

**So you**

**want**

**to talk**

**about**

**race**

**Ijeoma Oluo**

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What if I talk about race wrong?

NOT ALL OF US ARE LUCKY ENOUGH TO HAVE CONVERSATIONS on race with white people willing to take the emotional risk of investigating the role they play in upholding racism. Not all of us are lucky enough to leave an office discussion on race with no worse than a snide comment and a slightly bruised ego. These conversations, when done wrong, can do real damage. Friendships can be lost, holidays ruined, jobs placed in jeopardy. For this reason, many people avoid the topic of race altogether and recoil when it's brought into conversation.

But you are reading this book because you realize that we *have* to talk about race. Race is everywhere and racial tension and animosity and pain is in almost everything we see and touch. Ignoring it does not make it go away. There is no shoving the four hundred years' racial oppression and violence toothpaste back in the toothpaste tube.

In fact, it's our desire to ignore race that increases the necessity of its discussion. Because our desire to not talk about race also causes us to ignore race in areas where lack of racial consideration can have real detrimental effects on the lives

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of others—say, in school boards, community programs, and local government. And while it may seem that people of color always need to “put race in everything,” it’s the neglect of the specific needs of people of color, which exist whether you acknowledge them or not, that necessitate it in the first place.

As a black woman, I’d love to not have to talk about race ever again. I do not enjoy it. It is not fun. I dream of writing mystery novels one day. But I have to talk about race, because it is made an issue in the ways in which race is addressed or, more accurately, not addressed. When my employer enforces hairstyles in their dress code that ignore the very specific hairstyle needs of black women (see military restrictions against small braids, for example), then my employer is making race an issue in their attempts to ignore it. When my son’s school only has parent-teacher conferences during school hours, they are making race an issue by ignoring the fact that black and Latinx parents are more likely to work the type of hourly jobs that would cause them to lose much-needed pay, or even risk losing their employment altogether, in order to stay involved in their child’s education. When I take my kids to movies and none of the characters they see look like them, it’s the studio that is making it about race when they decide to make up entire universes in which no brown or black people exist. I just want to go to work, educate my kids, and enjoy a movie.

The truth is, we live in a society where the color of your skin still says a lot about your prognosis for success in life. This is the reality right now, and ignoring race will not change that. We have a real problem of racial inequity and injustice in our society, and we cannot wish it away. We have to tackle this

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problem with real action, and we will not know what needs to be done if we are not willing to talk about it.

So let's all get a little uncomfortable. If my mom and I can do it, so can you.

**YOU'RE GOING TO SCREW THIS UP.**

You're going to screw this up royally. More than once.

I'm sorry, I wish I could say that reading this book would guarantee that you'd never leave a conversation about race feeling like you've gotten it all wrong and made everything worse. But I can't. It's going to happen.

It's going to happen, and you should have these conversations anyway.

So now that I've thoroughly bummed you out, let's work on what we can do to lessen the number of times you screw this conversation up, minimize the amount of damage you do, and maximize the benefit to all involved. Here are some basic tips that will increase your chance of conversation success, or at least decrease your chance of conversation disaster:

- 1) **State your intentions.** Do you know why you are having this particular conversation? Do you know why this matters to you? Is there something in particular you are trying to communicate or understand? Figure it out before moving forward and then state what your intentions are, so that the people you are talking with can determine whether this is a conversation they are willing to join. Very often, these

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attempts at conversation fail because two people are entering with two very incompatible agendas and proceed to have two very different conversations, and that doesn't become clear until it blows up in anger and frustration.

- 2) **Remember what your top priority in the conversation is, and don't let your emotions override that.** If your top priority is understanding racism better, or addressing an incident involving race, or righting a wrong caused by racism, don't let the top priority suddenly become avenging your wounded pride if the conversation has you feeling defensive.
- 3) **Do your research.** If you are going to be talking about an issue you are not familiar with, a quick Google search will save everyone involved a lot of time and frustration. If terms or subjects come up that you are not familiar with, you can ask for some clarification if you are in person, but know that if you are a white person talking to a person of color—it is never their job to become your personal Google. If you are online and these topics or terms come up, you can Google faster than it takes to hold up the entire conversation begging people to explain things to you. Even if you are a person of color, making sure you understand more about the topic you are trying to address, beyond your immediate experience with it, will give you more confidence in your conversation and will help you get your point across.
- 4) **Don't make your anti-racism argument oppressive against other groups.** When stressed, when angry,

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when tired, or when threatened, our worst selves can come out. It is fine to be angry, there is a lot about racism to be angry about. And it is fine to express that anger. But it is never okay to battle racism with sexism, transphobia, ableism, or other oppressive language and actions. Don't stoop to that level, and don't allow others to. We must be willing to fight oppression in all of its forms.

- 5) **When you start to feel defensive, stop and ask yourself why.** If you are talking about race and you suddenly feel the need to defend yourself vigorously, stop and ask yourself, "What is being threatened here? What am I thinking that this conversation says about me?" and "Has my top priority shifted to preserving my ego?" If you are too heated to ask yourself these questions, at least try to take a few minutes away to catch your breath and lower your heart rate so that you can. This is something that happens to people of all races, and not only can it stop us from hearing things that need to be said, it can stop us from saying what we really mean to say.
- 6) **Do not tone police.** Do not require that people make their discussions on the racial oppression they face comfortable for you. See chapter 15 for more details.
- 7) **If you are white, watch how many times you say "I" and "me."** Remember, systemic racism is about more than individuals, and it is not about your personal feelings. If you find yourself frequently referring to your feelings and your viewpoint, chances are, you are making this all about you.

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- 8) **Ask yourself: Am I trying to be right, or am I trying to do better?** Conversations on racism should never be about winning. This battle is too important to be so simplified. You are in this to share, and to learn. You are in this to do better and be better. You are not trying to score points, and victory will rarely look like your opponent conceding defeat and vowing to never argue with you again. Because your opponent isn't a person, it's the system of racism that often shows up in the words and actions of other people.
- 9) **Do not force people of color into discussions of race.** People of color live with racism each and every day with no say over when and how it impacts their lives. It is painful and exhausting. When people of color have the rare luxury to choose to not engage in additional dialogue about race, do not deny them that. Even if this discussion is really important to you, you never have a right to demand it. There will be other opportunities.

These tips should help you have more healthy and productive conversations on race and racism. Look through the list and try to recognize where you have had trouble in the past and make a concerted effort to practice the tips that may address where things have gone wrong.

But even with all of your practice, and with the best of your intentions, there will be times where this all goes to shit. There will be times where you truly lose the plot and you aren't sure what has happened, but you do know that you have really messed it up.

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It is important to learn how to fail, to learn how to be wrong in a way that minimizes pain to you and others and maximizes what you can learn from the experience. Here are some tips for when your conversation on race has gone very wrong:

- 1) **Stop trying to jump back in when a conversation is beyond saving.** When things have gone really wrong and everyone is upset, and every additional word feels like a knife in the chest, stop trying to force a resolution. I know that it is very hard to leave an emotional conversation unfinished. It is hard to leave feeling unheard or misunderstood. A resolution can still happen, provided you haven't already burned all the conversational bridges around you, but not right now. It's obvious, by how things have been going, that you are not in a state to find a whole new, productive path for this conversation. Step away, and take some time to calm down. Then think about where things went wrong, and what, if anything, can be done to revisit that conversation later in a productive and healthy way.
- 2) **Apologize.** If you can see where you screwed up, where you made assumptions, where you got overly defensive, where you hurt someone—own up and say sorry. And mean it.
- 3) **Don't write your synopsis of this conversation as “the time you got yelled at.”** Remember why you had been in this conversation. Remember what the core issue was. Do not revise it in your mind so that

instead of “an important conversation on race that didn’t go well,” it becomes “that tragic time you got yelled at for trying and felt bad.”

- 4) **Don’t insist that people give you credit for your intentions.** If you screwed up and you hurt people, your good intentions won’t lessen that hurt. Don’t insist that people act less hurt or offended or angry because your intentions were good.
- 5) **Don’t beat yourself up.** Yes, you should feel bad when you say or do something that hurts someone else. And it’s natural to feel frustrated when you aren’t communicating as effectively as you need to. But you also need to keep in mind that this happens, a lot. If this was something that we were good at talking about, well, I certainly wouldn’t have felt the need to write this book. You shouldn’t expect those hurt by your actions to just brush what happened aside, but that doesn’t mean that you should consider yourself a monster. Instead of drowning in guilt, or ignoring your wrongdoing in order to escape guilt altogether, take some time to really think about what was said and what you could have done better. There is a good chance that the person you were talking to was trying very hard to let you know where you were going wrong. Even if you don’t get the chance to make things right with the person you were talking to, you can use what you have learned to make sure you don’t screw up in that same way again with other people. You can and will do better if you learn from this experience.

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- 6) **Remember that it is worth the risk and commit to trying again.** Okay, this conversation didn't go well. In fact, it went horribly. And now you know that you have more to learn and more you have to do to get better at this. But you have to just keep trying, because the alternative is your complacency in the continued oppression of people of color.

No matter what, when you are having a conversation about racial oppression, you will not be the only one who is nervous and you will not be the only one taking a risk. These conversations will always be hard, because they will always be about the hurt and pain of real people. We are talking about our identities and our histories and the ways in which these are used and exploited to elevate and oppress. These conversations will always be emotional and loaded to various degrees—and if they are not, then you are likely not having the right conversation.

Racial oppression should always be an emotional topic to discuss. It should always be anger-inducing. As long as racism exists to ruin the lives of countless people of color, it should be something that upsets us. But it upsets us because it exists, not because we talk about it. And if you are white, and you don't want to feel any of that pain by having these conversations, then you are asking people of color to continue to bear the entire burden of racism alone.

Have these conversations, not just with people of other races—and I know that's why the majority of you are reading this book. You should be having these conversations with people of your own race as well. White people—talk about

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race with other white people. Stop pretending that you are exempt from the day-to-day realities of race. Take some of the burden of racism off of people of color. Bring it into your life so that you can dismantle racism in the white spaces of your life that people of color can't even reach. People of color, talk to your people about race. Feel the therapeutic effects of honest and safe conversation about race. Examine and confront your internalized racism. Make space to heal and rejuvenate.

Take care in your conversations, remember that you are dealing with the real hurt of human beings. But be brave in that care, be honest in that care. These conversations will never become easy, but they will become easier. They will never be painless, but they can lessen future pain. They will never be risk-free, but they will always be worth it.