it honestly, that you don't have to waste your time on people who won't. Just know you have every right. It's the responsibility of anyone ... especially if they're being served this book a run-in with conversation, anyone with privilege should be sent a note to be supporting those boundaries and enforcing them, you shouldn't have to. But, that you have every right to them.

I would recommend that. Reach out to anyone, if there's an authority figure you can ... or, if not, just someone you trust, that might be willing to write that out and get people to agree on it in the conversation.

Ruchika Tulshyan:

Good advice. I wanna do a quick time check because I've let this conversation run free. We are out of time. I don't even have the words. Like, if I say thank you, it doesn't feel like enough, but I so appreciate you and the work that you're doing. It means a lot to have you here and have this conversation, in this room. Thank you.

Ijeoma Oluo:

You know I love you, Ruchika, and, I'm gonna take a minute, too, because I feel that she can be here ... she hates it when I do this, but we don't do it enough.

Ruchika doesn't ask for a lot of spotlight in the work that she does, but as a woman writer and teacher and a woman in publishing, she has doggedly worked for years to increase representation for marginalized populations and, especially women of color, in publishing. She mentors, she calls in favors, she calls in connections. She is amazing and the work

she's doing in this city, if there is a publishing of any value in Seattle, she will have had a hand in it.

Ijeoma Oluo: I get to yell at the internet and I get paid to do that but, a lot of what she does is un-thanked and unrecognized and she does it out of pure love and commitment to journalistic integrity, commitment to writing, commitment to dialogue, and commitment to her community. I appreciate it and I'm glad to know you and I'm proud to know you.

Ruchika Tulshyan: Thank you so much.

Amy Nelson: Alright. That's it. Thank you.