So You Want to Talk About Race

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF IJEOMA OLUO

Ijeoma Oluo—who identifies as a black, queer woman—was born to a black father from Nigeria and a white mother. Oluo's book, *So You Want to Talk about Race*, addresses many aspects of her childhood and upbringing. Oluo describes growing up poor in the United States, often living without access to electricity or water and suffering from food insecurity. Many of her childhood memories center on her experiences with poverty and racism. Oluo put herself through university as a divorced single mother, graduating with a degree in political science from Western Washington University at the age of 27. She subsequently worked in technology and digital marketing while running a food blog on the side from Seattle, Washington. After the death of Tamir Rice—a 12-year-old black boy (the same age as Oluo's own son) who was shot and killed by police in 2014 while playing with a toy gun—Oluo began writing about racism on her blog. She garnered notoriety on both Twitter and Facebook for her unapologetic views on racial injustice in the United States. Oluo's rising social media profile caught the attention of several mainstream media outlets, and she began writing articles for publications including *The Guardian*, *The Stranger*, *Jezebel*, and *Medium*. She is an outspoken critic of racism and sexism in mainstream publishing, particularly when it comes to the erasure of the black female voice. Oluo was initially reluctant to take on the emotional labor of a large-scale project about painful topics like racial slurs and police brutality when publishers offered her a book contract, but she agreed to do so after support for the project poured in from people of color on social media. *So You Want to Talk about Race* was published in 2018. The book garnered significant acclaim—notably from *The New York Times*, *Bustle*, and *Harper's Bazaar*—for its no-holds-barred approach to racism. A hallmark of Oluo's writing is use of personal anecdotes—typically about racially charged situations in her day-to-day life—which she leverages to expose deeper, systemic problems with racism in U.S. society.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

One of Oluo's central concerns is systemic racism, which is racism that's embedded into the way a society runs. She's particularly concerned with systemic racism in the U.S. As such, she pivots around several political moments in U.S. history, notably the 1960s civil rights movement and the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement. Oluo references President Kennedy's 1964 establishment of affirmative action (programs designed to reduce systemic inequality in education and federal employment), and President Reagan's 1983 legislation to defund affirmative action. Oluo also discusses police brutality in U.S. society at length, mentioning in particular the deaths of Tamir Rice (a young boy who was shot and killed by police officers while playing with a toy gun) in 2014 and Sandra Bland (a 28-year-old woman who died in police custody after being stopped for a traffic violation) in 2015. Oluo is a harsh critic of U.S. society's reluctance to prosecute officers involved in the deaths of unarmed black Americans. Oluo also briefly touches on civil rights figures like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, who were both assassinated in the 1960s.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Oluo addresses several race theorists in *So You Want to Talk About Race*, notably Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw's research on intersectionality—the idea that many aspects of social identity, including race, gender, sexuality, and class affect a person's ability to succeed in society—is a central influence on Oluo's arguments. Crenshaw's 1995 book *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement* includes her seminal essay on intersectionality, and it also includes several other essays on the topic. Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* (2010), which discusses contemporary racism in the U.S. is also a central reference point for Oluo in her arguments. Oluo's writing on racism was first popularized through her social media activity, much like Layla F. Saad, who published *Me and White Supremacy: How to Recognize your Privilege, Combat Racism, and Save the World* in 2018. Like Oluo, Saad focuses on helping people confront and challenge their own racism. Other nonfiction books about contemporary racism written by women of color include Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), Scaachi Koul's *One Day We'll All Be Dead and None of This Will Matter* (2017), Phoebe Robinson's *You Can't Touch My Hair* (2016), and Dianne Guerrero's *In the Country We Love: My Family Divided* (2016).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** So You Want to Talk About Race
- **When Written:** 2018
- **Where Written:** Seattle, Washington
- **When Published:** 2018
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Nonfiction
- **Setting:** Contemporary United States
- **Climax:** Oluo concludes that small actions can make a big change, and she encourages Americans to work together to combat racial inequality.

- **Antagonist:** White supremacy
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Twitter Maven. Oluo gained notoriety for her frequent use of Twitter. She uses Twitter as a means to call out racism as she encounters it in her day-to-day life. In *So You Want to Talk about Race*, she often refers to her Tweets, and she uses them as a jumping off point to explore racial injustice.

Facebook Controversy. In 2017, Oluo was suspended on Facebook for her posts about racism in U.S. society. Her censorship triggered a huge controversy because it implicated Facebook as a company that censors people who post about social justice.

PLOT SUMMARY

Author Ijeoma Oluo begins *So You Want to Talk about Race* by saying that her experiences as a black woman in U.S. society have deeply affected her life. She thinks that racism is a pervasive problem in U.S. society, so she's writing this book to help people have more productive conversations about racism. These conversations, she says, are inherently uncomfortable—both for privileged people and oppressed people—but she encourages people to embrace their discomfort for the ultimate goal of reducing racial inequality.

Oluo thinks that people who suggest that social justice efforts should focus on class (rather than race) are mistaken. Oluo argues that U.S. society was designed under the principle of racial oppression, beginning with the genocide of Native Americans and the enslavement of black people. Oluo thinks that those in power set up U.S. society to help them amass wealth and power by stealing land and labor from people of color. She thinks that the principle "*you will get more because other people get less*" still drives U.S. society, meaning it functions to keep that cycle—of taking from people of color to benefit rich, white men—in place. Oluo also says that oppression is like **cancer** in U.S. society: classism is one kind of cancer, and racism is another kind of cancer. Treating one won't cure the other, so both need to be addressed.

Oluo argues that fighting racism isn't about changing individual people's minds—it's about changing a system (which she describes as a "**machine**") that encourages and reinforces racist behavior. She equates changing an individual's mind to treating the nausea that cancer causes rather than treating the cancer—the system that creates racists—itself. Oluo acknowledges that many white people, including her own mother, often unintentionally say insensitive or hurtful things during conversations about race. To mitigate this, she advises privileged people to avoid assuming that they know what it's like *be* black just because they know black people. She also advises them not to demand an education about race from people of color or to police their tone of voice, because this is effectively asking for emotional labor from people who are already at a disadvantage.

From here, Oluo discusses privilege and intersectionality. She argues that privilege is having a set of advantages in society *because* other people don't. Oluo says that if she finds it easier to get a job because she's a light-skinned black woman, she's benefitting from a racist assumption among her employers that black women are less intelligent than white women. That same assumption keeps dark-skinned women away from opportunity, leaving more opportunities available for others. Oluo also thinks that privilege is intersectional. People can be privileged for many reasons—such as being able-bodied, male, or neurotypical. Oluo argues that people should use the extra power that their privilege gives them to try and reduce—or dismantle—the inequalities they benefit from. That, to Oluo, is what the phrase "check your privilege" means.

Expanding on the concept of intersectionality, Oluo explains (utilizing race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw's view) that social justice movements suffer when activists involved don't examine their own privilege relative to others in their group. Women, for example, see themselves as oppressed compared to men, but they might overlook the ways in which they're privileged relative to *other* women—who might also be oppressed by racism, ableism, transphobia, classism, and more. Thus, Oluo advocates that the fight for social justice has to be intersectional. Feminists, for example, should fight against *all* the barriers that women face, even if those barriers don't target them personally.

Oluo moves on to discuss police brutality and affirmative action. She cites the death of Sandra Bland (who died in police custody after being stopped for a traffic violation) to explain why black Americans fear for their lives when they're stopped by police. Oluo argues that the issue isn't about a few racist cops. Rather, it's about the systems in society that encourage racist beliefs (for example, a media and news cycle that consistently depicts black people as violent and dangerous) and that empowers police to act on those beliefs by permitting them to disproportionately abuse, incarcerate, and kill black people without facing consequences. The system, thus, is what needs to be changed. Oluo thinks that policies like affirmative action (which, for example, funds scholarships for people of color in educational contexts) do just that. Such programs, she argues, don't try to give unfair advantages to people of color—they just try to mitigate the effects of a system that disproportionately marginalizes people of color.

Oluo expands on this idea when addressing the school-to-prison pipeline, which she argues is another effect of systemic racism. Oluo argues that systemic channels (like media representations depicting black people as violent "thugs")

subtly teach educators that black children are more prone to violence. This makes teachers more likely to interpret childhood rambunctiousness as aggressive when children of color act out, which makes them disproportionately suspend and expel children of color or label them with learning disabilities. These disciplinary actions stay on children's records, decreasing their chances of getting college placements and increasing their likelihood of winding up in juvenile detention (and then jail) because they have a record of disobedience. It also teaches black and brown children that they will be punished for being too enthusiastic, loud, or rebellious, which steals their childhood joy.

Oluo's then addresses racial slurs—specifically, the n-word. Oluo argues that this slur reminds people of color of a history of enslavement, lynching, and violence. Using such slurs thus triggers deep emotional trauma and forces people of color to manage the emotional labor of being hurt while trying to get through their everyday activities. The task of managing painful emotions is inherently taxing, and it takes energy away from other things people of color could be doing to enhance their lives, which marginalizes them further.

Oluo addresses cultural appropriation next. She defines cultural appropriation as the act of taking symbols, imagery, food, fashion, performance styles, or other cultural paraphernalia from an oppressed culture. Oluo lists people who wear Native American headdresses or bindis as fashion accessories, fusion restaurants run by white chefs, and white rappers as examples. Oluo argues that such practices increase racial inequality. It's easier, she says, for white chefs selling Americanized fusion food to gain traction with white critics, which makes their restaurants more likely to succeed at the expense of authentic ethnic restaurants owned and run by people of color. She also notes that when white rappers become successful, it makes it harder for black artists whose rap sounds different in comparison to get record contracts. Oluo argues that if it's easier for appropriated versions of cultural practices to become successful in the marketplace than authentic ethnic versions, that means the society "prefers its culture cloaked in whiteness." It implies, Oluo argues, that people think whitewashed versions—of black music, for example—are safer and better for U.S. society, which reinforces white supremacy.

Oluo then tackles microaggressions like touching black people's hair, asking a person of color where they're "really" from, or commenting that somebody doesn't "sound" black. Many people use microaggressions without meaning to. This, Oluo says, is a symptom of a society that normalizes racist behavior. Oluo says microaggressions are problematic because they happen so frequently—they're like punches that hit somebody where they're already bruised. Every time a person of color faces a microaggression, they have to manage negative emotions that wear them down and limit their ability to concentrate on what they need to do in the moment. Over time, these persistent microaggressions add up and take a toll on their abilities to succeed in life. When people get called out for using microaggressions, Oluo says, the best thing to do is acknowledge the pain caused and apologize. Even if the person didn't mean to hurt a person of color, they still did. Oluo thinks that it's important to acknowledge the hurt and learn from the experience for the future, rather than try to justify the microaggression because they meant well.

Oluo revisits the topic of schools to explain that young students of color today are angry because it's increasingly obvious to them (in the era of Trump's presidency) that the system is stacked against them. Oluo reminds her readers that anger is a natural response to the unnatural situation of racial oppression, and she encourages older people to support the youths who are pushing back against systems of authority that marginalize them. Oluo's next chapter addresses the "model minority" myth, which falsely depicts Asian Americans as "good" or "successful" minorities. Oluo takes issue with this because statistics show that many Asian Americans—especially Bangladeshi and Hmong people and second-generation Chinese Americans—face substantive economic and educational barriers to opportunity, so it's important to be intersectional and acknowledge their needs in the social justice agenda as well.

Finally, Oluo revisits the topic of managing difficult emotions in conversations about race and emphasizes that the goal of these conversations—difficult as they are—is to motivate action against systemic racism. Asking people of color to communicate their views about racism in a "nice" way is unjust, Oluo says. It effectively asks people of color to police the way they talk about racism so that it doesn't upset privileged people, and that demands extra labor from people who are justified in being angry. White people also often react defensively when their racism is called out, because they're uncomfortable facing their own racism. Oluo advises such people to take pause when this happens instead of lashing out in defense, which only hurts marginalized people even more.

Oluo closes by reminding her readers that the goal of all these uncomfortable conversations about race isn't to help privileged people feel better by talking things out. Rather, the goal is to motivate action against a system that normalizes racist behavior. Oluo acknowledges that this is a difficult task, but it's possible. Complacency about such issues, Oluo concludes, is racist because it lets an oppressive system keep running. So, she encourages people to act. For example, every time a person votes for a district attorney who's more committed to combatting police corruption than their opponent, they're taking a step to dismantle the systemic effects of a white supremacist system. Oluo concludes that there's a long road ahead but that "we can do this, together."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ijeoma Oluo – Oluo is the author and central voice of *So You Want to Talk about Race*. Oluo is a black woman who begins writing a blog about race to cope with her frustration at experiencing racism in life. The blog evolves into *So You Want to Talk about Race*, in which she offers advice for white people and people of color in U.S. society to help them have more productive conversations about race. Oluo begins each chapter with a personal anecdote about her life—usually centering on a conversation about race that went wrong. She uses these anecdotes to expose deep, systemic problems with racial oppression in U.S. society, and then she offers advice for how to have better conversations about those topics. Oluo highlights the deep emotional trauma of experiencing racism, which is emotionally taxing for people of color, so a lot of her advice centers on how to be more sensitive to oppressed people's pain when talking about race. Oluo also puts the onus on privileged people to make active efforts to reduce inequalities marginalized people, and she gives tangible advice for how to do so. Throughout the book, she emphasizes throughout that the fight for social justice has to be intersectional: it has to consider to the multiple and varied sources of oppression in U.S. society and make active efforts to dismantle them all.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Oluo's mother – Oluo's mother is a white woman who marries a black man and gives birth to Oluo and her brother Aham. Oluo and her mother have a disagreement about the extent to which Oluo's mother can understand the lived experiences of people of color.

Oluo's son – Oluo's son is an eight-year-old boy who's frustrated that it's not safe for him to play with his toy gun outside after Tamir Rice is killed by the police. His teachers also threaten him at school because he refuses to say the Pledge of Allegiance.

Aham – Aham is Oluo's brother. He experiences significant racial discrimination in school.

Well-meaning friend – Oluo's well-meaning friend unintentionally offends Oluo when he suggests that it's better to focus on class inequality than on racial oppression.

Coworker – The coworker is a racist colleague of Oluo's. They have an argument about welfare and benefits.

Friend – Oluo's friend is a person who tells her that she shouldn't be calling out offensive comments as racist after she has a fight with a racist coworker.

Natasha – Natasha is a mother whose young son Sagan faces discrimination in school.

Sagan – Sagan, Natasha's son, is a five-year-old black boy who's discriminated against in school for being too rambunctious.

Nick – Nick is a white boy who, along with his sister Amy, joins in when neighborhood kids use racial slurs against Oluo and Aham.

Amy – Amy is a white girl who, along with her brother Nick, joins in when neighborhood kids use racial slurs against Oluo and Aham.

Liz – Liz is Nick and Amy's mother. She assumes that Oluo and Aham are spoiled and rude when they become withdrawn after experiencing racism.

Oluo's boss's boss – Oluo's boss's boss is a senior executive who offends Oluo when he makes comments about her hair.

Jennifer – Jennifer is a girl who teases Oluo about her big lips.

Theater director – The theater director is a colleague of Oluo's who repeatedly uses racial slurs during a dinner party.

Kimberlé Crenshaw – Crenshaw is a race theorist who coined the term "intersectionality" in 1989.

Michelle Alexander – Alexander is a race theorist who wrote *The New Jim Crow*. Oluo agrees with Alexander that affirmative action is insufficient to eliminate racial discrimination in the U.S.

William Peterson – Peterson is a sociologist who coined the term "model minority" in 1966.

Sandra Bland – Bland was a young black woman who died in police custody in 2015 after being arrested for a traffic violation.

Tamir Rice – Rice was a young black boy who was shot and killed by police in 2014 while playing with a toy gun.

Donald Trump – Trump is the president of the United States as of 2020. Mass protests erupted after his election in 2016 due to his campaign platform, which many viewed as racist and sexist.

Barack Obama – Obama is the first black president of the United States. He was in office from 2009 to 2017.

George W. Bush – Bush was president of the U.S. from 2001 to 2009. Oluo discusses Bush's outrage at being accused of racism.

John F. Kennedy – Kennedy was president of the U.S. from 1961 to 1963. He introduced "affirmative action" policies during his presidency to help reduce opportunity gaps in education and offer federal employment opportunities to people of color.

Ronald Reagan – Reagan was president of the U.S. from 1981 to 1989. During his presidency, Reagan cut funding to "affirmative action" policies in the U.S. despite ongoing discrimination against people of color in education and the workforce.

Al Sharpton – Sharpton is a black civil rights activist, religious

minister, and U.S. politician.

Jesse Jackson – Jackson is a black civil rights activist, religious minister, and U.S. politician.

Martin Luther King – King was a black civil rights activist who was assassinated in 1968. Oluo says that teachers tend to laud him for his pacifist approach to civil rights.

Malcolm X – Malcom X was a black civil rights activist who was assassinated in 1965. Oluo says that teachers tend to demonize him as an angry black man who "hates white people."

Chris Rock – Rock is a black comedian and actor who produced a popular documentary in 2009, *Good Hair*, about people of color's hair.

Kanye West – West is a black musician who accused George W. Bush of racism.

Oprah Winfrey – Winfrey is a black media icon.

Beyoncé Knowles-Carter – Beyoncé is a black singer and pop-culture icon.

Elvis Presley – Presley was a famous white musician. Oluo cites Presley's music as an example of cultural appropriation.

TERMS

Cultural Appropriation – Cultural appropriation is the borrowing of traditions or practices—such as food, dress, music, or language—from another culture. **Oluo** believes that cultural appropriation is harmful when there's a power imbalance between the borrowing culture and the one being borrowed from, as this can result in further economic or social oppression for the latter.

Intersectionality – Intersectionality is a phrase coined by race theorist **Kimberlé Crenshaw** in the 1980s to capture the fact that people in U.S. society are oppressed for multiple, often overlapping reasons. People can be oppressed because of their race, class, gender, or sexual orientation, as well as for countless other reasons. This means that a white, disabled man might be as poor as a black, non-heterosexual, able-bodied woman, but the forces in society that keep them poor are different. Like Crenshaw, **Oluo** thinks that *all* these sources of inequality need to be dismantled before social justice is achieved. In other words, the fight for social justice has to be intersectional: it has to consider the multifaceted ways in which people face oppression and have privilege relative to one another.

Microaggression – **Oluo** defines microaggressions as "small daily insults and indignities perpetrated against people of color." Microaggressions are often committed unintentionally, but Oluo argues that they are a form of oppression because they're psychologically harmful to oppressed people.

School-to-Prison Pipeline –The school-to-prison pipeline is the process by which black and brown youths are disciplined at a disproportionate rate in the education system, which correlates with higher levels of criminalization and incarceration among these demographics later in life. In *So You Want to Talk about Race*, **Oluo** uses the example of **Sagan** being harshly punished as a kindergartener to critique the school-to-prison pipeline.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RACISM, PRIVILEGE, AND WHITE SUPREMACY

In *So You Want to Talk about Race*, author Ijeoma Oluo argues that white supremacy is deeply entrenched in American culture. Oluo sees the United States as systematically centered on privileging the needs of white people at the cost of people of color. She finds this agenda so pervasive that it shapes every aspect of U.S. society, including education, law enforcement, politics, and the media. She argues that individual racists are the product of a society that subtly teaches them that people of color are inferior, and that even people who don't believe they are racist still benefit from other people's oppression if they have racial privilege. To Oluo, complacency about privilege is actually a form of active racism. Oluo stresses that everybody who is committed to racial equality in the U.S. is obliged to take action against systemic racism whenever they can safely do so—for example, voting for district attorneys who are more likely to prosecute cases of police brutality. Ultimately, Oluo argues, changing a racist system is the most effective way to dismantle white supremacy in the United States.

Oluo depicts the U.S. as a society that was designed to preserve white supremacy at the expense of people of color. Oluo says that racism—believing that certain races are inferior to others—was a lie that people told themselves to legitimize slavery and indigenous genocide in the early days of U.S. history. In other words, white supremacist beliefs have effectively built a society on the assumption that "you will get more if other people get less." Further, Oluo claims that people aren't naturally racist—they *become* racist under the influence of education, media, politics, and other public aspects of U.S. life that privilege whiteness. Oluo describes the U.S. as a society that was designed to oppress black and brown people so that white people could reap the economic benefits. She argues that racism is a tool used by people at the top of the hierarchy—rich,

white men—to achieve wealth and power. Oluo thinks that in every demographic of U.S. society, "black and brown people are consistently getting less," showing that the system is working as intended and that the effects of systemic racism are pervasive.

Oluo argues that in a society designed to preserve white supremacy, doing nothing is active racism, because it perpetuates the existing system. Many people in the U.S. have privilege without realizing it, as people often focus on the fact that they're disadvantaged in some way without realizing other ways in which they're privileged. For example, as an able-bodied, black, queer woman, Oluo is oppressed because of her gender, race, and sexual orientation, but she is privileged in being able-bodied. Similarly, in white supremacist societies, systemic racism funnels more opportunity in life—including college admissions, jobs, homes, and more—to white people by keeping people of color away (say, through mass incarceration). People who do nothing to change the status-quo (or lessen their privilege) are thus actively benefitting from the oppression of others. As Oluo puts it, complacency is racist because "systemic racism is a **machine** that runs whether we pull the levers or not, and just by letting it run, we are responsible for what it produces. We have to actually dismantle a machine if we want to make change." In other words, Oluo believes that everyone in American society must participate in dismantling the "machine" of racism—to stand by passively is to implicitly condone the oppression of marginalized people.

Oluo thinks that people who care about racial justice are obligated to challenge systemic racism whenever it's safe for them to do so. For example, to limit the power of white supremacy in education, people can talk to their school boards and demand more diverse school curricula. To combat police brutality, people can vote for district attorneys that are actively committed to fighting corruption and prosecuting police crimes. To challenge opportunity gaps in the workplace, people can call out microaggressions that depict people of color as less competent. Ultimately, for Oluo, the only way to be antiracist in a white supremacist society is to target systemic racism (whenever it's safe to do so). Changing the system that creates racist individuals should thus always be the goal of a person who's committed to equality.

CONFRONTING RACIAL PAIN

Ijeoma Oluo's *So You Want to Talk about Race* is a moving account of the deep emotional burden of racism in the United States. Oluo shows how racist encounters trigger feelings of hurt, shame, and anger in people of color, which compound old wounds that never have a chance to heal. She thinks that insensitivity to racial pain is one of the biggest reasons why conversations about racism go wrong or end in disaster. In addition, many white people face feelings of pain and shame when confronted with their own (often unintended) racism, which can also derail conversations about race. To help this situation, Oluo lays out strategies for navigating emotions during conversations about race. Broadly, Oluo recommends that people who are unintentionally racist acknowledge (rather than dismiss) the pain they've caused and remember that there is a shared common goal of challenging oppression. This approach, Oluo argues, will make conversations about racism less divisive and more productive.

Throughout her book, Oluo emphasizes the heavy emotional impact of experiencing racism in order to show how people of color grapple with feelings of hurt, anger, and shame on a daily basis. Because people of color face racial pain so often, racial jabs often dig further into pre-existing hurt and have a much larger effect than is often apparent. Even seemingly harmless questions like asking someone where they're "really" from or cracking a joke about somebody's hair can be much more damaging than they seem. Oluo says that people of color experience these kinds of microaggressions so often than each new one is like punching somebody in a place where they already have a bruise. People of color also won't (or can't) always communicate their pain, especially if they don't feel safe to do so, meaning that it's often overlooked. Communicating pain also requires a lot of emotional labor that often goes unacknowledged. When people of color do address their pain, Oluo thinks that it's important not to "tone police" them (ask them to be less angry) or demand a debate, since this asks for "more emotional labor from somebody who is already hurt." It also shifts the focus of discussion away from addressing a person's oppression. As Oluo puts it, asking somebody to adjust their tone or be less hostile is like asking them to focus on communicating in a way that "you approve" of.

Oluo thinks that ignoring or dismissing someone's racial pain often leads to conflict in conversations about race. Her advice is to always acknowledge racial pain, even if it's hard to understand. Oluo explains that some aspects of a person of color's lived experience will simply be inaccessible to others. It can be easy for a person to dismiss feelings they don't personally experience, or to become defensive about meaning well, but Oluo thinks that these reactions are counterproductive. She argues that hurting somebody by accident still causes pain. The best thing to do in such situations is to acknowledge the pain caused, even if it was unintended. It's important to remember, Oluo says, that hurt, anger, and pain are "are natural reactions to the unnatural system of racial oppression."

Oluo argues that white people can also experience painful feelings when confronted with their own racism—especially if their racism is unintentional—which can derail conversations about race as well. Oluo thinks that many people are racist without realizing it, because they're inevitably influenced by a culture that's saturated with white supremacist narratives. Confronting unexpected feelings of shame about accidentally racist behavior can make people uncomfortable and defensive.

In such instances, Oluo suggests that remembering to focus on the shared goal of combatting oppression (being an ally) rather than trying to avoid discomfort (say, by laughing something off) or lashing out in defense. Ultimately, Oluo argues that confronting racial pain—by calling out the racism of others and by recognizing one's own racism—isn't easy, but it's important. Learning to navigate that pain in constructive ways is thus an important part of having conversations about race.

INTERSECTIONALITY, OPPRESSION, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

In *So You Want to Talk about Race*, author Ijeoma Oluo argues that people are oppressed for many reasons in the United States beyond race, including gender, sexual orientation, class, ability, physical appearance, and more. These aspects of a person's identity and socioeconomic status intersect and create different challenges for different people. Oluo warns against assuming that all marginalized people face the same general experience of oppression. For instance, a straight black man, a non-heterosexual white man, and a trans black man will experience oppression in different (though sometimes overlapping) ways that all need to be addressed. Oluo thinks that it's important for the fight for racial justice to be intersectional: it must consider "all of the intersections of identity, privilege, and oppression that people face." Oluo thinks that when intersectional differences are ignored, social justice movements inadvertently marginalize certain people by glossing over important differences. She also warns against confusing or mistaking one form of oppression for another. For instance, when somebody says an issue isn't really about race but about class—in such cases it's likely about both, meaning both need to be addressed, and addressing one won't solve the other. For Oluo, taking an intersectional approach—thinking about all sources of oppression in a society—is vital to eradicate social inequality overall.

Oluo stresses that oppression and privilege aren't only divided along racial lines—U.S. society discriminates against people for many reasons. For example, people can marginalize others because of their gender: typically, trans and gender-non conforming people are most oppressed, followed by women. Ableism also marginalizes people, meaning it can be harder for people with disabilities to get jobs in buildings that aren't accessible, and it can be harder for people who aren't neurotypical to receive the same standard of schooling as others. Media representations also tend to normalize heterosexual relationships over non-heterosexual ones. Class and poverty have a profound effect on oppression as well: it's much harder for people to succeed in U.S. society if they come from a poor background. All in all, this means a poor, heterosexual, disabled white man is disadvantaged in different ways than a poor, non-heterosexual, able-bodied black woman (like Oluo). The many factors that contribute to oppression thus make conversations about social justice much more complicated.

Oluo argues that when people overlook intersectionality, they tend to mischaracterize oppression, so it's important to remember that addressing one dimension of oppression (e.g., class) will not resolve issues in other forms of oppression (e.g., race). For example, when the fight for women's equality focuses primarily on white women, there's still additional work to do to ensure justice for women of color as well. Similarly, Oluo admits that she often overlooks Asian Americans in her fight for racial justice, because of the "model minority myth" which falsely depicts all Asian Americans as successful high-achievers. To Oluo, all aspects of oppression merit attention. Oluo suggests thinking of each form of oppression as a specific type of **cancer** to explain that each social problem needs to be addressed to heal a society: "Disadvantaged white people are not erased by discussions of disadvantaged facing people of color, just as brain cancer is not erased by talking about breast cancer. They are two different issues with two different treatments, and they require two different conversations." Overall, Oluo argues that it's essential to factor in intersectionality—that is, to address all the ways a person is oppressed—when striving to achieve social justice.

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

In *So You Want to Talk about Race*, Ijeoma Oluo looks at how borrowing, or appropriating, from other cultures can be a form of oppression. While many people think of the U.S. as a "melting pot" of cultures that all influence one another, Oluo argues U.S. society is set up to privilege white culture. This means that when white people borrow the trappings of marginalized culture (like their music, hairstyles, or food), their whitewashed interpretations of those things (for instance, a Native American Halloween costume or rap music made by white artists) often become normalized in the dominant culture at the expense of the genuine ethnic versions. Oluo is careful to point out that there's nothing wrong with admiring what other cultures do and wanting to participate in their practices. However, there *is* a problem when there's a "power imbalance" in play between the two cultures involved. Oluo argues that using symbols or practices from an oppressed culture to gain success in the marketplace is wrong because it takes opportunities away from disenfranchised people. Thus, it's not so much the appropriation that's problematic, but the economic and social damage it causes to people who are already oppressed.

Many people assume that sharing between cultures fights racism, but Oluo argues that this perspective is naïve and simplistic. In a society designed to privilege white people (like the U.S.), this so-called sharing is more like stealing from another culture when white people do it, because they end up taking opportunities away from marginalized (non-white)

people. When white rappers are successful, for example, their sound "changes the definition of rap for the American culture." This makes it harder for artists of color to succeed because their sound is different. As Oluo puts it, "When the same white rappers are given Grammys for their attempts, over more talented black rappers, it makes it harder for rap by black artists to be accepted by mainstream culture—because it sounds different than what they've come to know as 'good rap.'" Similarly, Oluo argues, fusion restaurants "helmed by white chefs" often take the lion's share of economic success through "Americanized menus" that are more likely to appeal to (predominantly white) food critics. Restaurants with better reviews can charge more money, meaning it's easier for restaurants with Americanized or fusion cuisine to succeed in the marketplace, and this reduces economic opportunities for ethnic restaurants with more traditional menus. To Oluo, people who genuinely appreciate things about other cultures—say, their food, fashion, or music—shouldn't appropriate if they are in the dominant culture. A person who really loves rap, for example, will appreciate that rap is an art form that grew from the pain of oppression. Oluo says that "the heritage of rap, the struggle of rap, the triumph of rap" may inspire someone to want to rap, but they can never share in the pain that gave rise to the art form, they can only reap the benefits—"the enjoyment and the profit and the recognition."

Oluo also finds it unjust when a society demonizes traditional or ethnic cultural expressions (like rapping or wearing braids) but celebrates appropriated versions as somehow safer or less threatening. Rap by black artists, for example, is often "vilified by many in 'respectable' white America." As Oluo puts it, rap "is the language of 'thugs' and is responsible for numerous societal ills from 'black-on-black' crime to single-parenthood. Rap music is the reason why your teenager is suddenly disrespectful. Rap music is the reason why kids don't go to church anymore. Wife leave you? Pretty sure rap music told her to." When white rappers don't share in that blame, U.S. culture effectively tells people that whitewashed rap is safer and therefore better, which, Oluo argues, is racist. This attitude effectively normalizes white expression over ethnically marginalized expression, which further reinforces white supremacy.

Oluo concludes that when it comes to appropriating, it's important to consider if using another culture's symbols or practices might increase the economic and cultural marginalization of people who are already disenfranchised. If there's a chance it might, it's better not to use their symbols or practices: the inconvenience of playing it safe is much smaller than the potential damage of appropriating.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

CANCER

Author Ijeoma Oluo compares oppression in U.S. society to various forms of cancer. In symbolizing oppression like this, she makes two important claims: first, that there are many forms of oppression in U.S. society, just as there are many forms of cancer. She uses the idea of treating cancer to symbolize remedying inequality in U.S. society. If a person has brain cancer and breast cancer, for example, both cancers have to be treated for the person to heal. Treating their brain cancer is a step in the right direction, but it won't cure their breast cancer. Similarly, Oluo argues, if people are oppressed by race *and* class in the U.S., both issues need to be addressed for social justice to be achieved. Oluo also uses the metaphor of cancer to explain that trying to change every racist person's mind in the U.S. is like trying to treat the nausea that cancer causes. In order to heal the person, Oluo argues, the cancer—the system that creates racists—needs to be treated. Otherwise, the underlying cancer will just cause more nausea (the system will create more racists). The systems that Oluo is talking about are forces of society that encourage and perpetuate racist behavior. She lists the following mechanisms as examples: educational curricula that privilege white history, news and media that depict people of color as violent "thugs," legal and justice systems that disproportionately target people of color, and politicians (like Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump) who manipulate these tools to increase the wealth and power of rich white men at the expense of others in society.

MACHINE

In *So you wanna talk about race*, Oluo compares systemic racism to a machine that churns out racists and oppresses people of color just by functioning. Oluo says that people who know the machine is running but do nothing to stop it are complicit in the damage the machine causes. Using this metaphor, she argues that people who are complacent about racism or ignore the issue altogether are not being neutral—they are being actively racist because they are allowing a system that oppresses people to continue. This means that everybody has an ethical obligation to dismantle the machine (the systems of society that cause people to become racist), even if they didn't build it. In other words, silence about systemic racism allows violence against people of color to continue, and Oluo believes that this is inherently unjust.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Seal Press edition of *So You Want to Talk About Race* published in 2019.

Introduction Quotes

❝ As a black woman, race has always been a prominent part of my life. I have never been able to escape the fact that I am a black woman in a white supremacist country.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo's punchy opening sentences of *So You Want to Talk about Race* set the tone for her argument and clue the reader in to several important claims that she will make as the book progresses. In phrasing her opening as such, Oluo informs the reader that she is both black and a woman: this already shows that her discussion about race is intersectional, meaning that it's inherently tied to other aspects of her identity, like her gender (later, she will also reveal that she is able-bodied and queer). Thus, Oluo's opening already implies that her argument will be intersectional, meaning that multiple aspects of her identity overlap and intertwine to determine the amount of privilege and oppression she faces in society.

Oluo also boldly asserts that she lives in a "white supremacist country." From this, the reader learns that her concern isn't so much with individuals but with a society and institutions that encourage people to privilege the white race over others. This is another core facet of Oluo's argument. She consistently argues that the prevalence of white-privileging systems in U.S. society—for example, the media, education, the justice system, and politics—are the central vehicle of oppression in the U.S., and that they must be dismantled in order for social justice to be achieved.

❝ I remember saying once that if I stopped to feel, really feel, the pain of racism I encountered, I would start screaming and never stop.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

As Oluo explains her motivations for writing *So You Want to Talk about Race*, she introduces a simple but profound idea that is central to her argument: that the experience of racism is emotionally traumatic. People of color living in the U.S. have to bear the constant burden of managing difficult emotions that are triggered over and over again as they go about their daily lives—this puts a tremendous strain on them, which affects their ability to succeed in life. Many of Oluo's arguments thus focus on reminding privileged people to be cautious about the emotional labor they demand from people of color in conversations about racism. Oluo doesn't say this just to help people be nice or kind. She thinks that people who want to fight racism are *obligated* to try and minimize inequalities between oppressed and privileged people—and one of these inequalities is the emotional burden of dealing with racism.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ I'm ranting now, I'm talking fast to get it all out. Not because I'm angry, because I'm not, really. I know it's not my friend's fault that what he's saying is the prevailing narrative, and that it's seen as the compassionate narrative. But it's a narrative that hurts me, and so many other people of color.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker), Well-meaning friend

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

After her introduction, Oluo opens the next chapter by recalling a conversation with a well-meaning friend. Her friend suggests that maybe the problem in the U.S. isn't racism, but classism. It's clear from Oluo's response that she's agitated by this statement, and it's also clear that her friend means well but doesn't realize he's being insensitive and hurting her. Oluo uses this motif throughout her book: she begins with a personal anecdote (usually about a conversation gone wrong or a well-meaning but insensitive conversation), expands on the topic to expose broader social issues in society, then offers advice for how to have a better—more productive and more sensitive—personal conversation on that topic.

In using this format, Oluo is able to capture both the external (spoken) and internal (felt) dimensions of these conversations—she highlights her immediate emotional response to show how people with good intentions (like Oluo's well-meaning friend) can trigger a great deal of emotional trauma in oppressed people without realizing it. Oluo's strategy is to make the reader empathize with the

experience of being triggered and motivate them to try and be more sensitive—or less triggering—in the future. Helping people become more accountable for the trauma, pain, or anger that their well-meaning comments can trigger is a central focus for Oluo.

> This promise—*you will get more because they exist to get less*—is woven throughout our entire society.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker), Well-meaning friend

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo is expanding on a conversation with a friend about the connection between race and class. In doing so, she outlines one of her core arguments about the role of racism in U.S. society: that the U.S. was founded on the principle she outlines in this quote. In doing so, Oluo makes several important claims.

Oluo argues that U.S. society is hierarchical. To Oluo, the people at the top—essentially, rich, white men—use the mechanisms of society (such as the education system, media, politics, law enforcement, and legal system) to increase their own wealth and power by exploiting other people. In essence, Oluo thinks powerful people manipulate society's mechanisms to systematically target people of color and keep them away from opportunity— they use racism as a tool to help themselves get richer and more powerful. This implies, as Oluo argues here, that racism is woven into the mechanisms of society, meaning that the only way to reduce oppression is to change the systems that keep society running the way it does. Oluo also implies that racism and classism are inherently connected, which means that it won't be possible to resolve class inequality in the U.S. without also addressing racial oppression.

> What keeps a poor child in Appalachia poor is not what keeps a poor child in Chicago poor-even if from a distance, the outcomes look the same. And what keeps an able-bodied black woman poor is not what keeps a disabled white man poor, even if the outcomes look the same.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker), Well-meaning friend

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo is discussing a well-meaning friend's comment that class—and not racism—is the real social justice issue in the U.S. Although Oluo's friend means well, his comment frustrates Oluo because she thinks that social justice is an intersectional issue which means that people are oppressed for all sorts of reasons in the U.S. Some are oppressed because they're poor, others because they're differently abled, others because of their gender—and many are oppressed because of their race. It may be that a "disabled white man" and an "able-bodied black woman" are equally poor, but the reasons *why* U.S. society marginalizes both people are very different.

For Oluo, it's important to understand all the reasons why somebody is oppressed, so that the barriers to their success can be removed. For the disabled white man, social justice efforts would likely address class and accessibility issues. For the able-bodied black woman, gender and race discrimination would feature more prominently. Thus, in demanding that social justice efforts only focus on class, Oluo's friend overlooks important problems that need to be addressed, in addition to class, in U.S. society—especially racism, which is Oluo's central concern.

> It is about race if a person of color thinks it's about race.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker), Well-meaning friend

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo is offering advice for privileged people on how to talk about racism in a more sensitive—and less oppressive—way. She's referring to a conversation with a friend who means well but keeps insisting that racism is really just about classism. This upsets Oluo because it feels like he's denying the reality of her lived experience, which has been entrenched in racism. Oluo thus offers this piece of advice for people who want to talk about race with people of color.

Her point here isn't to suggest that people of color are always right, or that others have to agree with them. Her

point is that when a person of color thinks something is about race, they're expressing that a situation is causing them racial pain. It might not be obvious, Oluo says, to somebody from the outside when a seemingly innocuous comment is triggering—but that doesn't mean the person of color isn't triggered. Oluo's advice, in such situations, is to trust the experience of the person of color and acknowledge that their pain is real; denying or dismissing their experience will likely lead to conflict. This is what she means when she says, "It is about race if a person of color thinks it's about race."

Chapter 2 Quotes

"You can't just go around calling anything racist. Save that word for the big stuff. You know, for Nazis and cross burnings and lynchings. You're just going to turn people off if you use such inflammatory language."

Related Characters: Friend (speaker), Ijeoma Oluo, Coworker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo is telling a friend about a coworker who sent out an offensive meme about poor women of color. Oluo is surprised when her friend responds that Oluo went too far in calling her coworker's actions racist. Oluo, on the other hand, thinks that her friend is overlooking two important issues: first, people of color have to deal with small indignities and triggering events on a daily basis that take up their emotional energy. This leaves them with less energy to focus on other things they need to accomplish, which leaves them at a disadvantage and increases their marginalization. Second, Oluo's friend implies that it's preferable for people of color to tolerate such occurrences rather than make privileged people uncomfortable by calling them out. Such a view effectively holds that people of color should be uncomfortable so that privileged people don't have to be. In other words, Oluo's friend problematically assumes her coworker's emotional peace of mind is more important than Oluo's, even though Oluo is the one being marginalized by the encounter—which Oluo believes is inherently unjust.

If we have cancer and it makes us vomit, we can commit to battling nausea and say we're fighting for our lives, even though the tumor will likely still kill us.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker), Coworker , Friend

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

After having an argument with a coworker who sends out a racist meme and discussing the problem with a friend, Oluo offers two definitions of racism: the first definition suggests that battling racism entails teaching individual people not to be racist. The second definition suggests that racist individuals are created by a society that encourages racist behavior. Oluo thinks that the second definition is much more important, and here she explains why. Oluo symbolizes a racist system or society as a person with cancer. The cancer causes all sorts of symptoms—like nausea, pain, and fatigue. Each racist individual in society is like a symptom caused by the cancer. Even if people try to convince every racist individual in the U.S. not to be racist, the system will still be there, helping to encourage racists beliefs in other people. So, changing people's minds is like treating the symptoms of cancer (the nausea it causes, for example). This may help a person a little, but it won't fix the problem. The only way to heal the person is to treat the cancer itself. Thus, the only way to solve racism in U.S. society is to change the systems that foster racist behavior.

Systemic racism is a machine that runs whether we pull the levers or not, and just by letting it be, we are responsible for what it produces.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo is discussing systemic racism, which exists in societies that function to disproportionately oppress people of color.

Oluo believes that the U.S. is one such society. So far, she has argued that institutions of U.S. society like the media, education system, judicial system, and political system teach Americans that people of color are dangerous, and they function to keep people of color away from opportunities in life (through practices like mass incarceration).

In this quote, she explains that people who do nothing to act against racism in U.S. society aren't neutral. If they do nothing, they allow these systems to keep encouraging racism and oppressing people of color. Doing nothing, thus, is never neutral—it's actively racist. Therefore, people who live in a society with systemic racism have an ethical obligation to act. If they want to be anti-racist, they have to make an active effort to *change* the system so that it doesn't keep targeting, abusing, and killing people of color. If they do nothing, they knowingly allow more people to be oppressed and are therefore partially responsible for that oppression. Oluo symbolizes this state of affairs by imagining systemic racism is a machine that churns out racists and targets people of color. If somebody knows the machine is running, and they do nothing to try and turn it off, they're implicit in the damage that the machine does.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ *"I'm just going to go to him tomorrow and explain that I have three black kids and I understand where he's corning from."*

Related Characters: Oluo's mother (speaker), Ijeoma Oluo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo's white mother (who married a black man and raised three mixed-race children) is having a conversation with Oluo. Oluo's mother gets upset when a colleague says that she doesn't know about the black experience, and she decides to revisit the issue by explaining that she has a black family.

Oluo thinks that her mother's plan is insensitive, though she explains that her mother loves and cherishes her family and clearly supports people of color. However, even though Oluo's mother is part of a family of color, she doesn't know what it *feels* like to live every day with a visible—and permanent—marker of identity that oppresses her. In wanting to identify with her coworker, Oluo's mother effectively implies that her own lived experience (specifically, her own amount of privilege and oppression in the world) is the same as a person of color's, which is patently false.

Oluo thinks that many conversations about race end in disaster when privileged people assume that they already know what it's like to be black, and they therefore don't acknowledge or try to learn from people of color's experiences instead of asserting their own authority. To Oluo, such assumptions are marginalizing: they feel like a denial or dismissal of people of color's experiences with racism.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ So please, check your privilege. Check it often.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo is discussing the concept of privilege in U.S. society, and she concludes with this advice. She frames privilege is a set of advantages that somebody has in society that make it easier for them to succeed in life. When somebody has privilege, Oluo says, it means that they benefit from a state of affairs that make their lives easier because other people are being marginalized. It's easier, for example, for an able-bodied person to get a job in a society that doesn't have many handicap-accessible work environments. The reason *why* it's easier for the able-bodied person to find work is partly because differently abled people can't access buildings without ramps and therefore can't compete for jobs in those buildings. The chances of success for able-bodied people are effectively higher because other people are being marginalized, which is unjust.

Checking one's privilege is thus the same as making an effort to reduce disparities that give the privileged person an unfair advantage. When Oluo urges people to check their privilege, she's asking them to do their part to ensure that *all* people have access to opportunities that they have, which is something that everybody who's committed to social justice should do as often as possible.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ How do our social justice efforts so often fail to help the most vulnerable in our populations? This is primarily the result of unexamined privilege.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker), Kimberlé Crenshaw

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo is discussing intersectionality, a concept coined by race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw argues that it's important to consider all facets of a person's identity to understand why they're oppressed in society. Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" to explain that multiple factors of a person's identity intertwine to affect how they're treated in society. A white woman, for example, is oppressed for being a woman, while a black woman is oppressed for being a woman *and* for being a person of color.

Both Crenshaw and Oluo think that many social justice movements tend to assume the needs of *one* demographic are the same as the needs of *all* people they speak for. When Oluo argues that some people's needs get left out because of "unexamined privilege," she means that people tend to focus on the disadvantages they face (relative to others who are more privileged), but they often forget to address the privileges they also have. Feminist movements, for example, have historically focused on the disadvantages that white women face in society compared to white men and have tried to remedy those. Women of color, however, face additional oppression because of their race that *also* needs to be addressed for all women to achieve equality. Similarly, disabled women face oppression that able-bodied women don't, and their rights needs to be fought for as well.

The fight for women's rights thus needs to be intersectional—it needs to take into account the diverse situations of all women, not just those who are most able to fight for justice. Similarly, the fight for racial justice needs to tackle barriers to opportunity for all people of color (including people of different genders and sexual orientations, people with different physical and mental abilities, people of multiple ethnicities, and so on). The best way to ensure this, Oluo says, is for people to examine their own privilege and make space for the voices that are underrepresented in their social justice movements.

❝ When you are supposed to be fighting the evils of "the man" you don't want to realize that you've become "the man" within your own movement.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker), Kimberlé Crenshaw

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo is in the process of arguing (in line with race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw) that social justice movements need to be intersectional—that is, they need to fight the oppressions faced by *all* people that their movement represents. In other words, antiracists should aim to fight for the rights of all people of color, including men, women, differently-abled people, queer people, and so on. Similarly, feminists should aim to fight for the needs of all women, including women of color, differently-abled women, trans women, and more.

Here, she explains why there's often emotional resistance to this idea in social movements: people tend to focus on their own oppression, and it can be difficult to acknowledge that oppressed as they are in society, there are likely others who have it worse than them. For example, a black, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender woman likely has more privileges in U.S. society than a black, differently abled, queer, trans woman. Oluo explains that people often fear being marginalized or "decentralize[d]" within their own movements if they focus on the needs of other, more disadvantaged people. Oluo argues that despite this, people need to fight their resistance to confronting their own privilege to make sure their fights for justice are inclusive—otherwise, they're also implicit in the very oppression they're fighting.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ We like to believe that if there are racist cops, they are individual bad eggs acting on their own.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker), Tamir Rice , Sandra Bland , Aham

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo is discussing police brutality. She's just recalled how fearful she and her brother Aham were when they were stopped for a traffic violation by the police. Their fear stems, she explains, from the knowledge that many black people in the U.S. are unjustly killed by police officers. Oluo cites the

examples of Sandra Bland (who died in police custody after being arrested for a traffic violation) and Tamir Rice (a young boy who was shot and killed by police while playing with a toy gun) to illustrate her case. Oluo argues in this quote that many people are uncomfortable acknowledging that the system of law enforcement in U.S. society is fundamentally unjust.

Many people, Oluo argues, prefer to think that there just happen to be a few "bad eggs"—racist police officers—within an otherwise well-functioning system of law-enforcement. Oluo disagrees. She doesn't think that anybody is born racist. She argues that people become racist when they're influenced by a society that depicts people of color as dangerous and condones unjust acts of violence against them. Oluo explains that news and media cycles often depict black people as "thugs," which subtly conditions people—including police officers—to believe that black people are inherently more violent (or dangerous) than others. Police officers who commit violence against people of color also rarely face consequences in the justice system. According to Oluo, ending police brutality, thus, is not just about punishing a few racist cops: it's about changing the systems that make people become racist and empower them to target people of color.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ [W]hen I look at the school-to-prison pipeline, the biggest tragedy to me is the loss of childhood joy.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker), Sagan , Natasha

Related Themes:

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo is discussing racial discrimination against black and brown children in schools to illustrate systemic racism in action. She began her discussion with an anecdote about a five-year-old boy named Sagan who was suspended for being agitated one day in kindergarten, which left his mother Natasha "reeling." Oluo closes this discussion with this quote.

Oluo explains that Sagan's suspension is so problematic because it will stay on his academic record and negatively affect his chances in life—even though he likely just needed a nap that day. Oluo cites multiple statistics that show children of color are disproportionately disciplined in schools, and she thinks this happens because U.S. society—especially its news cycle, media representations, and education curriculums—subtly teaches people that black and brown children are inherently more violent than white children. People—including educators—are subtly influenced by depictions of black youths as "thugs," for example. This makes them more likely to interpret the ordinary childhood rambunctiousness of black and brown children as dangerous and threatening behavior, which makes them more likely to discipline children of color in schools. Disciplinary action stays on children's records, limiting their chances of getting jobs and funding for higher education, and increases their chances of being criminalized in juvenile detention and prisons.

This process of discrimination is colloquially known as "the school-to-prison pipeline." Oluo argues that systemic racism thus systematically disadvantages children of color in U.S. society. Moreover, there's also a deeply cruel emotional cost that she alludes to in this quote: such practices teach black and brown children that they'll be punished for being exuberant, rambunctious, or rebellious. The school-to-prison pipeline thus steals more than some children's futures—it also subdues and controls black and brown children, and steals their childhood joy.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ We couldn't say, in front of Nick and Amy, "The kids all called us niggers and your children laughed." So we just sat silently and I tried not to cry.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker), Liz , Amy , Nick , Aham

Related Themes:

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo is reminiscing about a week in her childhood when she and her brother Aham go to stay with their white friends Nick and Amy for a week. On the first day of their trip, some local kids use the n-word, a racial slur, against Oluo and Aham—but instead of defending them, Nick and Amy join in. Later, Oluo and Aham don't want to get Nick and Amy in trouble, so they don't say anything to Nick and Amy's mother, Liz. The rest of the week goes terribly, and Liz thinks Oluo and Aham are spoiled, unsociable children when they don't want to go and play in the street any more.

Oluo uses this example to highlight that people of color are often confronted with racism in situations where they don't feel safe to call it out. This means that people of color encounter racism much more frequently than most people think, but they'll generally only call out that racism when they feel safe to do so. The burden of internalizing their pain when they don't feel safe adds even more emotional labor to their mental load, which contributes to their marginalization. This implies that there's an onus on privileged people to use their own privilege to call out racism when it's safe to do so. Oluo also cautions that privileged people not force the issue when people of color don't want to call out racism: there might be a good reason why they're not doing so, and it likely has to do with their safety.

A lot of people 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.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo is discussing racial slurs. She explains that people of color sometimes reclaim slurs within their own communities. Despite this, Oluo maintains that it's inadvisable for people of other races (especially white people) to use racial slurs like the n-word. Oluo notes that white people might disagree and invoke their right to freedom of speech to do so. This quote captures Oluo's response to such people. It's true, Oluo acknowledges, that everybody should be able to say whatever they want. But when these people live in a white supremacist society, using racial slurs causes significant emotional pain in people of color that only further impedes their ability to get by in a world that's already stacked against them. Oluo argues here that well-meaning people should really focus on doing their part to help dismantle systemic racism, establish "racial harmony," and heal past traumas if they want to live in a society where using such words doesn't limit other people's freedom.

Chapter 10 Quotes

But instead what I was standing in front of in that airport was a caricature of my culture. A caricature of the vibrant decorations and festive music. Everything I'd loved about African food had been skinned and draped around the shoulders of a glorified McDonalds.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo is recalling how disappointed she feels when she's at an airport and sees that an "African" restaurant is really just an American restaurant decorated in shallow nods to African culture. As Oluo approaches the restaurant, she sees that it has chairs decorated in zebra patterns and a caveman mural on the wall, but it serves burgers, fries, and nachos. Oluo uses this example to explain that appropriation—taking symbols, imagery, or practices from other cultures—is problematic because it results in shallow, whitewashed versions of authentic cultural practices that strip out what's meaningful about the culture that's appropriated. Oluo thinks that this is disheartening to people of color if they already live in a society that underrepresents their culture and makes it hard for them to succeed and share their own cultural practices with others. To make her point more explicit, she compares the restaurant described here—which is clearly successful—to her bittersweet memories of a more authentic Nigerian restaurant, run by Nigerians, that had to shut down because of lack of business, which hurts Oluo's feelings.

We can broadly define the concept of cultural appropriation as the adoption or exploitation of another culture by a more dominant culture. This is not usually the wholesale adoption of an entire culture, but usually just attractive bits and pieces that are taken and used by the dominant culture.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

As Oluo begins her argument about the ethical issues with cultural appropriation, she offers an explicit definition of the concept. Many people assume that sharing between cultures is a good thing. For example, sharing food, music, clothing styles, rituals, stories, symbols, and imagery between cultures can be educational and informative. However, to Oluo, there can be damaging aspects of this sort of cultural exchange. Appropriation, she argues, is more like exploiting another culture than learning from it or paying homage to it. Oluo argues that if there's a power imbalance between two cultures, appropriation can offer lots of benefits to people in the dominant culture, but it won't do much—if anything—to benefit those in the oppressed culture. She spends the rest of the chapter laying out reasons why that's the case, centering on the economic costs of such practices to people of color, who are already marginalized in U.S. society.

> Some modern and fairly well known examples of cultural appropriation by the dominant white culture in the West are things like the use of American Indian headdresses as casual fashion, the use of the bindi as an accessory, the adoption of belly-dancing into fitness routines, and basically every single "ethnic" Halloween costume.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo is discussing cultural appropriation. As she begins her argument for why she thinks appropriation (borrowing or adapting symbols, imagery, or practices from other cultures) is problematic, she lists some examples of appropriation in action, which are noted here. Oluo's list helps her readers have some reference points in their minds to weigh up against her arguments. In raising these examples, Oluo draws attention to three important facets of appropriation.

First, she thinks that appropriation is problematic when the cultural exchange involves a dominant culture taking from an oppressed. Second, she thinks that appropriation is an intersectional issue: her examples explicitly include symbols or practices from Native American culture (headdresses), South Asian culture (bindis), and Middle Eastern culture (belly-dancing). Additionally, they implicitly allude to a number of additional non-white cultures (an "ethnic" Halloween costume might include a geisha costume appropriated from Japanese culture or a tribal costume influenced by African culture, for example). Third, Oluo thinks that appropriation often washes over or distorts significant or meaningful components of cultural phenomena, which can seem hurtful or insensitive to people of color. Bindis, for example, have ritual significance in Indian marriage ceremonies that people ignore or dismiss when using them as fashion accessories.

> Think of artists like Elvis Presley who have been canonized in the annals of music history for work that was lifted almost wholesale from the backs of black musicians whose names most Americans will never know.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker), Elvis Presley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo is discussing cultural appropriation. So far, she's asserted that cultural appropriation is exploitative. Here, she uses the example of Elvis Presley to offer a reason why she thinks this. In a white-privileging culture, Oluo argues, it's easier for white artists to become successful. For example, record companies are more likely to offer them contracts, it's easier for them to get media representation or airtime, and people are more likely to acknowledge and remember their contributions to society. People who look back on the time that Elvis was making music thus remember Elvis but don't know much—if anything—about the musicians of color from whom he borrowed his style. As such, Elvis takes credit for—and reaps benefits from—marginalized people. To Oluo, this is an example of how appropriation often benefits people who are already in a privileged position at the expense of people who are oppressed, further contributing to their oppression, which is unjust.

> That "legitimacy" bestowed by whiteness actually changes the definition of rap for the American culture.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker), Elvis Presley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo is expanding on her reasons for claiming that cultural appropriation is exploitative. Here, she explains that it's easier for white artists to be lauded for their art in a white-privileging society. Oluo thinks that when a white rapper imitating a black art form gains success and media representation in the U.S., their interpretation of rap actually comes to stand for what rap *is* to many Americans. This changes the perception of what counts as "legitimate rap" in the eyes and ears of audiences. It affects who they give their money to and what they aspire to, and it affects whom record producers consider as marketable artists for their subsequent projects. It can thus be harder for black rappers whose art sounds different to white-sounding rap to gain a foothold in the marketplace, which directly impacts their ability to succeed in society. As before, Oluo argues that any behavior that increases—rather than decreases—racial inequality is effectively racist.

"Cultural appropriation is the product of a society that prefers its culture cloaked in whiteness.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo has just finished explaining that cultural appropriation—borrowing symbols, imagery, or practices that originate from other cultures—can be economically damaging to people of color. Oluo argues that this is because it's easier for white people to get representation in a white-privileging culture (such as the U.S.), which reduces opportunities for people of color. Now, she outlines another issue with cultural appropriation. The fact that it *is* easier for appropriators to gain mainstream traction in U.S. society shows that the society overall "prefers its culture cloaked in whiteness." When a society subtly influences people to think of people of color as dangerous (as Oluo argues that the U.S. does through its media, educational, political, and legal channels), such people will tend to think that whitewashed versions of cultural practices (say, music) are safer and healthier for the society. This further marginalizes people of color and undermines their cultural contributions to society by depicting such contributions—like rap—as dangerous in their authentic form.

Chapter 11 Quotes

"I'm glad it's not one of those weaves [...] Those are so expensive and really bad for your hair."

Related Characters: Oluo's boss's boss (speaker), Chris Rock , Ijeoma Oluo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo is recalling an encounter when she's at a work dinner and a senior executive, whom she refers to as "my boss's boss" makes this comment. Oluo's boss's boss is trying to be supportive: he's watched a Chris Rock documentary about hair and thinks that the pressure and expense of wearing weaves that imitate white hair unfairly burdens women of color. What Oluo's boss *doesn't* realize is that he's actually being offensive, and Oluo outlines the reasons why.

First, Oluo's boss's boss is bringing up a racial issue at a professional work meeting, which is triggering for Oluo. She's struggled with her hair for her whole life, and calling her out on her hair in a professional context (even with good intentions) forces her to address a painful issue. Second, the executive is assuming that he has a right to comment on how a woman of color should treat her own body, which is insulting. Oluo explains that she doesn't need to be educated about weaves—she's lived with them her own life. Therefore, Oluo explains that in making such a comment, her boss's boss inadvertently assumes that his experience from watching a documentary gives him a right to decide what's right and wrong for black women to do with their hair. In this sense, it's almost like an appropriation of the black lived experience.

Chapter 12 Quotes

Don't force people to acknowledge your good intentions.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo is discussing microaggressions—minor insults that seem innocuous but actually aren't. Examples include asking somebody where they're "really" from or telling somebody they don't "sound" black. Oluo explains that such questions

or comments can seem harmless on the surface, but they often trigger people of color, especially when people of color have to fend off such questions repeatedly on a daily basis. She also acknowledges that often, people don't mean to be insulting when they utter microaggressions—they just don't realize the harm they're causing. If a person is called out for an unintentional microaggression, Oluo thinks that it's important not to press the point that the comment wasn't intended to be malicious. The important point is that the comment triggers a person of color's pain, and that hurt needs to be acknowledged and apologized for. Oluo argues that people who insist that they meant well instead of apologizing are effectively privileging their desire not to confront their own racism over a person of color's hurt. They're also implicitly asking the person of color to do that too, which to Oluo is problematic.

Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ The director looked at me pleadingly. He didn't need training. He knew a lot of black people. He grew up with black people. He was practically black himself. He just needed to talk. With me. He repeatedly insisted that if I could just sit with him in a bar and talk this out with him, whatever had caused him to drunkenly repeat "nigger" at a dinner table surrounded by people of color would never happen again. But I did not want to talk with this man, especially not over drinks […] I wanted this man to take some action for change.

Related Characters: Ijeoma Oluo (speaker), Theater director

Related Themes:

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis

Oluo is discussing an encounter in which her colleague—a theater director—uses the n-word, a racist slur, during a work dinner. The people of color at the dinner request that the theater director undergo racial awareness training, but he resists and pleads with Oluo to just talk to him instead. Here, she explains why that's a problematic response.

In using an offensive racial slur, the theater director has already hurt a lot of people of color who now have to grapple with the stress of confronting and managing their painful emotions in a professional context. Second, instead of taking action himself to remedy the situation, the theater director effectively demands even more emotional labor from Oluo by asking *her* to teach him what's wrong with his behavior, instead of somebody who's paid to do that. This request, Oluo says, is inappropriate because he's asking for *more* emotional labor from her than he's already caused. When this labor is uncompensated—as it would be if Oluo discussed the theater director's racism with him over drinks—it also has an economic impact on her by taking her time away from other things she could be doing to generate income. Such requests, to Oluo, are thus fundamentally problematic as they increase—rather than decrease—the marginalization of people of color.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION: SO YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT RACE

Oluo begins by saying that being a black woman in a white supremacist country has deeply defined her life. Her blackness affects how she dresses, her musical and social tastes, and how people treat her and her sons, how people talk about her skin and features. It impacts her job prospects, her ability to navigate social spaces without being called out, and even her ability to get a taxi. From Oluo's perspective, she's just trying to get by like everybody else. If she were to think too much about the pain of the racism she encounters on a daily basis, she thinks that she would scream endlessly.

Oluo opens by stressing two aspects of her argument that will come up a lot: first, she thinks the U.S. is "a white supremacist country," meaning American society has been structured to privilege white people. Reducing racism thus demands addressing inequalities perpetuated by the system rather than convincing individual people not to be racist. Second, Oluo addresses how much emotional labor people of color like herself face when talking about race, which she stresses by describing the feeling of wanting to scream. Throughout the book, she will emphasize the emotional intensity of experiencing racism.

As a young black woman, Oluo's initial strategy for success was to work harder, dress more formally, be more polite, hide her anger, and even laugh at racist jokes as if they didn't hurt. But as Oluo got older, she grew more compelled to talk back and resist. She started writing a blog to address her exasperation, emotional pain, and fear for her community—she can't pretend anymore. To Oluo, the grave issue of racism in the U.S. is impossible to ignore. These are frightening times for people to realize that "America is not, and never has been the melting-pot utopia" that they've been taught about. People want to learn about the black experience, but how does one start the discussion?

Oluo's description of herself as a "young black woman" subtly informs the reader that talking about race usually involves talking about other forms of discrimination (such as gender discrimination). She stresses once again the deep emotional trauma that people of color face because of racism. Oluo also hints that thinking of the U.S. as a "melting-pot utopia" where lots of different cultures come together on equal terms is problematic, because she sees white culture as dominant and exploitative.

The gap in people's knowledge is as vast as the solar system, but Oluo is here to help start the conversation. Many people are intimidated by how to talk about race and confront racism—these conversations aren't easy. Oluo anticipates that white people may find the issues she's going to discuss here uncomfortable, and people of color may have to confront their trauma and pain. She hopes that people will be willing to embrace the discomfort her book might trigger. In this book, Oluo will focus on the day-to-day questions about race that she's often asked. In doing so, she hopes that she'll help people approach the topic less fearfully, despite how horrific racism and oppression in America are.

Oluo thinks that the biggest challenge to talking about racism is the fact that people typically want to avoid feeling hurt, scared, angry, or "uncomfortable." People of color don't like to rehash their trauma, and white people don't like to confront their own racism. Oluo thinks that many conversations about race go wrong because people are reluctant to tackle these feelings. So, she's going to talk through how to work through discomfort as it comes up in conversations about race.

CHAPTER 1: IS IT REALLY ABOUT RACE?

Oluo's in a coffee shop talking with a smart, well-meaning friend who thinks that more progress would be made if people talked about "class" instead of race. Oluo is tired of this sort of conversation. Since the 2016 election, liberals and progressives have been scrambling to figure out why so many people feel excluded by the left wing's message. They typically assume that all the focus on race has left out "working class white men" from the narrative, and that focusing on class will also help disenfranchised minorities. Oluo has heard this argument many times, but she decides to engage with her friend and hopes to show him that class and race aren't interchangeable.

Oluo emphasizes that having this sort of conversation is both tiring and laborious for her, thus stressing the emotional burden that people of color face when talking about race. She also hints that such conversations also unfairly burden people of color to educate others on racial disparity in the U.S. Oluo uses this example to stress that oppression is multifaceted (or intersectional), meaning that people are oppressed for many reasons, including race and *class. Talking about one issue (say, class alone) won't fix problems with the other.*

Even if the government raises the minimum wage, Oluo argues, her "black-sounding name" still limits her chances of getting a job interview. The lower value of homes in predominantly black neighborhoods affects her access to loans. Her sons are still more likely to go to prison than white men. Teachers are more likely to consider black youths aggressive, affecting their abilities to graduate. Oluo is ranting now, but she's not angry—she's hurt. Oluo's well-meaning friend suggests focusing on America's class problem first, thinking it's a good start. Oluo sighs and says that black people have been hearing that suggestion for hundreds of years, and they're still waiting.

The exchange between Oluo and her friend illustrates how conversations about race typically go wrong. Oluo's well-meaning friend fails to recognize the burden he places on Oluo to educate him on all the ways that people of color are oppressed because of their race. She stresses this point by discussing specific issues faced by people of color that aren't related to class, such as her "black-sounding name." The conversation also burdens her emotionally, which she highlights by emphasizing her emotional agitation. Her friend also fails to see how his dismissal of her lived experience and first-hand knowledge further exacerbates the situation.

Many people say that race is a social construct, but Oluo thinks this is effectively a lie that justifies crime: people treat certain races as less human in order to legitimize slavery and genocide. Money is also a social construct—people choose to pretend that little pieces of paper are worth centering their lives around. Yet, to Oluo, both are "alive." She thinks that dealing with class alone will not solve the inequalities of a system based on the idea that one group gets more because another exists to get less. The lure of racism persists in a system where people believe there isn't enough power or resources to go around.

Oluo believes that racism is a tool used by people in power to help them amass wealth. She notes how those in power have historically dehumanized people of color so they can justify stealing land and labor from them through slavery and genocide. She thinks that the same motivations (to oppress others by race for personal gain) still have force in contemporary U.S. society. Oluo thus argues that talking about class alone won't address the fundamental role that racism plays in perpetuating economic inequalities in the U.S. She also describes social constructs (like race) as "alive" to emphasize the real human cost—measured in lives and emotional trauma—involved in abusing "social constructs" like race.

Oluo thinks that the narrative of white supremacy is so entrenched in society that in every demographic, "black and brown people are consistently getting less." She agrees that the class system violently oppresses and harms people of all races, but she also thinks people of color are also harmed for their race. She says that a disabled white man might end up as poor as an able-bodied woman of color, but the reasons *why* they're poor are different. Oluo argues that oppression is about class, but it's also about race, gender, sexuality, and ability.

Oluo thinks that racism is systemic in the U.S., meaning society is set up to ensure that no matter where a person of color falls in the class hierarchy, they will still be disadvantaged—or "consistently get[] less"—compared to a white person in the same position. Oluo also emphasizes that oppression is intersectional: a lot of people are poor, but they're poor for different reasons that all need to be addressed to eliminate inequality.

It bothers Oluo that in many conversations about social issues, the discussion rarely goes beyond questioning if the issue is really about race. She understands that such conversations are difficult and complex, but if things are going to change, people need to start somewhere. She sets out some basic guidelines to help people: an issue is about race if a person of color deems it so, if it disproportionately affects people of color, or if it follows a wider pattern of events that disproportionately affect people of color. Oluo is going to break each of these down a little more fully.

Oluo sets out guidelines to help well-meaning people have conversations about race, rather than to shut them down. She advises people to recognize and acknowledge (rather than dismiss) the individualized first-hand experiences of people of color in such conversations. She also argues that acknowledging racial pain (even when it's not clearly understood) is important because such pain often points to deeper systemic patterns of abuse in U.S. society.

Addressing the first guideline, Oluo says that when a person of color thinks it's about race, that doesn't mean a person of color is always right. But it does mean that their lived experience—which is inherently shaped by their racial identity—is valid, even if they're talking to someone who can't understand the issue as an outsider. Things aren't necessarily *only* about race, but race is always part of the picture. Oluo feels that if she's followed in a store by a white clerk, the history of black people being mistrusted by white people is brought into her experience—and the white clerk similarly brings that history into her experience.

Oluo thinks it's important for privileged people to acknowledge the experiences of disenfranchised people, even if they don't fully understand them. Effectively, it's important to trust a person of color who says an experience is racially painful or damaging and acknowledge their pain as valid before bringing up other issues. Dismissing those feelings as irrelevant or demanding explanations from them will likely end in conflict.

Addressing the second guideline, Oluo says that when she blogs about race issues (like incarceration), white people often respond saying that it's not about race (because white people can be incarcerated too, for example). Others mention successful black people—like Oprah or Beyoncé—to argue that people of color don't face hardship in the U.S. Oluo thinks that such arguments oversimplify the way race works in American society. All sorts of hardships can affect all sorts of people, so there are multiple causes for hardship, and a wide range of effects. As Oluo puts it, brain **cancer** and breast cancer are two illnesses that require two different treatments. Similarly, race and poverty are both hardships, but they require two conversations.

Oluo uses the metaphor of cancer to explain that injustice is intersectional (multifaceted). Beyoncé, for example, is oppressed by her race, but she's also likely privileged in other ways (say, by having supportive parents who helped her manage the early stages of her career). Intersectionalists (like Oluo) argue that the different features of a person's life and identity add up to determine how many barriers they'll face in society. Thinking about each form of discrimination (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, or ability) as a specific type of cancer suggests that each cancer needs its own treatment, or the sick person will still suffer. Similarly, talking about class discrimination will do some work to eradicate injustice in the U.S., but it won't be enough to completely heal society, because racially-based oppression will still be there.

Oluo explains the third guideline with an analogy: if a person is in an abusive relationship, the issue isn't about a single incident but about repeated incidents. Similarly, people of color living in a white-privileging society face persistent small indignities day after day. Every time there's a new hurt, it digs at old "scars." Similarly, if a person is punched in the arm every few minutes, the issue isn't really about whether the last punch was actually a punch—it's more about the person being *consistently* punched. A person who's already bruised also feels greater pain from a single punch.

Oluo uses the metaphor of injuries to explain why it's important to acknowledge racial pain—even when an incident doesn't seem like such a big deal from the outside. When a person is hit in the same place over and over (or repeatedly targeted because of their race), they'll develop scars (the long-lasting damage or trauma of sustained abuse). If a small punch does *trigger a great deal of hurt, it's usually an indication that there's a deeper pattern of abuse in play (systemic racism), which should never be ignored.*

To Oluo, the experience of blackness isn't only about oppression—her blackness also invokes a rich history of beauty, resilience, and creativity that she's grateful for. Similarly, she thinks oppression isn't always or only about blackness. Oluo thinks that many people are afraid that if they make something about race, some people will be left out (like poor white men, for instance). Oluo thinks that people shouldn't isolate race as society's only problem, but they shouldn't ignore it either. They need to think about race like one piece of a "**machine**." Oluo says that the world often tells people color that they're wrong about what they're experiencing and feeling in their own lives. To Oluo, they're not wrong, and people of color have just as much of a right to be heard. So, if they think that it's about race, they're right.

Oluo stresses once again that oppression is intersectional: it's like a machine with many different moving cogs and wheels—such as racism, sexism, homophobia, or ableism. To fully stop the machine, all the parts need to be dismantled. She reminds people of color that their pain is a valid, natural, and justified response to an unnatural and unjust system (which she illustrates through the metaphor of a machine). Oluo concludes that trusting in the lived experiences of people of color isn't the be-all-end-all of every conversation about oppression—but it will help to get a conversation going rather than shut it down.

CHAPTER 2: WHAT IS RACISM?

Oluo discusses an online argument she once had with a coworker. In the argument, Oluo's coworker posts a meme saying that poor people should pass drug tests to get welfare. Oluo—who grew up on welfare—responds that stigmatization like this hurts people who are just trying to survive. They shouldn't have to prove that they deserve food and shelter. Her coworker responds that poor people should be sterilized so they don't have more kids to get more welfare money. Oluo thinks that such attitudes dehumanize poor people and—in a society that has a history of forced sterilization of people of color—it's a dangerous thing to say. Oluo's coworker says that Oluo shouldn't be so angry because it gives "people like you" a bad reputation.

Oluo uses the argument she has with her coworker to illustrate that sometimes people don't realize how their individual actions actively reinforce the wider system of oppression that's in place in U.S. society and trigger deep emotional pain among oppressed people like herself. Often, when confronted with their own racism, such people tend to lash out in defense. Here, Oluo's coworker does so by invoking the racist stereotype of the angry black woman, lumping Oluo in with "people like [her]" based on her race rather than respecting her as an individual. Her coworker avoids confronting their own prejudice because it's a deeply uncomfortable thing to acknowledge.

The next day, Oluo discusses the argument with a friend. She feels hurt that her coworker adopts views that dehumanize black women. Oluo's friend is concerned about Oluo calling everyday encounters like that racist. He thinks that "real racism" is about things like Nazis and lynching. He says that people—like his grandma—often say things that come off as racist, but it's cruel to accuse an old lady who means well of being racist. No matter what Oluo says, her friend isn't willing to acknowledge how racism affects Oluo's life. She feels heartbroken.

Oluo subtly reinforces the idea that people of color repeatedly find themselves in situations where others deny that everyday instances of racism are "real." This shows that this type of conversation isn't a random occurrence but a systemic pattern that keeps happening because people in U.S. society are conditioned to think that racist comments are normal. Once again, Oluo highlights the pain that encounters like this cause people of color like herself.

Oluo thinks that people can't agree on what racism is, which makes it harder to talk about. She thinks that racism is most commonly defined as "any prejudice against someone because of their race," or "any prejudice against someone because of their race, when those views are reinforced by systems of power." The difference between the two definitions has a big impact on how to address race and racism in the U.S. The first one is about individual racists who are best avoided (like people who share "Obama = monkey" memes). The second is about racist behavior and oppression as part of a larger system. For Oluo, racist people are conditioned by a racist system.

Oluo makes it clear that she doesn't think some people just happen to be evil or hateful. She doesn't want to go around changing every single person's mind who sends offensive memes (like the "Obama = monkey" meme which invokes the incredibly racist stereotype of equating black people with monkeys). Rather, she thinks that U.S. society is designed to encourage such behavior. For Oluo, it's important to focus on changing the system (institutions of power, including media, education, and politics) that feed racist values into U.S. society. To Oluo, the system is the real source of racism in U.S. society, and as long as the system reinforces racist beliefs and behaviors, it will continue to create more racists.

Oluo thinks that complacency gives the system power. 400 years of systemic oppression has put people of color at a disadvantage. The worst that Oluo can do to a white person is call them a name, but racist a white person can get her fired, arrested, or killed using the system's tools. Oluo recognizes that helping her neighbor love people of color makes it easier for her to be around her neighbor—but it won't reduce police brutality, racial income disparities, food insecurity, or mass incarceration (it's like treating nausea from **cancer** instead of the cancer itself). Oluo argues that changing individual people's mindsets also unfairly puts the onus on Oluo to prove her humanity to people who want to discriminate against her.

Oluo reinvokes the metaphor of cancer to explain why changing the system should be the goal of social justice movements. In her analogy, a person with cancer stands for a society. Their illness—or cancer—is systemic racism. Cancer causes many symptoms, including nausea, pain, and fatigue (each of which represents individual racists). Treating various symptoms (or changing the minds of some racists) will make a person (society) a little better, but it won't cure them of the problem. The symptoms will keep returning (more racists will be created) until the cancer is eradicated.

Oluo thinks that so many of people's tastes and opinions are shaped by media, education, economics, and values of those in power—including who's beautiful, scary, or smart. Oluo would never assume that an individual has core racist beliefs on their own that come out of nowhere. To Oluo, if a person has racist views, it means that they are interacting with the system in the way it was designed. She argues that "systemic racism is a **machine** that runs whether we pull the levers or not," and that by passively allowing it to run, all of society is responsible for the injustice it produces. Therefore, the machine must be dismantled to bring about change.

Oluo revisits the symbol of oppression as a machine to argue that complacency about the system is actively racist. The machine is a tool for oppression that just keeps running and churning out new racists "whether we pull the levers or not." This means that people who know the machine is running and don't do anything to stop it are complicit in the creation of new racists, regardless of whether they're actively racist themselves. The only way to eradicate racism in the U.S. is to change the tools of society that encourage and teach racist beliefs and behaviors.

Oluo asks the reader to think about why they're here. If the reader's goal is to get people to be nicer to one another or to make more friends of color, this isn't the book for them. She wrote the book for people who want to help fight a system of oppression that's directly responsible for the deaths of people of color. To Oluo, the problem of race in The U.S. isn't about "a few individuals with hate in their hearts." It's about a system that divides resources, wellbeing, and justice along racial lines. Changing people's feelings won't affect the school-to-prison pipeline, for example. Even if every person in the U.S. starts to love people of color, lives won't improve without the system changing.

Oluo restates her emphasis on changing the system without using a metaphor this time in order to make it clear and explicit that the goal of this book is to help people realize that the system is always *the target (not "a few" hateful individuals). This means that changing the system that pumps out hateful rhetoric is the only way to stop such hateful values from emerging in society. Oluo also thinks that remembering that the system is the common enemy (of people who are oppressed* and *of people who are privileged but committed to social justice) helps to foster solidarity and empathy in conversations about race that might otherwise end in conflict.*

Oluo thinks it's important to remember that racism is a tool that helps those at the top of the system stay in power. Their motivations and goals aren't simply to oppress people of color—the "ultimate goal" is "the profit and comfort of the white race, specifically, of rich white men." Oppressing people of color is a tool that helps them achieve wealth and power. Effectively, Oluo thinks that the system manipulates people's emotions, ignorance, and fear to facilitate white supremacy. People need to address their emotions, but they can't ignore the system that riles its populace up and motivates them to hate, abuse, and kill people of color for the benefit of the most privileged people in society.

Oluo shifts focus to explain why systemic racism is so prevalent in U.S. society. It's not because those in power just want to be racist (again, she doesn't think anyone is simply born racist). Rather, the minority of "rich, white men" at the top of society use racism as a tool to help them stay rich and powerful. In other words, their wealth and power are their "ultimate goal[s]." Racism enables white supremacists to deny an enormous chunk of the population money and power by disenfranchising them (by making others fear them, denying them opportunities, incarcerating them, and so on).

It can be a difficult to have conversations about race with people who don't acknowledge systemic racism. What should you do when people bring up "racism against whites" and assume the impact on their lives is the same? Oluo notes that such claims are often "defensive reaction[s]" triggered by fear or confusion. Oluo suggests learning to focus on systemic effects: if somebody assumes that black people are never on time, one can call out that assumption as racist, but it's also good to explain how the assumption contributes to systemic oppression. For example, it reinforces false beliefs about black people that make employers reluctant to interview them in the first place. For Oluo, addressing the systemic causes and effects of racism will help others make the important distinction between systemic racism and "anti-white bigotry."

Oluo thinks focusing on "systemic racism" is a helpful tool to minimize conflict and foster solidarity in conversations about race. Sometimes, white people become defensive when others call out racism (so they react by saying that they're being called out because of "racism against whites" or "anti-white bigotry.") But if people recognize that the system is ultimately responsible for causing their racist views, they'll remember they're not the targets—the system is. This will help them function as allies to people of color in the shared common goal of dismantling the system that creates racists and oppresses people of color.

CHAPTER 3: WHAT IF I TALK ABOUT RACE WRONG?

Despite growing up in a mixed-race household, Oluo doesn't think she has a meaningful conversation about racism with her white mother until she's 34. When Oluo is younger, her mother gives her advice that all parents of black kids have to: about avoiding cops, being followed, and hair and skin shaming. Oluo's mother never assumes that Oluo's blackness will hold her back in life. Oluo thinks her mother's optimism is directly related to her positive experiences in the world as a white person. At home, Oluo feels smart, beautiful, black, and kind. But outside the home, it's hard for Oluo's mother to see "the everyday hurdles we had to jump, the tiny cuts of racism that we endured throughout our lives."

Oluo's nod to her mixed-race heritage hints once again that everybody's experience with oppression is slightly different: it's determined by a number of intersecting factors (including race, gender, wealth, and more). Her mother's advice to avoid cops implies that the institution of law enforcement is geared toward targeting people of color, which underscores that racism is systemic in the U.S. Oluo's description of "everyday hurdles" and "cuts of racism" underscores the perpetual emotional burden of confronting racism on a daily basis.

Oluo dreads talking about race with well-meaning white people who think they "get it." One day, Oluo's mother calls to say that she can identify with black people because she raised three black kids. Oluo cringes. They talk about the difference between loving black people and "*being* an actual black person who experiences the full force of a white supremacist society first hand." Oluo admits that she has light-skinned privilege but not white privilege, noting that historically, mixed-race people still had to be slaves. She and her mother talk about how and when to discuss race in non-triggering ways. Afterward, Oluo's surprised to see her mother's behavior shifting. Oluo's mother stops trying to identify with black people and starts focusing on how she can pressure fellow-white people to do better.

Oluo warns her readers not to confuse knowing black people with "being an actual black person" who lives with racism day in and day out. This means that people who think they "get it" probably still have things to learn. In making this point, Oluo reemphasizes the intersectional nature of her experience with racism: she's oppressed as a person of color but also somewhat privileged as a light-skinned person of color. This means that a person whose situation is slightly different has different experiences with racism (like Oluo's mother, who has mixed-race children but isn't black herself). Oluo thinks it's important to be sensitive to these differences when talking about race, acknowledge that everybody's lived-experience is valid, and avoid assuming that one person's experience is the same as another's (which is what her mother initially does). Oluo's feeling of dread again stresses the emotional burden of talking about racism as a person of color, and her description of the U.S. as a white supremacist society reminds the reader that systemic racism is the ultimate source of these difficulties and problems.

Oluo knows that conversations about race can get heated and uncomfortable. As a black woman, Oluo doesn't enjoy talking about race, but she believes that ignoring race only makes it more necessary to have such conversations. Often, she finds that ignoring race actually *makes* things racist. When employers enforce hair-style restrictions that ignore the needs of black women (for example, prohibiting braids), they make race an issue by ignoring it. Oluo just wants to go to work, educate her kids, and enjoy movies like everyone else. But the truth is, she lives in a society where a person's race affects their chances in life, and ignoring race won't change that.

Oluo explicitly addresses the emotional labor involved in addressing systemic racism. She argues that it's everybody's responsibility to ensure their society is fair and just. Often, however, the burden of calling out unfair and unjust practices falls on those they oppress. People of color, like everybody else, don't want to tackle racism all the time. They just want to live happy lives, but they can't do that unless everybody does their part. This is why complacency about systemic racism is actively racist: it shifts the burden of making a change onto people who are already doing more than their part.

Oluo wishes that she could guarantee her readers will never screw up a race conversation again after reading this book, but she can't. However, she has some tips to help privileged people avoid "conversation disaster." She recommends thinking about the purpose and goals of the conversation beforehand, as communicating specific intentions helps others determine if they're willing to join that conversation. She also warns against shifting the topic if things get heated. If the top priority is understanding race better, it's important to resist making the conversation about your feelings or your ego if you start feeling defensive.

Oluo thinks that many conversations about race end in "disaster" because people struggle to handle difficult or uncomfortable emotions. People who mean well but get it wrong often become defensive, angry, or hurt; they try to lash out because their ego is wounded, which can derail conversations. It's important, Oluo advises, to explicitly identify systemic racism as the target or problem and try to mitigate focusing on defensive urges.

Next, Oluo suggests doing some homework. If you don't know terms or definitions, Google them to avoid wasting people's time and frustrating them. Even during a conversation, you can Google something to avoid making others explain things to you. She also recommends being mindful of other groups. If your argument helps with the race issue but is sexist, transphobic, or ableist, that's not okay. Oluo thinks that we need to battle all forms of oppression. She also suggests taking a pause if you start to feel defensive, asking yourself if the focus has shifted to your ego, and taking a few minutes to calm down so that you can say what you really mean.

Oluo thinks that conversations about race often place an unfair burden on people of color to educate others on things they don't know. This is problematic because it requires more labor from somebody who's already disadvantaged. Oluo stresses again how important it is to be mindful of intersectionality: people are oppressed for many reasons in U.S. society, and the ultimate goal of conversations about social justice should be justice for everyone. *Therefore, saying something progressive about race that marginalizes other groups is counterproductive.*


Oluo next warns against tone policing. She says, don't try to control the way people talk about their racial experiences. Oluo also recommends trying to avoid saying "I" or "me" too much, and focus more on listening to people of color. Remember, she says, that the target is a system that makes people racist. Finally, Oluo reminds people not to force people of color into talking about race. They have to live with it every day, and race conversations are "painful and exhausting." If it's not a good time, there will be other opportunities.

Oluo reemphasizes that conversations about race should avoid unfairly burdening somebody who's already disenfranchised. Asking people to change their tone is problematic because it demands more labor from the person of color, and it shifts the focus of the conversation away from how to reduce systemic racism and toward making others communicate in a way that meets the privileged person's approval. Oluo continues stressing the pervasive emotional burden of "painful and exhausting" feelings on people of color to confront their racial pain every time they talk about race.

Oluo says that even with the best of intentions, and no matter how much you prepare, there will be times when a conversation goes south—you don't know what happened, but you messed up. Here's Oluo's advice for those situations: first, don't try to save the conversation. It can feel frustrating to leave a conversation unfinished or feeling misunderstood, but likely, whatever else you try to say will just make things worse. It's better to revisit it another time. Second, apologize and take ownership of your mistakes. Third, don't rewrite the conversation in your head as that time you tried or meant well but got attacked. Think of it instead as a conversation about a difficult topic that didn't go well.

One of the tricky things about living in a society where racism is systemic is the amount of social conditioning a privileged person has to resist to stop being inadvertently racist. This means it's likely that privileged people will mess up or say the wrong thing, because they've been conditioned in a certain way. Oluo thinks it's important to remember the goal of eliminating racism (including one's own unintended racism) is a process—it demands patience and persistence.

Fourth, don't demand credit for meaning well. If you hurt someone, your good intentions won't make them hurt less. Fifth, forgive yourself. Instead of drowning in guilt for offending someone, focus on what you've learned so you can apply it in future conversations. Sixth, remember that difficult conversations are worth it for the goal of social justice. Oluo says that even if a conversation goes horribly, you have to keep trying—otherwise, your complacency continues to fuel the oppression of people of color.

Oluo stresses that perseverance isn't only worthwhile, it's necessary—giving up or avoiding the issue because it's uncomfortable allows systemic racism to continue. Thus, the only way to be antiracist is to confront these difficult conversations and actively seek change.


Oluo concludes that conversations about racial oppression are inevitably emotional and anger-inducing. Oppression is an upsetting topic, but ignoring it won't make it go away. Oluo recommends talking with people of other races and also having conversations with people of your same race. To Oluo, if you're white and you don't want to have painful conversations, then you're shifting the burden of tackling racism onto people of color. Oluo also advises people of color to confront their internalized racism and make space to heal. She encourages all people to have these conversations, because as tough as they are now, they'll help make things better in the future.

Oluo acknowledges the emotional burden—on all parties involved—of talking about race. It's painful for privileged people to confront their own racism, and it's painful for people of color to address their trauma. She stresses once again that it's important to face this discomfort head on, especially for privileged people—avoiding uncomfortable conversations shifts the burden of seeking justice onto people who are already disenfranchised, which, again, only perpetuates racism.

CHAPTER 4: WHY AM I ALWAYS BEING ASKED TO "CHECK MY PRIVILEGE"?

Oluo felt like an outsider growing up in Seattle, especially at school where there weren't other black students. When she's older, she joins a Facebook group for people of color and discovers a vibrant community of people like her to hang out and discuss arts and culture with. One day, at a group picnic, she feels awkward when a few black men playing basketball nearby ask to join them. It's never occurred to her that other black people might find her "bougie" group "pretentious" and inaccessible. She feels lucky that she can shield some of the blow from racism in privileges that "white Seattle valued," but she feels bad for overlooking that the community isn't as radically accepting as she assumed.

Oluo shifts track to discuss the topic of privilege. Once again, she stresses that privilege is intersectional; it's an oversimplification to say that all white people are equally privileged and all black people are equally oppressed. Her anecdote here shows that privilege and oppression come up in complex, multilayered, constantly shifting ways. She's oppressed as an outsider in "white Seattle," but she's privileged within her social group relative to the new "outsiders" (the basketball players) who want to join in. She signals this by describing her group as potentially "bougie" (wealthy) and "pretentious" to other people of color.

Oluo hates the phrase "check your privilege"—it's usually a sign of a conversation gone wrong. But she also thinks it's important to understand privilege, and how it's relevant for social justice efforts. To Oluo, privilege is really an advantage that you have that others don't. They include privileges based on race, physical ability, gender, and class but can also include less obvious privileges like sexual orientation, physical appearance (or body type) and neurological differences. Oluo argues that addressing systemic oppression requires us to understand the full impact of the advantages our privileges give us.

Oluo wants to unpack the concept of privilege a bit further. She stresses that privilege and oppression are two sides of the same coin: a person with privilege is advantaged because the system gives them that privilege by taking opportunity away from somebody else. Privilege is thus inherently unjust. Second, she reminds the reader that privilege is intersectional: everyone likely has some forms of privilege and faces some forms of oppression, and it's important to examine these, to "check your privilege."

For example, Oluo has a college degree that she worked hard for while raising a child. She's proud of the effort she put in but feels it's dishonest to pretend her degree is entirely due to her own efforts. She grew up in a household with a mother who taught her to value education. She grew up as a nondisabled child with access to a school designed to serve her needs. Her grade school education was free. She's a documented citizen which gives her access to financial aid. Her degree gives her access to jobs and promotions that smarter people without degrees can't get. Oluo feels that if she doesn't question these privileges, she's contributing to a system that is unfair.

Oluo uses her own situation to show how privilege and systemic oppression are related. She's privileged in being educated, able-bodied, and documented, which gives her greater access to economic success (through financial aid and employment). Oluo has these privileges because society gives her more opportunity by taking opportunities away from disabled, uneducated, undocumented, and poor people. Her list also subtly emphasizes that oppression is intersectional (it affects different people for different reasons in many overlapping ways).

Oluo thinks people feel threatened by the concept of privilege because we don't like to believe we're harming others, don't deserve what we have, or don't understand how the world works. It's crucial, to Oluo, that people understand the privileges they do have come at somebody else's disadvantage. As a light-skinned black woman, Oluo is perceived as more intelligent than dark-skinned black women. If she accepts advantages on the basis of that assumption without questioning it (say, if she accepts a job without asking why her dark-skinned counterparts didn't), she's allowing those biases to continue.

Once again, Oluo stresses that that people don't like to confront their own prejudice (or check their privilege) because it's uncomfortable. As before, however, Oluo argues that being complacent about privilege is the same thing as being actively prejudiced: it allows the inequality to continue, and it allows a person to attain success because others are held back (through discriminatory attitudes and practices).

To Oluo, having privilege is like having power to speak up in situations where others don't. She thinks we should check our privilege, because doing so helps us identify areas where we have more power to change the system. She recommends making a list of all the advantages you had growing up—including things like growing up middle-class, being cisgender, being documented, being neurotypical, and so on. She suggests resisting the urge to think about all your disadvantages at this stage. Oluo feels underprivileged as a black, queer woman, but that doesn't mean she *shouldn't* check her privilege—otherwise, she might exclude people (such as black trans people or disabled black people) from her fight for social justice.

Oluo argues that one way to work through the discomfort of facing one's own prejudice is to recognize that privilege is unfair, but it's also power. The most ethical thing that a person can do with that power is to use it to seek change—they can call out problems and try to change the system so that power is more equally distributed in the future. It's thus important for everyone *to check their privilege—not to punish themselves or feel guilty for having an unfair advantage, but to help identify areas where they are in a position of power and are therefore able to recognize future power imbalances and fight oppression. Oluo's advice to make a list also stresses that people are privileged for many different reasons, which all need to be addressed to fully eliminate power imbalances in society.*

Oluo suggests studying your list and thinking about how your advantages in life shape your views on racism, education, and wider social issues. Then, seek out people who don't have your privileges and listen to what they say about those topics. Oluo does this herself every year, and she recommends getting used to the discomfort, "sting," and guilt that come with having privileges. These feelings, she says, won't kill you. But learning about your privilege will help you stop being defensive and become more empathetic and generous during arguments.

Oluo acknowledges that even though the aim of identifying one's privileges is to make positive social change, the effort will inevitably stir up uncomfortable emotions (such as the "sting" of shame and guilt). Once again, she advises the reader to embrace their discomfort rather than avoiding it. Oluo also implies that the fear of feeling uncomfortable is one of the biggest barriers to productive activism.

Oluo continues, saying that once you're aware of your privilege, you can start dismantling it. For example, if you had a private education, use your financial security to support efforts for improving public schools. If politicians seek your political support, ask them what they'll do to support other communities. If you have a flexible schedule and can make a daytime parent-teacher meeting, ask the school if they can move the next meeting to times that accommodate working parents. To Oluo, there are endless possibilities for leveraging your privilege to make ca change, so she urges everyone to regularly check their privilege.

Oluo illustrates several ways in which a person can flex their power to make a positive social change. Her varied examples remind the reader that privilege is intersectional—it's not just about race. As before, Oluo concludes by urging the reader to remember that doing nothing with the power that privilege gives them isn't neutral, it's actively oppressive: being complacent only perpetuates the existing system of power imbalances and creates further inequality, which is why people need to be aware of the privileges they have so they can use them productively.

CHAPTER 5: WHAT IS INTERSECTIONALITY AND WHY DO I NEED IT?

Oluo tweets about a famous black male musician who hasn't been arrested for sexual crimes. Her tweets go viral, and she receives a lot of hate responses accusing her of hating black men. People accuse Oluo of siding with white oppressors. She's frustrated because people are so concerned with the oppression of black men that they forget about the oppressions faced by black women. Oluo feels that she often faces situations where people deny her oppression in her day-to-day life. She knows that online harassment can get ugly very quickly, and she feels like Twitter is a crucial resource for voices like hers in a white male-dominated media industry, so she tries to contain the damage from her tweet.

So far, Oluo has worked various examples into her arguments to show that people are oppressed and privileged for many different reasons that overlap and intersect to make everyone's situation unique (including gender, sexuality, class, race, ability, nationality, and more). Now, she's going to explicitly address this phenomenon. She begins by highlighting the emotional impact of confrontations that are overgeneralizing (too binary, or not intersectional enough).

By the next day, the crisis is averted, but Oluo is "overcome with sadness." She thinks that black women on social media feel "very alone and very abused." White women praise her attack on patriarchy but also call her "divisive" for bringing up race. Black men applaud her for calling out white supremacy but also call her a "feminist tool of slave masters." Oluo feels that black women have been integral to every feminist movement in U.S. history, yet nobody marches for them.

Oluo continues signaling the emotional burden of oppression by communicating her feelings of "sadness," isolation, and abuse. Oluo also feels that sometimes, the fight for racial justice overlooks the way black women are oppressed within black culture. Sometimes, the fight for feminism overlooks the way black women are oppressed by white women, which is what leads black men to accuse Oluo of being a "feminist tool of slave masters." All oppression is painful, so people, like black women, who are oppressed in multiple ways feel an extra burden—and they often feel more isolated or overlooked within social movements (or among people who are supposed to be their allies).

Oluo defines intersectionality as "the belief that our social justice movements must consider all of the intersections of identity, privilege, and oppression that people face in order to be just and effective." She's interested in the concept because it applies to her so much. Oluo says she can't suppress her blackness to support women's rights, and she can't cut away her womanhood to support black rights. She implores people to march for her too—as a black woman.

Oluo gives an explicit definition of intersectionality here, focusing on the idea that social justice only happens when everybody who's oppressed gains equality. Oluo won't escape oppression until her womanhood and *her blackness are accepted by others. This means that black women should have the same opportunities as white women, black men, white men, and every other individual in U.S. society, regardless of their demographic.*

Oluo explains that identity is shaped by a lot more than race, and there are many forms of oppression beyond racial oppression. Oluo is a black, queer woman—so when she's harassed on the street, she doesn't know if it's because she's black, because she's queer, or because she's a woman. For Oluo, the source of the problem is "unexamined privilege," as this leads to activism that overlooks the needs of vulnerable people in society, such as "disabled Latinx trans women." For instance, Oluo cites black activism that prioritizes heterosexual men of color's needs; feminist activism that prioritizes "the needs of white women"; or LGBTQ activism that prioritizes white, gay, cisgender men's needs.

Oluo stresses that people tend to over-simplify: they tend to assume that their situation is exactly the same as others, and they forget ways in which they have specific privileges (or, as Oluo puts it, they don't examine their privilege). In a feminist movement that isn't *intersectional, it's main participants (for example, "white women") might focus on eradicating the oppressions* they *face (assuming that* all *women are in the same boat). But straight, white women have privileges that minority, non-heterosexual, trans, and disabled women don't have. This means their feminist movement will help straight, white women achieve equality, but it leaves the others (like "disabled Latinx trans women") behind, which is unjust.*

Race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in 1989 when addressing the unique oppressions faced by black women. Scholars subsequently expanded the concept to include other causes of oppression, including class, mental and physical ability, and sexual orientation. Yet, Oluo argues, intersectionality hasn't gotten much traction in social justice movements. She offers some reasons for why this is the case.

Oluo argues that although race scholars have been dealing with intersectionality since the 1980s, activist movements still lag behind, and they often fail to achieve their aims because they're insufficiently intersectional (they don't tackle all the forms of oppression when fighting for people's rights, which leaves some people behind).

Oluo argues that intersectionality makes activism more complicated: it's much harder to figure out the needs of a diverse group than a homogenous group, so people often focus on the needs of the majority to make things easier. Second, intersectionality forces people to people face their own privilege, which many find uncomfortable. Third, intersectionality shifts focus away from the needs of people who are used to being at the center of a movement (such as white women in feminism). Fourth, intersectionality forces people to consider people they don't usually interact with. This is uncomfortable because people like to form groups with people they feel are similar to them.

Once again, Oluo argues that one of the core reasons why well-meaning activists are slow to embrace intersectionality is because they don't like to confront the shame and guilt of their own privilege or put themselves in uncomfortable situations like talking with other women who live very different lives. While this is understandable, Oluo stresses that it's not acceptable—avoiding uncomfortable feelings or situations leaves some people out of the conversation.

Oluo believes that most people who want to fight oppression aim to improve society for *all* people. This means that they must embrace intersectionality to make sure they don't oppress some people while fighting for the rights of others. Oluo suggests that you can include intersectionality in discussions about race by asking yourself some questions.

Oluo again stresses that activists don't like to think of themselves as oppressors within their own groups. But if they use their power to only help a certain demographic—say, straight, white women—then they are *actively oppressing other women by fighting some systemic power imbalances in society and leaving others in place.*

First, Oluo suggests that people ask themselves how factors like race, gender, ability, class, and sexuality impact the subject they're dealing with. She then advises seeking out the perspectives of diverse groups of people with different intersectional needs. She also suggests taking stock of who's writing the books and articles that champion a cause: are they writers from diverse backgrounds? Oluo also asks people to consider who their activism leaves out or ignores and ask themselves how they're making safe spaces for underrepresented or marginalized people to join the conversation.

As before, Oluo argues that the importance of checking one's privilege becomes imperative. If the goal of feminism is to help all *women, it's important to recognize that some women have privileges because other women don't. White women have more privilege in a white supremacist society because they're white—this isn't their fault, it's a problem with the system. But the system needs to be changed, nonetheless. Again, the goal of identifying such privileges isn't to trigger guilt or shame, but to identify pockets of power and use them to make space for others whose needs and perspectives are underrepresented.*

Oluo continues with some pointers for increasing attention to intersectionality in conversations. Most people don't know what intersectionality is, and this might make them defensive. It often helps to start with real-life examples: orient the discussion toward thinking about ways to do more (rather than ways your movement is failing). In day-to-day contexts, Oluo suggests asking yourself questions like who gets to speak at company meetings? Who developed your child's curriculum? Whom did you vote for? Oluo things that everything can be made more inclusive when we think about intersectionality and confront our privilege.

Oluo's practical tips also emphasize that the point of identifying power imbalances within a movement isn't to shame the most privileged people or denigrate the movement. The aim is to identify areas where a person can use their power (or privilege) to make the group more inclusive, and therefore to help the movement achieve its goal of social justice. This, admittedly, demands confronting difficult or uncomfortable feelings of privilege, but it's necessary.

CHAPTER 6: IS POLICE BRUTALITY REALLY ABOUT RACE?

Oluo is driving with her brothers, and she gets stopped by a cop for speeding one mile per hour over the speed limit. They all stay calm but are terrified. Oluo tweets that she's been stopped just in case something happens. Her brother Aham tells the cop that he's reaching for the registration, waits for approval, and moves his hands slowly. Oluo remembers a time when a cop warned her not to reach for the glove compartment without saying what she's doing first, otherwise she could get shot. When Oluo gets home, she receives many tweets from her community and people of color asking if she's safe. She also receives many tweets from strangers asking why she brought race into the issue.

Oluo begins with a personal anecdote about being stopped by police for speeding and fearing for her life to stress that there is something deeply wrong with this picture. The solidarity she receives from other people of color—and the advice from a cop in the past—subtly imply that police brutality is a widespread (likely systemic) issue. Oluo's feeling of terror emphasizes the profound emotional trauma of being targeted as a person of color in U.S. society. The tweets that deny or dismiss her experience indicate defensive reactions that tend to derail conversations about topics like this.

Truthfully, Oluo doesn't know if she was racially profiled, but she also knows to never ask a police officer why she's been stopped (she might end up like Sandra Bland). To Oluo, police brutality is about power, corruption, fear, guns, and accountability. The power that enables police brutality puts *everyone* at risk, but not equally. Studies show that black drivers are 23 percent more likely to be pulled over; five times more likely to be searched, ticketed, arrested, and killed by cops; and four times more likely to experience police force than white people (including hitting, choking, pepper spraying, tasing, and gun use). It's clear to Oluo that black people are being targeted.

Sandra Bland was a black woman who died in police custody three days after being arrested for a traffic violation in 2015. Oluo raises this example and provides additional concrete statistics to further reinforce the idea that police brutality against people of color is a systemic issue in the U.S. If police brutality is systemic, it means that law enforcement in U.S. society is set up to target, oppress, and kill people of color. This is a bold claim, which is why Oluo uses hard evidence to back it up before delving deeper.

Oluo isn't sure if the fear and stress of encountering police is worse, or the persistent denial that this happens to black people. People like to believe that systemic racism doesn't exist and that there just a few "bad eggs." Oluo knows it can be difficult for people who look to the police for safety and security to see them as harmful. But she needs people to believe her. She's scared and hurting, and people are dying.

After offering facts to justify her claim, Oluo appeals to the reader's emotions: her descriptions of the persistent terror faced by black people in the U.S. are intended to foster empathy with their plight and to highlight once more the pervasive emotional cost of being black in U.S. society. As before, she emphasizes that the problem isn't a few random hateful people, or "bad eggs," but an entire system of enforcement that systematically oppresses and kills black people.


Oluo suggests looking at historical relationships between police and people of color to help understand why minority communities lack trust in the police. She argues that the country's first police forces grew out of "Night Patrols" and "Slave Patrols" whose task was to control and capture black and Native American people. In the Jim Crow era, many Southern police offers were also part of the Ku Klux Klan. Oluo argues that since the 18th century, people of color have *always* experienced higher rates of arrest, assault, and death by police. Police have also consistently been used to intimidate, silence, and punish ethnic minority activists.

Oluo appeals to history to justify her claim that law enforcement institutions in the U.S. were designed *to oppress people of color. She argues that the police force evolved out of "Patrols" specifically created to control and catch black slaves and Native Americans. She moves through later periods of history to show that since its creation, the U.S. police force has persistently targeted people of color and continues to do so, meaning that Oluo thinks the police force is a tool of white supremacy through and through.*

Oluo argues that controlling people of color is entrenched American policing history. Among people of color, fear, mistrust, and trauma are also woven in. For Oluo, the damaged caused by police brutality and systemic oppression are multigenerational, and they haven't healed—because police brutality is still going on. This doesn't mean that most police officers are "racist, hateful monsters," but it does mean that American culture has been shaped by media depicting black Americans as "violent criminals." Today's politicians use the same lingo when they talk about keeping cities safe from "thugs." To Oluo, politicians and taxpayers essentially endorse and fund the perspective that black people need to be controlled by police.

Oluo reminds the reader that she's not saying police officers are racist, hateful people. She's saying that the people in power use the structures of U.S. society—like the media, education, and politics—to teach Americans that people of color are dangerous and need to be controlled, and they use the police force to exert that control. This system keeps people of color away from opportunity, which enables white supremacists at the top of the hierarchy to hoard power and wealth. All this comes at a tremendous emotional cost to people of color, which Oluo represents with the metaphor of wounds that haven't healed (earlier, she used the symbol of scars to represent the same idea).


Oluo acknowledges that black men are more likely to commit violent offences than white men. But she thinks terms like "black-on-black" crime are fully racist, noting that most crime in white communities happens by white people, but it's never called "white-on-white" crime. Oluo thinks that communities with more poverty and unemployment will simply have more crime. Oluo explains that on average, the net worth of a black or Hispanic American is less than a tenth of a white American. Native Americans are also three times as poor as white people. Even worse, Oluo asks, what should people of color do when they experience crime but can't trust the police to protect them?

Oluo uses the example of "black on black crime" (a common phrase in the news cycle) to show how the media and politicians manipulate their language to subtly imply that black people are inherently violent. She debunks this as a manipulation tactic by showing that most crime simply happens within *communities—and poor communities tend to be populated with people of color because of the preexisting systemic oppression they face.*

Oluo argues that police are armed with guns *and* empowered by a justice system that protects them. If a civilian experiences harm as a result of unjustified force from a police officer, the officer will likely face few consequences. The situation is different for white people. Oluo notes that police were created "to protect and serve" white communities—there's no history of violent oppression and abuse. Of course, white Americans have been abused by the police (especially those in the LGBTQ community), but on the whole, white Americans trust the criminal justice system.

Oluo explains that it can often be difficult for people who aren't subject to such extensive oppression to grasp what it feels like. This is especially relevant in contexts where systemic racism is in force, precisely because the system ensures that most of the white community have different (and more positive) lived experiences with the police, as people whose job is to "protect and serve" their needs. This makes it much harder for them to understand the experience of being oppressed by an entire institution of society.

To get to a place where *everyone* can trust the criminal justice system, Oluo thinks that people need to acknowledge the very different history that people of color have with the police. When talking about police brutality, Oluo says that it's important to remember that what happened to you is "valid and true" but that it's not everyone's experience. If you do trust and value the police force, you should expect them to earn the trust and respect of people of color. Oluo argues that people of color don't want white people to fear the police as much as they do—they want white people support their demands for the right to be able to trust the police.

Oluo stresses the importance of trusting in the lived experiences of people of color as "valid and true" when it comes to systemic oppression, rather than denying or dismissing their claims—even if the experiences they describe seem foreign or unfamiliar. In fact, the goal for everybody in society should be to have institutions where such experiences are *unfamiliar. Oluo reminds the reader that the point of addressing difficult issues like police brutality is to change the system so that it functions for everybody, not to shame the police or get rid of them.*

CHAPTER 7: HOW CAN I TALK ABOUT AFFIRMATIVE ACTION?

Oluo recalls her school days: when Oluo is seven, her family lives with another family in a tiny apartment, and her mother struggles to make ends meet. Their electricity and water are disconnected, and they have to sneak into an empty show apartment down the hall to shower and cook food. Eventually, Oluo's mother becomes eligible for university housing, and they move—Oluo moves around a lot in her childhood. Teachers perceive her strong academic record as "rare" among black students. Her brother Aham is also very talented but struggles in school because he's emotional and energetic, and teachers interpret his behavior as aggressive. Soon, students begin bullying Aham. He develops daily panic attacks and drops out of school.

For the next two chapters, Oluo addresses systemic oppression in education and the workforce. Here, she shows how racism in schools—evidenced by her teachers' generalizing assumptions that it's "rare" for black students to be smart and common for them to be aggressive—can have a lasting impact on a person of color's ability to succeed in U.S. society as an adult. Aham's mental health struggles also show how such practices can create lasting emotional trauma for people of color.

Oluo winds up divorced with a toddler at 22. She knows (from her mother) that education is her only chance of escaping poverty. She moves away, gets loans for college, and puts herself through school—as the only black person in her classes—while raising her son alone. She remembers feeling exhausted and isolated. Nonetheless, Oluo graduates, finds a job, and dives in with gusto. One day, Oluo is told she's getting a promotion, but her boss has to withdraw the offer because a white woman complains that Oluo is being promoted because she's black.

Oluo's feelings of isolation emphasize the emotional burden of being a minority in a professional environment, which can make the path to career success much more fraught and unlikely. The juxtaposition of Oluo's difficult journey with the complaint that she's unfairly getting ahead exposes how hurtful, insensitive, and damaging complaints against affirmative action can be for people who are already oppressed.

Oluo switches departments. She's the only black woman in a new team, and people make suggestive jokes about her body. Oluo learns that her black and Latinx colleagues earn a lot less than others, and she quits. At Oluo's next job, people think that her enthusiasm makes her "loud" and "opinionated." The company sends around an employee satisfaction survey and brainstorms ways to improve—except the directors assume that employees who criticize the lack of promotions among people of color "didn't understand the question." Over time, Oluo becomes "lonely and disheartened" as the only black woman in her division, so she starts a blog to help with her loneliness.

Oluo's experiences in the workplace highlight systemic racism at work in two ways: first, she notes how people of color are often paid less than their white colleagues. Second, she shows how conditioning about what black people are "like" can have a tangible negative impact on people of color's careers. Oluo's coworkers treat her as if she's aggressive ("loud" and "opinionated") and unintelligent (unable to "understand the question"), which are beliefs they've likely been taught through institutions like the media. Oluo's feelings of isolation and despair once again highlight the tremendous emotional burden of such experiences.

Oluo luckily finds herself writing during a time when media outlets are seeking black and brown voices. Publications (usually run by white men) start approaching her to contribute unpaid or low-paid articles. The publications' bylines become more diverse, but their staffed positions (with living wages and health insurance) don't. Eventually, Oluo quits her day job, starts hustling, and manages to eke out a career as a writer. She's proud, of course, but she's also angry. When she looks around, she's still the only black woman in the room, and she wonders what happened to the others that were left behind.

Oluo broadens her anecdotal testimony to cover another career—this time, writing. Here, she highlights that while writers of color can get published, it's much harder for them to be fairly compensated and have stable careers. In addressing multiple professional environments, she suggests that the opportunity gap for people of color is pervasive in multiple contexts, which implies that it's systemic. Her anger at this situation once again exposes the emotional toll of systemic racism.

Oluo wonders about the all the black and brown kids who were treated as difficult instead of talented and wound up in juvenile detention. She wonders about every queer person and every disabled person who can't be in the room with her, and she feels like her heart is broken. Oluo feels that people who are marginalized (like people of color, disabled people, single mothers, and non-heterosexual people) have to be better than everybody else just to get noticed—and even then, they'll likely just barely manage to eke out a living.

Oluo references non-heterosexual and disabled people to remind the reader that systemic oppression is intersectional—people are held back from career success for many reasons (including sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, and more). She emphasizes her feelings of despair to underscore again the emotional pain of confronting this reality in U.S. society.

Oluo thinks affirmative action isn't well understood in society. The concept was introduced by President Kennedy in the 1960s to force federal employers and educators to reduce opportunity disparities for people of color that resulted from of hundreds of years of racial and gender discrimination. The Supreme Court struck down efforts to enforce quotas to measure improvement. By the 1980s, when Reagan was elected, most conservatives declared affirmative action "no longer necessary" and began to defund it. Oluo thinks affirmative action should be expanded to cover other marginalized groups because it works—though not as well as it should—and this should matter to people who "value equality and diversity." Yet many people still believe that affirmative action is unjust.

Oluo explains that affirmative action focuses on helping people of color overcome systemic barriers to education and federal employment. She thinks that it's a tangible effort to change the system like she's been advocating all along—it aims to reduce inequalities that the system perpetuates. Despite this fact, affirmative action's impact has been limited. Oluo uses the back and forth among the country's political elite (and Reagan's actions to deem affirmative action "no longer necessary" despite the persistence of inequality) to show how easily those at the top of the hierarchy can manipulate the system—and popular opinion—to suit their needs.

Oluo summarizes some of the arguments commonly used against affirmative actions: first, some people argue that affirmative action isn't needed because society has progressed beyond the racism and sexism of the past. Oluo acknowledges that it's hard to quantify racism and sexism but argues that statistics show that disparities still exist. Since Reagan's cuts began, the wage gap for black men has stayed the same, and the wage gap for Hispanic men has worsened "from 71 to 69 cents for every dollar made by a white man." Grade school education studies show that teachers are more likely to look for problem behavior in (and suspend) black children. Black and Hispanic students are still underrepresented in universities by 20 percent.

Oluo uses empirical facts—such as specific, quantified wage discrepancies broken down by race—to show that despite what many people think, people of color still face more barriers to professional success than other people in U.S. society. They are consistently underpaid and underrepresented in higher education. This implies that people who deny the need for affirmative action—like people who resist confronting their own racism—are reluctant to face the discomfort of acknowledging how racist their society actually is.


Second, some think that people of color can just sue racist or sexist employers. Oluo notes that technically, an employer can fire someone for any reason—so without a paper trail proving discrimination, there's actually not much an employee can do. Since salaries are kept confidential, wage gaps also often go undetected. It's also harder for people of color and women to make it through the interview process in the first place.

Oluo highlights some examples of systemic racism in the workplace to show how commonly it comes up and how hard it is to call out. This subtly implies that there is an onus on those who are less at risk (those who have more privilege or power in the workplace) to call out these inequalities.

Third, people argue that affirmative makes people of color and women lazier than white men. Fourth, people think that affirmative action is unfair because it takes opportunities away from white men. Oluo sighs and notes that people of color and women are striving for an *equal* opportunity, which they don't have yet. Finally, some simply deny that affirmative action works, which Oluo says just isn't true. Multiple studies show that affirmative action increases the proportion of people of color in schools and public sector jobs. Moreover, these arguments all focus on race, yet white women have been the largest recipients of affirmative action so far.

In challenging some common arguments against affirmative action, Oluo highlights once more that workplace inequality and affirmative action are both intersectional—women also face systemic barriers to opportunity and benefit from efforts to equalize the power imbalance that centuries of patriarchy created. Oluo reminds the reader that affirmative action isn't designed to create *privilege (an unfair advantage), but rather to* correct *privilege: the goal is always equality, nothing more.*


Oluo concludes that affirmative action can improve the economic prospects of women and people of color. But even so, it's still just "a Band-Aid on [the] festering sore" of systemic racism. Oluo agrees with Michelle Alexander that the only problem with affirmative action is the false belief that it will be enough to achieve racial justice. Oluo says there's a tough ahead.

Oluo invokes the metaphor of illness once again to expose the pervasive damage of systemic oppression: earlier, she compared U.S. society to a person with cancer, and here, she imagines a person with a "festering sore." In calling affirmative action a "Band-Aid," Oluo implies that it's only a small step toward reducing systemic oppression. In mentioning women as well as people of color, she reminds the reader again that the fight for justice is intersectional, meaning that power imbalances target people in ways beyond their race.


CHAPTER 8: WHAT IS THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE?

Oluo discusses a woman named Natasha and her son Sagan. Natasha was called into school because Sagan apparently assaulted two teachers and mimicked a gun with his hand, and the school board wants to file charges against him. Then, Oluo learns that Sagan is five years old. Natasha is "still reeling" several days later. As the mother of two boys, Oluo knows that five-year-olds can become unruly if they haven't slept or feel ill. She's been hit by five-year-olds and knows that they usually need a time out when this happens. She never thinks this is "assault." Nobody asked Sagan how he was feeling that day, they simply suspended him—five months into his kindergarten education.

Oluo uses the "school-to-prison pipeline" to illustrate a tangible example of the oppression that children of color face in education. Oluo's anecdote about Natasha and Sagan illustrates a case of a black child who's labelled as violent and dangerous on his academic record (through his suspension) from the outset of his schooling, despite his young age. Natasha's "reeling" reaction highlights once again the emotional pain of experiencing racism in the U.S.


Oluo thinks that the public-school system in the U.S. labels black and brown children as "violent, disruptive, unpredictable future criminals." Only 16 percent of school students are black, yet 40 percent of expelled students are black, and black students are three times more likely to be suspended than white students. Seventy percent of students who are arrested in school are black. Oluo says that there are two ways to look at this data: either black and brown students *are* "violent, disruptive, unpredictable future criminals," or the school system is criminalizing the majority of black and brown students. This criminalization process is called the school-to-prison-pipeline.

Oluo draws upon statistics for suspension, expulsion, and arrest rates broken down by race to show that the oppression of children of color isn't random or occasional but pervasive in U.S. education—meaning that it's a systemic issue. The statistics suggest that children of color are disproportionately labeled as "violent" or dangerous in school than white children. Such labels stay on record and follow children throughout their schooling into adulthood.

The school-to-prison pipeline describes the high number of black and brown children who are funneled from schools into prisons, leading to mass incarceration that incriminates one in three black men and one in six Latino men. Oluo says that the pipeline starts with higher suspensions and expulsions for black and brown students. Students who are suspended or expelled are more likely to repeat years or drop out. Students who are arrested are more likely to be re-arrested. Schools flag boys whose fathers served jail time and watch them for extra disciplining needs, which perpetuates the cycle.

Children with suspensions or expulsions on their records face greater risk of incarceration as adults. This means that the school system disproportionately singles out black and brown children and limits their opportunities in life. To Oluo, this is exactly how systemic racism functions: the systems of society (here, schools and prisons) are used to funnel people of color away from opportunity so that others can have more. She's going to defend this claim more fully in the rest of this chapter.

Oluo knows teachers aren't "evil racists who hate black and brown children." Teachers are often "underpaid, underappreciated, overworked, and overwhelmed," which doesn't help. Moreover, school administrators and teachers can be influenced—like everyone—by cultural images of black and brown youths as violent. Oluo says that many teachers are white females whose training doesn't prepare them for handling disadvantaged children of color. Many underfunded and understaffed schools also disproportionately label interpersonal or disciplinary issues among black students as learning disabilities, which segregates and isolates them in special education programs. Black and brown children are also disproportionately targeted by zero-tolerance policies about weapons (which can include forks and finger-gun gestures). An increased police presence in schools also results in more arrests.

As with police brutality, Oluo stresses that the problem is not specific educators who just happen to be "evil racists." The problem is a society that conditions all Americans—including educators—to think that black and brown youths are inherently more dangerous than white youths (for example, through movies and newsreels that depict people of color as thugs). U.S. society effectively teaches Americans to fear people of color and then gives institutions (like schools) power to act on that fear. All this implies that changing the system should be the goal of anti-racists.

Oluo provides some tips for addressing the school-to-prison pipeline in conversation. She suggests including the topic in broader conversations about race, because it's relevant to many issues, including police brutality, mass incarceration, and wage discrepancies. Oluo also recommends talking to schools and school boards. Even in schools without black and brown children, parents should be aware of disciplinary measures, suspension and expulsion rates, and measures to reduce barriers to opportunity for black and brown students. Oluo thinks it can also help to recognize black and brown children's achievements using positive reinforcement.

Oluo offers concrete suggestions about how to change the system and dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. Once again, it's clear that Oluo's aim is not to shame or berate individual racists, especially teachers who are already underpaid and overworked. Rather, her aim is to show how parents can use their privilege (or their power) to request transparency about disciplinary measures and call out discrimination in schools. That way, those within the system can be held accountable for how they use that system.

Oluo continues, arguing that it's important to normalize the experiences of black and brown children. Depictions of everyday childhood (such as children playing together)—in television, memes, and movies, for example—usually center on white children. She also advocates criticizing language that stereotypes black and brown kids as criminals based on how they act or dress. When discussing unique problems faced by black and brown kids, Oluo thinks that the focus should shift to the needs of these children (rather than depicting them as the problem). She urges readers not to forget about disabled children of color, who are most vulnerable to punitive measures. Finally, Oluo recommends challenging white-centered education and pushing for more diverse curricula.

Oluo also thinks that educators can challenge the pervasive effects of social conditioning (from media representations that depict black and brown youths as thugs). Rather than reflecting the media's racist framing of children of color, the school system can provide a powerful counter-narrative through educational content that depicts black and brown youths as normal children rather than future thugs. Oluo reminds the reader that oppression in schools is intersectional: differently abled and neuro-atypical children are also disproportionately vulnerable to punitive measures, and their oppression also needs to be addressed.

The damage of the school-to-prison pipeline is profound, but the worst thing to Oluo is the way it steals childhood joy. It tells black and brown students that they can't be exuberant, rebellious, or defiant (or they will be disciplined, pathologized, or incarcerated). She implores the reader to help people of color save their children.

Oluo concludes her discussion of oppression in schools by stressing the profound and lasting emotional trauma that marginalized American children face. In doing so, Oluo aims to foster empathy in her readers to encourage them to take action.

CHAPTER 9: WHY CAN'T I SAY THE "N" WORD?

Oluo recalls the first time she was called a "nigger." In her memory, she's 11. Oluo and her brother Aham are staying with Liz (a friend of Oluo and Aham's mother) while their mother is on a business trip. They get along well with Liz's kids, Nick and Amy, and they mostly play in the woods. When Oluo and Aham go for a walk with Liz's kids, some local children say "look at the niggers," and Liz's kids start laughing. Oluo says "the words hit like buckets of cold water." They don't want to get Nick and Amy in trouble, or worry their mother, so they say nothing, but the tension creates a bad atmosphere, and they feel unwelcome. Words, Oluo says, have power.

Oluo's discussion of racial slurs like the n-word serves to emphasize the emotional cost of racism. She begins with a personal anecdote, emphasizing her shock (in the phrase "like buckets of cold water") that exposes how painful, stressful, uncomfortable, and damaging it can be for people of color to unexpectedly endure racial slurs. She also uses her anecdote to show that people of color don't always feel safe to call out situations that cause them racial pain, which is also a problem.

The word "nigger" comes from the Latin term "niger" (black), but it was used as a term to express hatred toward black people—especially by the Ku Klux Klan—since the 1700s. To Oluo, all oppression is rooted in language. Sometimes, she notes, the word "cracker" is used to reference white people, but to Oluo, it's not the same: it doesn't make people sick by evoking slavery, lynch mobs, "whites only" signs, and police dogs. Oluo says that people of color bear the pain of this history, while white people benefit from it.

Oluo explains that racial slurs connected with cruel oppressive practices like slavery and lynching carry a much stronger emotional punch because of the history associated with their use. This explains why some racial slurs are simply more hurtful than others—they not only invoke judgment but also an entire history of violence, abuse, and murder, which triggers profound racial pain.

Sometimes, words are reclaimed by the communities the words mean to oppress. Does this mean well-meaning white people should use them? It's true that everybody has a right to free speech, and people of color have very little power to stop anyone using racial slurs, but to Oluo, it's really about why anybody would want to trigger such pain. It might seem unfair that black people can use a term that white people can't, or that black people can't let it go, but Oluo says they can't let it go until oppression stops happening.

Oluo explains that reclaiming racial slurs within an ethnic community can be empowering, but when others use racial slurs to target communities who are already oppressed, it triggers historical trauma and negatively impacts people's ability to get through their day-to-day lives. Oluo therefore thinks that it's unethical for other people to use racial slurs if they are of a different race.

CHAPTER 10: WHAT IS CULTURAL APPROPRIATION?

Oluo is at an airport terminal, frazzled and hungry, and she finds a food spot called "Africa Lounge." She's excited, hoping they serve Ethiopian food. But as she gets closer, she notices chairs with zebra patterns on them, a mural depicting cavemen, and menus for burgers. She realizes that it's not an African restaurant, but an American restaurant dressed up like something else. She grows sad thinking about the few amazing African restaurants she does know, which evoke memories of eating delicious West African fufu for dipping in stew, hearing music that reminds her of Nigerian family gatherings, and being happy. She's disappointed to see a "caricature of [her] culture" at the airport.

Oluo now addresses the exploitation of black and brown culture. She's going to unpack this idea using two central examples: the music industry and the food industry. Juxtaposing her warm memories of eating West African food with a bland, superficial "caricature" of an African restaurant enables Oluo to symbolize how appropriation strips the soul out of meaningful cultural practices, which is one of her central concerns.

Oluo sees cultural appropriation as something that happens when a dominant culture exploits or uses an oppressed culture. Examples of appropriation by dominant white culture include using Native American headdresses and Indian bindis as accessories. Many people find cultural appropriation confusing because they think of the United States as a multicultural place and where it might help fight racism to embrace other cultures' practices. Oluo argues that these practices become a problem when there's a power imbalance between the two cultures.

Oluo explains here that if all cultures were equally valued in a society, there would be no problem with sharing and borrowing cultural practices. However, when there's a power imbalance—meaning that one culture is systematically privileged over others—taking cultural symbols from the marginalized culture can have a damaging economic impact that increases the oppression of the marginalized community.

Take music, for example: Oluo argues that music has been an important way for black Americans to process the pain of their oppression. But blues, jazz, and rock (which evolved from African musical traditions) were all deemed dangerous until white artists began imitating the sound and garnering fame, money, and respectability. Today, many talented black rappers remain in obscurity, while "okay" white rappers have tremendous success. This white-sounding rap becomes legitimized, and black artists struggle further because their rap sounds different. To Oluo, there's also a problem with rappers who can't connect with rap's history as a source of strength for black people facing adversity.

Oluo unpacks her claim about the economic impact of appropriation using the example of rap: she argues that in societies set up to privilege white culture, white artists find it easier to gain success in the marketplace. (even if they're just "okay"). Their whitewashed sound becomes normalized and changes what people expect to hear when they buy rap albums, which makes it harder for black artists to gain the same success. Thus, appropriation is more like stealing than borrowing or sharing.

The biggest problem, for Oluo, is that cultural appropriation betrays a society that "prefers its culture cloaked in whiteness." In a society where all cultures are equally appreciated, an imitation is just an imitation, but in American society, attempts to borrow from marginalized cultures become exploitative. Things get complicated, Oluo notes, when one thinks about who defines what belongs to a culture, especially when practices have been shared for a long time and play an important role in the dominant culture too. In the end, Oluo says that if your biggest concern is whether or not to wear a geisha costume to a party, you should count yourself lucky.

Oluo qualifies her argument to say that cultural appropriation isn't a cut-and-dry issue, especially as there's already lot of cultural crossover in the world. But she concludes that when in doubt, the best thing to do is err on the side of caution. Antiracists should always consider if their actions increase the oppression of marginalized people. If there's a chance that their actions will, they should steer clear, even if doing so is—at worst—an inconvenience.

CHAPTER 11: WHY CAN'T I TOUCH YOUR HAIR?

Oluo discusses a work meeting in which she's excited to meet her new team after a promotion. She's the only black person there. She's shocked when the director of her division, her boss's boss asks, "Is that your real hair?" and the whole team starts talking about "that Chris Rock movie about hair" and how damaging and expensive weaves are. This annoys Oluo—she doesn't need a movie to inform her about the pains of using chemicals on black hair to make it less coarse, because she's lived through it. Oluo feels like her boss is using her natural hair to shame other black women, meaning it's still being used as a tool for oppression.

Oluo's annoyance and frustration emphasize the emotional burden her boss puts on her by bringing up a triggering question in a professional environment. Her boss's assumption that he knows what he's talking about (just from watching a movie) also illustrates a much more subtle example of appropriation—he's appropriating the experience of having black hair (as if he knows what it's like and therefore has a right to comment on how to treat it).

Oluo says that most people know a lot about white hair styles—the cuts, products, and fashions are everywhere in the culture. But non-black people often know very little about black hairstyling methods, so they're curious, and they want to touch it. Many people—in shops, restaurants, and work meetings—touch Oluo's hair without permission, which is not okay. Apart from the fact that it's never okay to touch somebody without permission, she thinks it's weird that they want to. People's hands are dirty, it messes up curls, and ultimately, it continues a history of not respecting the freedom and autonomy of black people and their bodies.

In a nod to the topic of cultural appropriation, Oluo explains what a society with a dominant culture looks like: one culture's way of doing things (here, managing and styling hair) tends to take central stage, while other ways of doing things are pushed to the margins. It may seem harmless—or even progressive—to have curiosity about marginalized communities and their practices, but for Oluo, commenting on black people's bodies is very triggering and emotionally fraught.

Oluo explains that since slavery, black Americans' bodies have been treated as tools, curiosities, property, and sources of judgement and shame. Black people had to make their bodies resemble white people's bodies to earn respect. Light-skinned privilege and chemical hair-straightening come from trying make black people look less black. Oluo says black people still live in a country where their hair can affect perceptions about their intelligence and their job prospects. Natural hair is often seen as "ugly" or "ghetto." Oluo says that even if you're curious about black hair, you shouldn't try to touch it. Instead, question why black hair products are segregated in stores and why black hair tutorials are excluded from mainstream magazines.

Oluo explains that discussing something that seems innocuous—like hair—is actually very harmful when it reminds people of their historical oppression. It invokes the emotional trauma of a history in which black people didn't have control over their bodies. As before, Oluo argues that the best way to learn about other cultures isn't to place more strain on people who are oppressed, but to demand a change in the system so that marginalized cultures get more representation. This also helps to mitigate the harmful effects of cultural appropriation that Oluo discussed in the previous chapter.

CHAPTER 12: WHAT ARE MICROAGGRESSIONS?

Oluo recalls a conversation about lipstick in seventh grade, in which Oluo told a white girl named Jennifer that she liked her red lipstick. Jennifer, without thinking, quipped back that red lipstick would make Oluo look like a clown. Oluo was embarrassed and agreed, acknowledging her big lips. Throughout her adolescence, Oluo felt that much of her body was too much. Her hair was too poufy, her voice was too loud, her butt was too big. Oluo remembers another conversation about college applications, in which a boy told her that she wouldn't have to try too hard because she's black, so she'd get in. These perpetual reminders that she's different make Oluo feel like she doesn't belong.

In this chapter, Oluo expands on microaggressions: behavior or comments that seem harmless but actually trigger racial pain. She's already given several examples of microaggressions (such as touching black people's hair or cracking racist jokes), and she offers two more here to emphasize how often people of color face microaggressions on a daily basis. This is important because Oluo argues that small digs cause ongoing emotional strain when they come up all the time.

Oluo recalls a college scholarship conference for black and brown students that she attended in her senior year. For those two days, she realized that she didn't have to make her voice quieter or eat less because she felt big. Nobody made fun of her name, and she forgot about the size of her hips. She felt like a fully-fledged human who could breathe.

Oluo's memory illustrates how much emotional weight is lifted when a person feels like they fit in and they aren't constantly called out for being or looking different. She implies that the opposite situation—in which a person is constantly reminded that they're not like everybody else—is problematic, because it places a taxing burden on people to police their own behavior, which takes energy away from other things they might to pursue in life.

Racial microaggressions are "small daily insults and indignities perpetrated against people of color." They feel similar to comments from hypercritical parents that make you feel "less than" good enough. To Oluo, microaggressions are psychologically harmful, but they're also small (meaning people often dismiss them as mistakes or misunderstandings), cumulative (meaning one comment isn't such a big deal, but repeated comments chip away at your self-esteem), frequent (many people use them), and often unintentional. Many people don't realize they're being oppressive when they act that way. Examples include telling somebody that they don't sound black, cabs not stopping for people of color, and people who waiting to take the next elevator rather than share one with a person of color.

Before continuing further, Oluo offers a concrete definition and tangible examples of microaggressions. They show—like most topics Oluo has raised so far—that this issue is intersectional. People can face "small daily insults and indignities" for many reasons, ranging from their race, gender, or class to personal quirks that annoy their mothers. Oluo argues that microaggressions become more damaging the more frequently they come up. She's going to justify this claim over the next few pages.

Oluo says that microaggressions are distracting and exhausting. Moreover, they make racist assumptions a part of everyday life. They reinforce perspectives that prevent people from getting jobs, and they reinforce white supremacy by separating and dehumanizing people. Oluo suggests some strategies for how to cope with microaggressions: she stresses the importance of saying what happened (for example, asking somebody where they're really from assumes their race makes them less American). She also thinks it's important to ask uncomfortable questions (such as pushing people to explain why they said what they did) and let them know that meaning well doesn't make it better. It's important to raise the issue, even if it's uncomfortable.

Oluo thinks that microaggressions trigger feelings of defensiveness that a person has to manage as they go about their day, which distracts them and takes energy away from other things they want to accomplish. In a society that normalizes racism, racial microaggressions come up frequently, which places a tremendous toll on people of color. The more frequently a person has to deal with microaggressions, the more emotional energy they spend. This affects their ability to focus, which affects their ability to succeed in life, thus contributing to their oppression.

Oluo thinks that it's important to call out microaggressions when you witness other people using them but to take the lead from the person who's directly being harmed. Sometimes, people have good reasons for not speaking out (say, it's not a good time for them to confront the emotional burden). Oluo reminds people of color that it's not their job to call out microaggressions, but they have a right to stand up for themselves.

Oluo's warning underscores that people of color don't always feel comfortable calling out microaggressions, because doing so involves even more emotional labor. She implies that microaggressions often go unacknowledged, meaning that they come up even more often than most people might assume.

If you've been called out for a microaggression, Oluo advises taking a pause (it's easy to become overwhelmed and defensive), ask yourself why you chose to make that comment, if you'd make that comment to somebody of your own race, and why you felt threatened or uncomfortable. Don't force people to acknowledge your good intentions (the effect was still bad), remember that it's not just one comment (people of color face these all the time), don't demand an education in why something is offensive, and apologize. Even if you don't get it, acknowledge that you hurt someone. This is hard work, but it's important to remember that the little things count when it comes to racial oppression.

As before, Oluo argues that often, conversations about microaggressions go awry because they force people to confront their own shame in unintentionally saying something racist, which makes them defensive. Oluo reminds the reader that microaggressions are damaging precisely because they place an unfair emotional burden on people of color, which inhibits their chances of success in life. Responses that demand more emotional labor from the insulted person thus exacerbate—rather than mitigate—the problem.

CHAPTER 13: WHY ARE OUR STUDENTS SO ANGRY?

Oluo recalls a conversation with her eight-year-old son. Oluo's son is nervous because he doesn't want to say the pledge of allegiance in school, and his teacher threatened to call him out for it if he doesn't. He decided a few months ago that he's an atheist (so he doesn't want to pledge under God), doesn't like pledging to countries (because it encourages war), and feels like the country doesn't treat people like him well. Oluo also remembers her son being upset that his white stepbrother could play outside with a toy gun after Tamir Rice was shot, but he couldn't.

Oluo continues addressing the emotional impact of living in a racist society, though her focus shifts more explicitly to feelings of anger. Oluo's conversation with her son exposes further intersectional components to consider—it highlights how someone's age or generation can affect the way they respond to racial discrimination. Oluo reacts to Tamir Rice's death with some anger but more so with fear for her son, while her son responds primarily with anger.

Oluo was born in 1980 and grew up with the promise that racism was outdated and that it didn't prevent you from going to Yale. But the promise didn't live up to the realities of the 1990s and 2000s, including the crack epidemic, militarization of the police force, and mass incarceration. Her children's generation feels the full force of how bad things are. They know that no matter how well they do as individuals, there's still the system: it kills and imprisons them, it stops them from getting homes and loans, and it forces them to learn a white supremacist curriculum. They feel like things can't get worse for them, so they might as well fight back.

Oluo expands on how a person's age or generation affects their response to racism. Oluo's childhood was filled with more optimism about the possibilities for black Americans in U.S. society, but her son is growing up in a time where the systemic forces of racism—and its damaging effects—are much more visible. Oluo thinks that this emboldens today's youths to express their anger rather than stifle it out of fear. Oluo also subtly implies that if black youths seem inherently angrier than other children in schools it's not because they're born that way—it's because they have good reasons to be angry.

Oluo thinks today's kids are fighting for more justice than she could have ever imagined possible in her own youth. Their generation find adult debates about gay marriage, immigration, and transgender bathroom rights outdated: they've socially accepted many of the practices that adults resist. They march against Donald Trump without fear, and they're not afraid to ask for things like trigger warnings, non-ableist language, and inclusive events. Oluo says it's inevitable that everything adults say and do in the pursuit of justice will one day be outdated, and it's her job to support her kids take the path that they think is right. Oluo says that as a generation, it's our job to support the next generation, not to control them.

Once again, Oluo reminds the reader that the fight for social justice is intersectional—it entails battling all *oppressive tendencies of a society, whether they discriminate on the basis of race or something else (like gender, nationality, or ability). Oluo is encouraged by the shift from fear to anger among young people in the U.S. today, she suggests that this anger should not be stifled or feared. Rather, it supported, since it's directed at the right target: the system and the people at the top of the hierarchy who control it.*

CHAPTER 14: WHAT IS THE MODEL MINORITY MYTH?

Oluo recalls growing up poor. She spends her childhood with other poor black, brown, and white kids because they don't think it's weird not to have electricity, a phone, or stay-at-home parents. Nor do they think it's strange to have clothes from Goodwill or to go to the food bank. Oluo still feels the shame of being poor, but she can forget a bit among children in similar situations. Many of her friends are Asian Americans with parents who fled war and economic crises in countries like Vietnam and India. As an adult, Oluo is ashamed to admit that she often forgets about Asian Americans in her fight for racial justice because she's culturally influenced by the "model minority myth" of Asian Americans as middle-class high achievers.

Oluo uses the example of Asian Americans to show why intersectionality is so important. Many Asian Americans face historical trauma (like war, displacement, poverty, and colonialism), cultural appropriation, and barriers to opportunity in U.S. society—but most people assume that they don't. This is because of a pervasive (and false) assumption that all *Asian Americans are "model minorities" who have cracked the code of succeeding in U.S. society as non-white people. In confessing that she is also guilty of making this assumption, Oluo exemplifies the guilt and shame that people can face when confronted with their own prejudice.*

Oluo thinks that the model minority myth actively harms Asian Americans. Sociologist William Peterson invented the concept in 1966. Many Asian Americans do, in fact, achieve high graduation rates, high salaries, and low incarceration rates, so it might not seem like a "myth"—but to Oluo, there are still problems. Oluo thinks that the term "Asian Americans" washes out a lot of cultural differences, as it broadly includes war refugees, high-earning expats, third-generation Americans, and people from vastly different parts of the globe, including Pacific Islanders who have specific needs when it comes to racial justice in the U.S.

Oluo illustrates how ignoring intersectionality can have a damaging impact on people's lives. The term "Asian American" is so broad that it treats people in very different situations as if they're all in the same boat. The model minority myth assumes that those who are the best-off a category (e.g., wealthy expat bankers) represent the situations of everyone in the category, which is both false and harmful. People might assume that Asian Americans aren't oppressed because the best of them do alright, but Oluo is going to dismantle this assumption step by step.

The term "model minority" also ignores massive economic disparities. Overall, Asian Americans have a similar poverty level to white people, yet 6.7 percent of Filipino Americans are poor, compared to 18 percent of Indian Americans and 28 of Bangladeshi and Hmong Americans (a higher poverty rate than black and Hispanic people). Similarly, while Asian Americans overall have a 53 percent college graduation rate, the rate drops as low as 6 percent for second-generation Chinese Americans. Many marginalized people fall out of the picture when they're lumped into a broader general category. Oluo believes that Asian Americans also face professional limits: while Asian Americans comprise up to 60 percent of the tech industry workforce, they're half as likely to reach management positions than their white colleagues.

First, Oluo debunks the myth that Asian Americans are generally wealthy and successful. She uses statistics to show there are vast wealth disparities within the category. She also uses statistics to show that many Asian Americans face barriers to opportunity in education and the workforce, thus limiting their potential in U.S. society. Oluo is illustrating a fundamental problem with social categorizations that aren't intersectional. It's similar to assuming that the needs of rich white women are the same as the needs of black, trans, poor, and queer women because they're all women.

Many people also overlook Asian Americans when addressing hate crimes. For instance, Islamophobic people often target Sikhs without knowing that they practice a completely different religion. Oluo also thinks that people use stereotypes of Asian American women as subservient to mask domestic abuse (Asian American women are twice as likely as white people to experience domestic abuse). Asian Americans also lack political representation (there's only one Asian American in the U.S. Senate), and they face persistent microaggressions. Many people also use the model minority myth to accuse other minorities of laziness. Oluo concludes that the fight for racial justice demands giving Asian Americans a seat at the table.

Oluo uses the examples of hate crimes, domestic abuse, microaggressions, and lack of political representation to further debunk the false idea that Asian Americans are "model minorities" who don't face systemic oppression in U.S. society. Here, Oluo illustrates how ignoring intersectional differences has a tangible human cost: it can literally kill people. Overall, Oluo thinks that the U.S. is a society set up to privilege rich white men at the expense of others—meaning that anybody who falls outside that category is at risk.

CHAPTER 15: BUT WHAT IF I HATE AL SHARPTON?

As a child, Oluo is taught that Martin Luther King was a nonviolent person who didn't see color while Malcolm X was full of hatred for white people. Teachers and popular culture depict Martin Luther King's death as a tragedy but Malcolm X's death as what happens to angry black people, even though both were murdered for their common goal of fighting racial injustice. People often call out Oluo's anger against white supremacy—like that of Malcolm X, Al Sharpton, and Jesse Jackson—as destructive to race relations in the U.S. Yet in his lifetime, people also considered Martin Luther King dangerous and harassed, assaulted, and murdered him. Oluo feels that people's anger is always seen as too much if it threatens white supremacy.

Oluo revisits the topic anger triggered racism. Oluo argues here that systemic channels in U.S society (like education and the media) teach Americans to believe that when people of color feel angry, they're expressing their hatred of white people or being counterproductive. However, Oluo thinks that the anger of oppressed people is rarely (if ever) unjustified. Oluo thinks that the system tries to reframe justified anger as unjustified hatred precisely because anger motivates people to act and fight the system, and that's a genuine threat to white supremacy.

For hundreds of years, black people have been told that they will achieve equality by being nice, which to Oluo, sounds like saying black people need to earn their humanity. But, she reasons, if you believe in racial equality, you don't exclude people just because you don't like their tone. To Oluo, tone-policing happens when a privileged person shifts the focus of the conversation away from the topic of oppression and focuses instead on the *way* it is being communicated. It's effectively a tool to prioritize the comfort of the privileged person in the situation. But oppressed people grapple with intense emotional trauma, and they aren't always able to discuss their pain in a neutral or unemotional way.

Oluo shifts to addressing anger in personal—rather than systemic—contexts. Oluo implies that asking a person of color to stifle their anger—or change their "tone"—is discriminatory. She thinks it puts an unfair emotional burden on the oppressed person who's already at a disadvantage. To Oluo, the privileged person effectively decides that their own comfort is more important than the other's person's need to express their legitimate anger.

Oluo argues that policing someone's tone is a way of asserting dominance. A privileged person actually *increases* the disadvantage of an oppressed person by demanding that they communicate in specific ways. The privileged person shifts the focus from fighting oppression to earning their approval. Oluo recommends that if you don't like the way somebody is fighting racial oppression, remember that it's not about you or your approval, it's about racial justice—try to keep your focus on the common goal.

Oluo also thinks that making demands about a person's tone is counterproductive, as it shifts the focus of a conversation away from the core issue—racism—and toward policing the angry person's behavior. She reminds the reader that the racism a person of color experiences is the target—not the justifiable anger they express.

Oluo offers some strategies for white people who want to avoid tone-policing. She say that your privilege keeps you from understanding the full pain of systemic racism, but it's still real. Don't distract, deflect, or forget your goal of ending systemic oppression. Instead, drop your prerequisites—you shouldn't demand that oppression be fought in a way that's appealing to you. Walk away if you have to, but try to build a tolerance for discomfort and remember that it's not about your feelings. Finally, remember that you're not doing anyone a favor, you're doing what's right.

Oluo reminds the reader that privileged people often feel uncomfortable in conversations about race. But, as before, the essential point she pushes is that trying to reduce one's own discomfort is unfair. Everybody *feels pain when talking about racism. People who want to fight systemic racism thus need to embrace—rather than resist—uncomfortable feelings rather than try to police an oppressed person further to make the conversation easier for themselves.*

Oluo also offers advice for people of color who are being shamed for their tone. She says that these are *natural* reactions to oppression. Oluo continues, saying that people of color don't have to earn equality and justice, they already deserve it. She tells her readers of color that they matter, that they deserve to speak their truth, and that they have the right to be heard. Oluo reminds all her readers that the fight against racial oppression entails discomfort, but it's worth it. If you live in a white supremacist society, Oluo concludes, "you are either fighting the system, or you are complicit." There's no neutral ground, and you can't just opt out.

Oluo now addresses people of color by restating her central point: that anger is a legitimate, justified, and "natural" response to an extremely "unnatural" situation: oppression. Oluo ultimately argues that that experiencing difficult feelings isn't easy, but avoiding them is actively racist: people who shy away from the topic of racism to avoid feeling uncomfortable allow a racist system to stay in place and ruin innocent people's lives, which makes them "complicit" (or partially responsible for the pain the system causes because they let it continue to exist).

CHAPTER 16: I JUST GOT CALLED RACIST, WHAT DO I DO NOW?

In his book *Decision Points*, George W. Bush talks about how hurt he is that Kanye West accused him of racism. Oluo similarly recalls an ugly Twitter fight in which a Canadian person harasses her for insinuating that there's racism everywhere, even in Canada. She finds that often, when a white person's racial insensitivity is pointed out to them, and they "go nuclear." Many people of color fear retaliation most of all in racial confrontations, especially when they communicate that something is offensive. Oluo explains that calling out racism is a huge emotional burden for people of color, and it involves personal risks like harming friendships.

Oluo continues addressing difficult feelings people face when confronted with their own racism. Her examples here (Bush and the angry Canadian) illustrate that it's common for privileged people to resist facing their own shame and lash out in defense—or "go nuclear" and become angry—instead. Such reactions, Oluo stresses, are counterproductive and damaging: they place even more strain on people who are already suffering.

Oluo writes this chapter for white people who are afraid of being called racist. She says that people are complicated, and it's impossible for anyone to be anti-racist all the time, especially in a society that's saturated with white supremacy. It doesn't mean that you're hateful or evil. It means that you're influenced by your society—just like everyone else—and you have absorbed damaging views about race, which will come out in harmful ways, whether you like it or not. Embedded racism informs many everyday decisions—like where to shop and socialize—and it does tremendous harm to people of color. If you've been called racist, Oluo advises, don't dismiss it outright, especially if you're committed to racial justice.

Oluo reminds her reader—as before—that her aim isn't to shame or berate individuals for being unintentionally racist. She stresses that the real culprit—the source that's responsible for all these difficult emotions—is a system that subtly conditions people to become racist, even when they don't want to be. It's therefore imperative for people to acknowledge their own racism so that they can do their part to change the way the system has taught them to act.

When somebody makes you confront your own racism in conversation, listen. Don't jump to conclusions or assume they're calling you a monster. Hear them out and don't focus on what you intended to do. Even if you didn't mean to be harmful, you were, and you can't change that now. Oluo also advises trying to understand the broader impact of your actions. Imagine you've been talking over somebody in meetings. That's easy to dismiss as a misunderstanding, but if they're raising the issue with you, it might be because you're making them feel more uncomfortable in a workplace where they are already a minority. They might be worried about their prospects for promotion, or how other people will follow suit and do it more.

When a person is called racist, Oluo says, saying they meant well, didn't mean it, or were misunderstood is the exactly the same thing as denial: they're focusing on what they meant rather than the hurt they actually caused. It can be much more productive, Oluo argues, to simply acknowledge the hurt that was caused, even if it was unintended. This effectively entails trusting the oppressed person (who says that something is hurtful) rather than the system (which encourages hurtful behavior).


Oluo says to remember that some aspects of life as a person of color will simply be opaque to a white person because they've never lived through it. Even if you don't understand why somebody's offended, you should acknowledge their feelings. Remember that demanding a conversation or debate about the topic asks for extra emotional work from somebody who is already hurting. If the person needs to distance themselves from you, they have a right to do so. Remember that you're not the only one hurt by the confrontation. If you can see where you went wrong, apologize and mean it. If you can't, do not dismiss the person's hurt. Oluo concludes that this process isn't easy, but it's important.

Oluo explains why it's important to trust the oppressed person who's been hurt by a racist encounter: the first-hand lived experience of oppression may never be fully accessible to a person in a position of privilege, but that doesn't mean their hurt is any less real. As before, Oluo concludes that it's always better to trust and acknowledge an oppressed person rather than deny, demand, or retaliate. Such responses will only cause them to be further marginalized, and that should never be the goal of an anti-racist person.

CHAPTER 17: TALKING IS GREAT, BUT WHAT ELSE CAN I DO?

Oluo recalls a dinner with colleagues in a theater group, during which a white theater director gets tipsy and keeps using the word "nigger." The performers respond by asking the theater director to undergo "racial justice and awareness training." Instead of accepting their request, the director begs Oluo to sit down and explain where he went wrong. Oluo's frustrated. She doesn't want to sit down and chat with the director—she wants him to take action and make a change himself. Oluo explains that while some people are scared to talk about race, others use talking as an excuse to avoid taking action. She believes that many people think having a deep and meaningful conversation is the end, not the beginning of the work that needs to be done.

So far, Oluo has focused on encouraging people to have—rather than avoid—difficult conversations about racism. Now, she turns to a slightly different problem. Lots of people (such as the theater director who uses the n-word, a racist slur, in this anecdote) prefer to talk because it's easier than taking action. Oluo thinks this is problematic for two reasons: first, the director places an extra burden on Oluo by demanding her time and labor rather than doing something about the situation himself. Second, people who put too much emphasis on talking can become complacent about the real goal, which is to take action and bring about change.

Oluo remembers another time when she's asked to give a speech at a feminist protest because they don't have any women of color involved. She declines the invitation because it's uncompensated, and she finds that exploitative. Afterward, a white woman contacts Oluo and wants Oluo to take extra time and explain the issue to her (without offering to compensate Oluo for her time). Oluo says that she's constantly approached by people who seek her time because they want to become more educated. Oluo thinks that "they want to feel better but they don't want to *do* better."

Oluo explains that there is an emotional cost—in time and labor—to people of color when they talk about racism, which is problematic. Here, she goes even further to argue that demanding people of color's time to educate more privileged people isn't only burdensome, it's active exploitation—such people are effectively demanding free labor from disenfranchised people so that they can "feel better" themselves.

Oluo acknowledges that people can't understand racial oppression without talking about it, but she also thinks understanding isn't the ultimate goal—action is. Many people talk about global warming, but talk alone won't stop the planet from getting warmer. She implores her readers to talk, but also to act, and she offers some suggestions.

Oluo uses the example of global warming to show that talk alone won't make a change. She explains that the point of talking isn't to increase people's understanding, it's to change a system that's oppressive.

Oluo suggests voting in local elections for candidates who prioritize racial justice, police reform, increasing diversity in political representation, and increasing minimum wage. She also suggests asking schools for more diverse curricula, bearing witness to police brutality, speaking up about racial issues in union meetings, supporting businesses and cultural programs owned or run by people of color, giving money to organizations that fight for social justice (such as the ACLU and Planned Parenthood), and boycotting businesses that exploit people of color.

Oluo has argued that the reason why systemic oppression exists in the first place is because it helps the people at the top gain more money and power at the expense of others. Here, she suggests that changing that flow of money (by spending in ways that support disenfranchised people) can help to even the score. Similarly, boycotting expenditure on places that engage in cultural appropriation, or pushing for more diverse representation in arts, media, and schools, limits the power of white supremacy in those avenues. Oluo also advises supporting organizations that help disenfranchised women and fighting for legislation that reduces poverty to remind the reader that social justice is an intersectional issue—it demands challenging other sources of oppression like sexism and classism as well.

Oluo knows that dismantling systemic racism seems like a "huge" and "insurmountable" task, but she argues that it isn't. She says that everybody in society is part of the system—every time they vote, spend their money, and call out racist behavior—they are pulling levers of the system. Oluo recalls a 2016 situation in which a cop killed a black man but wasn't prosecuted. Many people commented on social media about their outrage. Oluo, instead, urged people not to reelect the district attorney who refused to prosecute the cop.

Oluo reminds her readers that although systemic racism is pervasive, the system only has power when people act in ways that support it. For example, every time somebody votes for a political official who challenges the status-quo, they take a little bit of power away from the system, and they weaken its ability to oppress people of color.

Recalling another local election, Oluo says that the 2015 defeat of Cook County State Attorney Anita Alvarez (who notoriously refused to charge several officers who killed people of color) sends a message to prosecutors everywhere that they can't afford to cover up police corruption. Oluo admits that some of these efforts end in defeat, and the wins are small—but they add up, especially when people keep trying. Oluo concludes that the road is long, but people are taking steps, bit by bit, to weaken the oppressive system. She urges people to talk and to act, and she closes with a word of encouragement, saying that together, we can make a change.

Oluo uses Anita Alvarez's defeat to show that every small change—such as removing one corrupt person from office—makes people in power realize that they can't stay *in power if people stop voting for them. Effectively, Oluo concludes that even though U.S. society's institutions (like politics, media, and education) control Americans, Americans also control these institutions—through their votes and their spending. Thus, voting and spending in ways that support people of color is the most effective way to combat systemic racism.*

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