

Book: *So you want to talk about race*

By: Ijeoma Oluo

- On pp.13-14, Oluo refers to a pattern she describes as keeping racism alive in class and labor movements. Have you also seen what she refers to as “trickle down social justice” used as an argument in education circles?
  - Related excerpt: “It tells you to focus on the majority first. It tells you that the grievances of people of color, or disabled people, or transgender people, or women are divisive. The promise that keeps racism alive tells you that you will benefit most and others will eventually benefit. . . a little. It has you believing in trickle down social justice.” (Oluo, 2019, p. 13-14)
- On p.14, Oluo says “it is difficult, if not impossible, to talk about race when we can’t even agree that something is about race.” Can you think of an example of a time when you or someone you know thought that something was about race and someone else did not? Your example could relate to teaching, students, education or curriculum, but also feel free to share a personal example that you would like to talk through.
  - Related excerpt: “Our lived experiences shape us, how we interact with the world, and how we live in the world. And our experiences are valid. Because we do not experience the world with only part of ourselves, we cannot leave our racial identity at the door. And so, if a person of color says that something is about race, it is – because regardless of the details, regardless of whether or not you can connect the dots from the outside, their racial identity is a part of them and it is interacting with the situation. Note, if you are a white person in this situation, do not think that just because you may not be aware of your racial identity at the time that you did not bring race to your experience of the situation as well. We are all products of a racialized society, and it affects everything we bring to our interactions.” (Oluo, 2019, p. 15)
- Do any of you explore the concept of privilege in any of your courses for students or faculty? What does that discussion look like? Do you have a specific exercise that you do with students? Do you think using the terms “advantages” and “disadvantages” are a helpful place to start?
  - Related excerpt: “The definition of privilege is in reality much simpler than a lot of social justice discussions would have you believe. Privilege, in the social justice context, is an advantage or a set of advantages that you have that others do not. These privileges are not due 100 percent to your efforts (although your hard work may indeed have helped), and the benefits of these privileges are disproportionately large or at least partially undeserved when compared to what the privilege is for. . . it is in these advantages and their coupled disadvantages that the health and well-being of large amounts of people are determined.” (Oluo, 2019, p. 59-60)

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Notes compiled by Kristin Effland, MA, CPM

January 23, 2020

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- Can you think of an example of where your “privilege Intersects with somebody else’s oppression” and how that has helped or might help you find one of “our opportunities to make real change” (Oluo, p. 65)
  - Related excerpt: “When we are willing to check our privilege, we are not only identifying areas where we are perpetuating oppression in order to stop personally perpetuating that oppression, but we are also identifying areas where we have the power and access to change the system as a whole.” (Oluo, 2019, pp. 64-65)
- Oluo explains that “In this individualist nation we like to believe that systemic racism doesn’t exist” (Oluo, 2019, p. 89). She goes on to explain then how acknowledging and believing people of color “means challenging everything you believe about race in this country” (Oluo, 2019, p. 89). If we agree, then we can expect for it to be challenging for us to encourage faculty, staff and students to grapple with the topic of race privilege and racism as part of their training. With this in mind, what do you offer (or might you envision offering) faculty, staff and students to support them through this challenging process? Do you offer different support systems for faculty, staff and students from different racial backgrounds?
- As educators, we can try using the exercise described by Oluo on p. 130. “When you talk about [students] in general, pause that mental image. Are you picturing a black or brown student? Whiteness is default in our society” (Oluo, 2019, p. 130).
  - How might considering the default images that we have in our mind help us to better support our students, revise our curricula or check our biases (both positive and negative)?
  - Considering this exercise, do you have an example of an aha moment to share?
- Do you have some examples of actions you are taking with Oluo’s plea in mind that “we need to ask for truly diverse and inclusive education for all” (p. 133)?
  - Do you have some examples of how you have begun to revise your curricula to help ensure that it does not “still teach and promote the history, culture, and politics that keep (people of color) oppressed” (p. 185)
- Have you encountered students, staff or faculty who seem to “want to skip ahead to the finish line of racial harmony. Past all this unpleasantness to a place where all wounds are healed and the past is laid to rest” (Oluo, 2019, p. 140)? How has this phenomenon played out? Were you able to find a way to address it?
- When the topic of cultural appropriation comes up in our school settings, how might we instill in our students and/or colleagues the sentiment expressed by Oluo “that it cannot end well if it does not start with enough respect for the marginalized culture in question to listen when somebody says ‘this hurts me’” (Oluo, 2019, p. 152).
- Have you found the concepts of microaggressions (and their connection to larger systemic effects as described by Oluo on p. 172) to be a powerful way to help students or colleagues begin to grapple with some of these difficult topics?
  - Relevant excerpt: “Microaggressions are a serious problem beyond the emotional and physical effects they have on the person they are perpetrated against. They have much broader social implications. They normalize racism. They make racist assumptions a part of everyday life...These microaggressions help hold the system of White Supremacy together, because if we didn’t have all these little ways to separate and dehumanize

people, we'd empathize with them more fully, and then we'd have to really care about the system that is crushing them" (Oluo, 2019, p. 172).

- Have you witnessed or encountered students or colleagues who seem to be saying that "White people would love to join [Oluo or others] and [their] fight for freedom and justice, but [she's] made it too unpleasant for them." p. 202 How might you respond?
  - Related excerpt: Oluo writes that the message is "that "people like me" are the reason why race relations are as bad as they are. My insistence on voicing my anger, on using terms like "White Supremacy" and "racist" to define White Supremacy and things that are racist, my insistence on being seen and acknowledged as black- that is the real issue." p. 202
- What might tone policing look like in a classroom setting?
  - Related excerpt: "Tone policing shifts the focus of the conversation from the oppression being discussed to the *way* it is being discussed. Tone policing prioritizes the comfort of the privileged person in the situation over the oppression of the disadvantaged person...Most damagingly, tone policing places prerequisites on being heard and being helped." p. 206
  - "To refuse to listen to someone's cries for justice and equality until the request comes in a language you feel comfortable with is a way of asserting your dominance over them in the situation." p. 207
- Have you found effective or creative ways of describing to your students or colleagues the role (and potential value) of discomfort in these types of difficult conversations?
  - Related excerpt: "Conversations about race and racial oppression can certainly be tough, but that's nothing compared to how tough fighting against racial oppression can be. Our humanity is worth a little discomfort, it's actually worth a *lot* of discomfort." p. 211
- What actions can we, as educators, take to avoid being complicit "in this system of White Supremacy" (p. 211) that Oluo describes?
  - Related excerpt: "If you live in this system of White Supremacy you are either fighting the system, or you are complicit. There is no neutrality to be had towards systems of injustice – it is not something you can just opt out of. If you believe in justice and equality, we are in this together." p. 211
    - Do you find this perspective espoused by Oluo hopeful? Problematic?
- Considering the emotional difficulty that persons in the helping professions may have with being considered "racist," might some of your students or colleagues find some solace in the sentiment that "[they] have been racist, and [they] have been anti-racist." p. 218? If so, might it be advisable to help promote both messages together to avoid them being dismissed outright?

### **Content to consider for updating counseling courses:**

- "Studies have shown that people subjected to higher levels of microaggressions are more likely to exhibit the mental and physical symptoms of depression" (Oluo, 2019, p. 169).
- "Studies also show higher rates of depression and suicidal thoughts in Asian American women. Yet Asian American women are rarely the focus of domestic violence awareness, victim advocacy, or mental health efforts" Oluo, 2019, p. 198).

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