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THE SUN INTERVIEW

White Lies

Ijeoma Oluo On Privilege, Power, And Race

BY MARK LEVITON | DECEMBER 2018



“Race has always been a prominent part of my life,” Ijeoma Oluo writes in her new book *So You Want to Talk about Race*. “I have never been able to escape the fact that I am a black woman in a white-supremacist country.”

Oluo was born in 1980 in Denton, Texas. Her father, a Nigerian college professor and politician, returned to his native country when she was three and never came back to the U.S. She and her brother, Ahamefule (often called Aham), had no contact with him growing up. Their mother, a white woman from the Midwest, raised them by herself in Seattle.

*After earning a degree in political science from Western Washington University, Oluo worked in technology and digital marketing and started a blog about food. Then, in 2012, black teenager Trayvon Martin was killed by George Zimmerman in an infamous “stand your ground” case in Florida. Trayvon was the same age as Oluo’s older son, Malcolm, and the tragedy inspired her to transform her blog into a vehicle for social activism. Her writing began to appear in *The Stranger*, *Jezebel*, and *The Guardian*, and her pieces often went viral. But the Internet has not always been welcoming to her. Once, while on vacation with her children, she went to a Cracker Barrel and joked on Twitter about “looking at the sea of white folk in cowboy hats & wondering ‘will they let my black ass walk out of here?’ ” Afterward she received hundreds of threats and racist messages.*

*Oluo is an editor-at-large for the online magazine *The Establishment*. In her blog on *Medium.com* she often covers serious subject matter — white supremacy, representations of race in the media, the U.S. crisis of mass incarceration and police violence — but her approach is personal and down-to-earth; she’s rarely without a rueful joke or a post about what her two sons said at breakfast. In 2015 she self-published *The Badass Feminist Coloring Book*, a project that developed from her habit of sketching famous feminists*

to relieve stress. She hit the New York Times best-seller list earlier this year with *So You Want to Talk about Race*. Though she realizes that most of her readers will be white, she says she wrote the book to help people of color make themselves heard. Her website is ijeomaoluo.com.

I met with Oluo at her favorite independent Seattle coffeehouse, which also serves as an informal community center and work space. We sat at a small table and struggled to talk over the sound of the coffee grinder and the not-so-quiet background music before moving to a bench across the street. It was a beautiful spring day, and despite her sometimes dire message, Oluo's energy and humor never flagged.

Leviton: You believe that if you're white in America, you're racist, and if you're a male in America, you're sexist. Are you saying I can't transcend my received culture no matter what kind of a person I am?

Oluo: I don't think you can escape it. But that doesn't mean you can't fight racism or patriarchy. You can fight the racism in society even while you fight the racism inside you. It's like fighting a cancer inside you: you're not "pro-cancer" because you have it.

There's no way to avoid absorbing our American culture, which was designed to benefit white males. We absorb American racism in ways we're not fully aware of. You can't undo a lifetime of experience in a few years of work. While you are struggling against racism, the culture keeps reinforcing it, telling you who is "normal" and who isn't, who deserves to be seen and who is made invisible. Racism is *alive*.

I want to move people away from thinking of racism as a feeling of hatred, because it's rare to find someone who blatantly hates people of color. But the impact of racial bias isn't lessened because it's not blatant. If someone denies me a job because I'm "not the right fit," without realizing that their idea of the right fit is almost always a white person, it doesn't hurt me any less than if I'm told, "I won't hire you because you're black." Racism is not necessarily an intention or a feeling. It is a system that produces predictable results.

In this country there are large racial divides in everything from infant mortality, to how much you earn, to your chances of being arrested or incarcerated. This is not because a bunch of white people wake up every day and decide to oppress people of color; it's not just the actions of individuals with hate in their hearts. We cannot understand American racism unless we recognize it as a system that was built to run — and that still runs — on principles of oppression and domination. Four hundred years of history doesn't go back into the toothpaste tube.

Leviton: You have said that white people accused of racism will often insist that they intend no harm — so much so that they end up denying the pain they have caused, even as they try to apologize.

Oluo: "I'm sorry you feel hurt" is not the same as "I'm sorry I hurt you." Are you apologizing for how that person *took* your action or for your action? I think you need to set aside the "I didn't mean to" defense. It doesn't really lessen the hurt to know that the person who used offensive language doesn't actually *hate* me. We should take responsibility for our actions. If you bump into someone on the street, you say, "I'm sorry." You don't put qualifiers on it in an effort to make yourself feel better.

When it comes to race, offenders often want to be exonerated. They might see it as someone "choosing" to be upset by what they said or did. But black people can't just will away the hurt. It doesn't happen to us once a year. We encounter racism every day. And this is difficult for white people to understand. It's just not their day-to-day experience.

White people will sometimes tell me how hurt they were when someone called them a "cracker." It stings, but they shrug it off. Why? Because it happens about once every five years. If someone called me a racial slur once every five years, I might be able to shrug it off, too. More important, "cracker" does not invoke the memory of whites being barred from lunch counters. It's not tied to family stories about people screaming, "Cracker!" as they lynched a white man because he winked at a black woman. The

word hasn't been used as a tool of racial oppression, because there's no system of power oppressing white people. In fact, there's a system of power protecting the person who gets called "cracker."

The first time I was called a "nigger," I was eleven years old. It was like getting hit by a bucket of cold water. My brother and I were staying with friends in a small mountain town. When we walked with our friends to their school-bus stop, the other kids on the bus started pointing at us and chanting that word. For the rest of our stay we couldn't bring up what had happened. When our mom picked us up, we didn't tell her.

If I'm walking down the street now, and some white person is having hateful thoughts about me, I don't care what's in their mind. But I also know that, should they decide to act on those thoughts and hurt me, the full power of our society would back them up. If I'm called a slur and I talk back, the white person could call the cops, and the cops will probably see the situation in a certain way, and I could end up dead. I'm not likely to think of calling the cops to settle a dispute on the street. I can't make a film where all the bad guys are white and the heroes are people of color and expect it to get major Hollywood funding. I'm not likely to be in a position to deny a job to a white person because they don't "fit."

Leviton: And yet there are plenty of whites who claim "reverse discrimination" in the job market, college admissions, and so forth due to affirmative-action laws [which require employers or admissions offices to make an effort to seek out candidates who belong to groups that have suffered discrimination in the past]. Do they have a point?

Oluo: Affirmative action is one of many ways to work around the immense bias white America has against people of color, especially in employment, government contracting, and education. It's meant to level the playing field until enough minorities get into higher positions where they might contribute to changing the culture. When it was first brought in by President Kennedy in the sixties and expanded by President Johnson, it was very successful in normalizing the presence of minorities in the workplace, increasing their standard of living, and granting them access to college. Shortly after it was introduced, affirmative action was expanded to include women. In fact, the people who benefited the most were white women, but it worked great for black people, too.

But many white men felt they were being discriminated against, and there was some merit to their complaint: they used to have 90 percent of all government contracts, and now they had 80 percent. Of course, we have to ask whether they deserved 90 percent for hundreds of years.

Affirmative action was severely rolled back starting with the Reagan administration, and college enrollment rates, government hiring, and so on for people of color plummeted. According to *The Sacramento Bee*, when California ended affirmative action in its colleges in 1996, black enrollment fell roughly by half in the first year. In states with affirmative-action bans, minority students are 23 percent less likely than white students to be admitted to college, but they are only 1 percent less likely in states that still have affirmative action.

Some would blame this disparity on failings within the black community. No. We have data showing that black and brown kids, from preschool forward, are discriminated against in school, are disciplined more harshly, and are suspended and expelled more often than white children for the same offenses.

A recent Northwestern/Harvard study showed that if a stereotypically "black-sounding" or "Latinx-sounding" name is on a job application, the chance of a callback interview goes way down. With a "white-sounding" name, the identical application is 24 to 36 percent more likely to result in an invitation for an in-person interview. Hiring discrimination hasn't budged since 1989, which is as far back as the study went. Human-resource departments continue to show a bias they're probably not even aware of.

Leviton: At the age of twenty-five you were up for a promotion at work, but you didn't get it. What happened?

Oluo: I had been working at a telecom company, and I always had top numbers. I'd been told I was getting a small promotion that included a transfer to a new department. I hadn't talked to anyone about my potential move, but I was excited.

The next day I was called into my manager's office. He said I didn't get the promotion, but "don't worry, your time will come." I was stunned. Lots of people in the office had heard that I had the position. I left his office, went into the bathroom, and cried a bit. I knew *something* had happened that wasn't being talked about, but I didn't want to make an issue out of it, because I needed the job; I was a young mother with two kids. So I just focused on my work and tried to get over it.

A few months later another position on that same team opened up, and I got the job. When I moved over to this team, they said they'd expected me months ago and asked what had happened. I told them I wondered, too. Then I found out that the first time I'd been promoted, a white woman who'd been passed over had threatened to sue the company for "reverse discrimination." Management had caved in to her threat. It was awkward, because she was now on my team, and I had to act like I didn't know what she'd done. I developed ways to save the company hundreds of thousands of dollars and got another promotion, but the stigma stuck: I had supposedly advanced solely because I was black, even though I had the best numbers and worked late every night. When I left the company, I had an exit interview with Human Resources. The first question I was asked was "Do you think you were promoted because you're black?" That's, like, the most un-HR thing I could be asked! That was my farewell kick in the stomach. [*Laughs.*]

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Leviton: You've identified numerous "microaggressions" that people of color experience nearly every day — instances of subtle, sometimes unconscious racism. What are some examples, and how do you respond to them?

Oluo: Microaggressions hit you out of the blue and remind you that you can't get too comfortable; that where you are isn't really the place for you. They are more than just annoyances. They are daily insults and indignities. Some are verbal: "Are you an affirmative-action hire?" "That's so ghetto." "You listen to opera? I thought you were black." "Do your kids both have the same dad?" "Your name is too difficult for me to pronounce. Do you have a nickname?" Others are nonverbal: The woman who clutches her purse as the black teenage boy walks by. Cabs that won't stop for you. College professors who make it a point to check your sources but not those of white students. The store clerk who follows you around the store in case she can "help you find anything." And you don't know how to react, because the person committing the microaggression is usually staring at you like they haven't done anything wrong. You're hurt, but you're also thinking: Do I bring this up or let it go? Do I risk an awkward conversation or getting yelled at? Maybe this is a coworker, not someone I can just ignore or avoid in the future. When you can't let your guard down, it increases your day-to-day stress. Plenty of psychological studies show how racism makes people of color less healthy. Dr. Monnica Williams of the University of Connecticut believes racism should be acknowledged as a potential cause of PTSD.

Most annoying for me are questions about my hair, or people who want to touch my hair. When I first went natural, some people felt the need to ask, "Are you entering your militant-black-woman phase?" When I changed jobs at one point, the first thing my new white boss asked was whether my hair was real. I titled a chapter in my book "Why Can't I Touch Your Hair?" because this is such an issue for black women.

Early on I realized I couldn't get excited around certain white people because they saw it as me "getting angry." At work they would bring me into meetings if they needed some energy but not invite me if they thought I'd be "too much."

Once, I was having drinks after hours with some coworkers, and one guy started telling the group how he'd never slept with a black woman. He looked at me and said, "But if I did, I'd go for darker than you. I'd go right for the heart of Africa." I'm just sitting there, not wanting to be on this great safari in his mind. People were laughing, and I was thinking: What do I do here? Do I risk ruining happy hour? Or do I just make sure I'm never alone with this guy?

Leviton: You get called horrible names on social media and threatened by Twitter trolls. You block the worst offenders, but from what I've seen, you're remarkably calm about these attacks and even make fun of them for being so boringly familiar.

Oluo: Some of the harshest responses I've gotten have been after I calmly pointed out someone's racism. I was on a radio station here in Seattle — a typical talk show where they invite a conservative, a moderate, and a liberal — and we were talking about the need to hold police accountable. In Washington State, in order to even press charges against an officer, you have to be able to prove *malice*. A grand jury can't indict a cop unless he or she *meant* to kill someone. It's one of the highest legal thresholds you can have: to prove someone's mental state.

I said I supported making some changes that would increase police accountability, and the conservative on the show interrupted to say that what we really needed to talk about was black-on-black crime. Now, "black-on-black crime" is a conservative talking point. It may have been used politely in the past, but it's become coded language that supports a racist view of black people. I pointed out that inner-city crime wasn't a big problem in Seattle, which is one of the safest major cities in the country. The host wanted to move on, but I said I thought the conversation should continue. It wasn't right to end on a "dog whistle" like that. The conservative just lost it. He started pounding the desk and yelling at me: How dare I say that. He wouldn't *allow* me to say that. We were in a small studio, and he was standing over me. (I found out later that a former mayor of Seattle was on Twitter writing, "What's going on? I'm listening to an angry white guy scream at a black woman on the radio.") The host didn't know what to do. I hadn't even called the guy a racist or a white supremacist.

A Canadian man once tweeted at me, saying I should move to Canada because "Canadians aren't racist." I pointed out some high-profile cases of systemic racism in Canada, but he kept insisting on the total lack of racism in Canada. I pointed out that he was denying the experience of Canadians who felt the effects of racism there, and pretty soon he was calling me a "cunt." For weeks he harassed me on Twitter, creating new accounts whenever I blocked him. When a white person says something racist, the person who points it out has to pay!

If I even lightly criticize white people who show up on my Facebook page to give me support, I get a response like "I can't say anything! I'm never coming back!" White people often complain about people of color being oversensitive, but they get angry when we point out the roadblocks they have placed in front of us. It's as if the real injustice were that they've been asked to pause and think about the harm they are causing.

It's a reflection of white supremacy that a white person might expect to talk with a black person about race and not be challenged about their own involvement in the racist system. There's no way to be neutral about white supremacy as long as that system benefits you every day. Just because white people aren't always aware of their power — or don't want to recognize it — doesn't mean they don't have it. For white people to do nothing is all the system needs for it to continue. But you can use that power in a way that helps rather than harms. You can be an ally and use your white privilege to help fight racism.

White supremacy is not just Nazis marching in the street. In the U.S. it's always been a part of the economic and social system. It's always been about taking land from nonwhites, getting free labor from nonwhites, and using the fear of the "other" to convince white people to agree to a system that oppresses black and brown people. It's about weaponizing mistrust and motivating people to act on their selfish interests and social prejudices.

The system doesn't have to rely on actual hatred of minorities, although we've certainly seen that given free rein. Despite the pretty words in the Declaration of Independence about all men being created equal, our founding fathers designed a system of white supremacy.

Leviton: Let's talk about another problem that arises in discussions about racism: "tone policing."

Oluo: Tone policing is when someone disputes a statement by focusing on *how* it was said, not on its content. It's when you're told to "calm down" or "be more ladylike" or "be less emotional." The person who's suffering has to express their experience in a way white people will accept before whites are willing to listen. You all think you're a better judge of what's proper than black people are, and that you have the authority to deem our complaints invalid. Your comfort level is more important to you than stopping the brutality we're facing.

I'm not saying white people have to leave themselves open to blatant abuse. Tone policing is when you say, "Be more polite. Don't call people out. Don't shut down a conversation by pointing out racist behavior." Multiple times a week white people will

tell me how committed they were to fighting racism — until I said something they didn't like. It always flabbergasts me: It's an option for you to support injustice because I made you feel bad? If white people really believe that racism is bad, they won't be talked out of it because someone was rude to them. Just like I don't think puppies should be murdered, and I won't change my mind if a puppy bites me tomorrow. [Laughs.] I'm a steadfast believer in the humanity of transgender people. Does that mean I've loved every transgender person I've met? No. Any population has its assholes. But if one of them is mean to me, I'm not going to say, "Wow, you ruined my Sunday. I don't think I can support your right to exist anymore."

White people's support in opposing racism is not a gift to people of color. Many believe we were born ready and willing to fight racism, and that it's our duty to destroy the system that oppresses us. Meanwhile if we ask benevolent white people nicely and give them a lot of thanks, they will bestow on us the gift of their effort to reduce the amount they participate in the exploitative system that's harming us. We don't tell men who've stopped beating their wives how generous and kind they are for discontinuing the abuse.

Leviton: Right at the start of *So You Want to Talk about Race*, you lay out some basic rules for discussions of racism. The first is that an experience "is about race if the person of color thinks it is about race." Are people of color infallible when it comes to identifying racism?

Oluo: These issues are multilayered and complex, but absolutely everything in America is race-related. No part of our society is without a racial component. If a person of color is telling you that what you're discussing has something to do with race, it does. Even if you can't see it, even if your behavior wasn't motivated by unconscious racism, that person of color sitting next to you has had to deal with such trauma many times.

Let's say you are setting up fireworks at your house, and your next-door neighbor is a war veteran and mentions that the noise might trigger some unpleasant memories for him. It makes no sense for you to respond, "Oh, no, this is just fireworks. It's got nothing to do with war." You recognize that explosions, for him, certainly do evoke war. It may not be *your* reality, but it's *his* reality, and a valid one. You don't have the right to say to him, "Get over it."

If I'm walking through a retail store, and a clerk is following me, and I get upset, it doesn't really matter to me if that clerk follows every customer and didn't single me out. Does the clerk not know that people of color get treated disrespectfully in retail stores, restaurants, and government offices? Maybe for the clerk it's not about race, but it sure is for me.

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Leviton: So what about the reverse? If a person of color concludes something *isn't* about race, is that always valid? How do you know they haven't internalized their own oppression and become "self-hating"?

Oluo: There are certainly times when the culture tells people of color that their inner states are incorrect; that they are crazy or deluded and that there's "nothing to see here." I've told myself that sometimes just to get through the day, even when I know something's not right.

I will say that, in any case, it's not a white person's place to rule on whether our conclusions are accurate or not. We don't get to choose when microaggressions hit us and when they don't. And when something is about race, we don't have the option of just walking away and never thinking about it again. Our conditioning, or just our exhaustion, might tell us to ignore a racial slight one day, but the next week we won't.

When white people say to a person of color, "We're not getting anywhere. Let's just agree to disagree," they're negating that person's experience. The white person can walk away thinking everything is fine, because a "neutral balance" has been reached, while the person of color feels invalidated and unseen.

Leviton: You call “intersectionality” the number-one requirement in your activism. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term in 1989 to refer to how class, race, sexual orientation, and other aspects of our identity are inextricably woven together.

Oluo: Intersectionality developed as a way to examine how the feminist movement neglected black and Latinx women. Then the idea was expanded to all women of color, and also poor women, LGBTQ people, and differently abled people. Intersectionality basically means that we don’t leave parts of our identities behind when we enter a certain space: “At this meeting we’re talking about women’s issues, so your being black is not relevant. Here, you’re a woman.” People’s lives — and this applies to everyone — don’t work that way. All aspects of us are present and interacting.

The concept existed well before Crenshaw wrote about it. Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech from 1851 is about being both black and a woman. But Crenshaw was specifically concerned with how middle-class white feminists were marginalizing the needs of women of color.

Some people view intersectionality as divisive within social movements. The argument is that if we insist on giving each part of ourselves its full due, we damage our ability to act politically: “Oh, if we take my white privilege into account, I feel like I can’t do anything right.”

But anytime we are trying to reduce harm, we *must* look at relative privilege and oppression. Maybe you feel distracted from the conversation *you* want to have because someone with a disability is pointing out how the subject impacts them differently than it does you, but think about how your desire to “get back to the subject” comes from a place of privilege.

The term “intersectionality” didn’t create a divide. The divide was always there. The difference is, now we talk about it.

Leviton: I remember how, in the late sixties, the mostly male leaders of Students for a Democratic Society relegated their girlfriends and wives to the kitchen and support positions. They argued that dealing with “women’s issues” would distract from ending the Vietnam War.

Oluo: There’s a myth that you can allow an “acceptable” level of bias, bigotry, and oppression in progressive movements in order to achieve your primary goal, and then you can go back and fix it later. White feminists might say to women of color, “We need to get abortion rights first. That’s our main goal. We’ll get to your concerns after we achieve that.” But the bigotry becomes so entwined in the movement that it can’t be removed later. You can’t bake a poison cake, put tasty icing on it, and hope it will become edible.

If you’re a critic of intersectionality, you are probably feeling frustrated. People with less privilege than you used to face their difficulties alone, on the outside. Now they are inside, and your sense of superiority is showing. Everything was fine when your needs were at the center. As long as the less privileged were standing for your issues, you considered their presence “diversity.” But you never had to stand for their issues or even consider how your actions might be harming them.

Here’s an example that pops up time and time again: I’ll be the only black person on a panel discussion about feminist issues, and a white woman in the audience will get up and say how inspired she was by the Women’s March in January 2017, and she will ask me why people of color were underrepresented at those marches: What is it going to take to get women of color to march with her?

Every time, I just sit there stunned by the gall, the hubris. She’s not seeing how she can make every march a women’s march if *she* would show up. Why isn’t she at the Black Lives Matter protest, where black women are trying to save their own lives and the lives of their children and spouses? Instead this woman wants to know what it’s going to take to get black women to crochet a pink hat and walk with *her*, in safety, once a year, so she can feel good?

The day of the Women’s March I sat at home and bawled. I was heartbroken. I had been writing about marching for black lives, begging and pleading for people to give a damn about actual brutalized and dead bodies, and now white friends I’d never seen at a Black Lives Matter march in Seattle were buying plane tickets to Washington, D.C., to march against what hypothetically might happen under the new president. But they wouldn’t show up at the marches in their own backyard to protest what was *already*

happening in our country. I was absolutely gutted. These were my liberal friends, whom I made excuses for when they didn't show up at local protests or meetings: maybe they don't like big crowds, I thought; maybe they don't like marches. Nope, I guess they just didn't think it was important enough to walk with me. They preferred to march with "all women." I guess those of us marching for our lives in Seattle weren't representing all women.

Look at the recent protests and marches against gun violence. No group has been more impacted by gun violence than black people in this country. But now that more white kids are being killed — and their deaths are lead stories on the news — huge crowds of white people are marching.

I have to ask white organizers: What are you doing to make your march an event I'd want to join? That would not be traumatizing to me? That would not erase me? That would not make it appear as if the only goals I have are the ones you have? When are you going to stand with me, with all of your privilege? If you march next to me, your chances of being run down by a cop or dragged off in handcuffs are far less than mine. Black women are risking their lives when there are cops around. Look at those white women at the Women's March taking selfies with the police, and then watch the video of cops in Seattle riding their bikes into groups of peacefully protesting black women. Watch the armored military vehicles rolling down American streets to confront Black Lives Matter protesters.

Sometimes white allies at protests get frustrated if I explain that they should not start a fight with the cops or throw rocks — because that's more likely to come back on *us* — and they could be a much bigger help some other way. One of the most useful things white allies can do is provide a safety barrier in front of a line of cops, because white people are less likely to be mistreated. That's a great use of privilege and power: surrounding people of color who are under threat.

This is where intersectionality is important: it invites you to come face-to-face with your privilege, your advantages — not to make you feel bad, but to show you opportunities for really helping. Being black, I'm automatically underprivileged in many areas of life, but I also recognize the advantages I personally have: I'm college educated. I'm not disabled. I live in a progressive area. I'm safely housed. I'm light skinned. The list is pretty long. There are times and places where I have an advantage that others do not, where I can speak when others won't be heard. I can put those advantages to use to fight systems of oppression.

“ The history of America is not just pioneers and cowboys and inventions and business. It's also brutality and slavery and oppression. If we want the country to be better, we have to look at that history.

Leviton: You don't want white people to speak on your behalf, though.

Oluo: I don't want them speaking *for me*, but I do want them to have tough conversations with other white people about white supremacy, about how it functions, how it perpetuates harm. You don't need to have black people around to fight white supremacy. You might be running a white business, with white employees, in a white neighborhood, with white customers — and if you're not deconstructing your role in white supremacy, then you're supporting it. Look at your suppliers. Look at the way you recruit employees.

Sure, white people may first have to come over and listen to people of color, because they don't have the awareness of white privilege that we do. But the next frontier is white people trying to dismantle the systems of racial oppression that benefit them. In a way, they're the only ones who can do that. White people need to want racism gone.

Leviton: We should see racism as an offense to our sense of morality.

Oluo: It should be enough that racism is ruining the lives of people of color. But even setting that aside, it's an illness that is harming white people in many ways. You are betraying your values. You are cutting yourself off from a large segment of humanity. You are denying yourself a richer culture. And you are supporting an economic and political system that's harming everyone. Our humanity should be enough, but for you there will be fringe benefits. *[Laughs.]*

The history of America is not just pioneers and cowboys and inventions and business. It's also brutality and slavery and oppression. If we want the country to be better, we have to look at that history. I think that's something white people want to avoid, and one cause of the backlash we're seeing now: the idea that whiteness is not something to be proud of. Trump is trying to give his supporters the belief that it's OK to be proud of a brutal and mediocre whiteness. People at his rallies are so excited about it! But they are not going to be able to run from the truth forever.

Leviton: With the recent success of films like *Black Panther*, *Moonlight*, and *Get Out*, and TV shows like *Atlanta* — all made by black filmmakers and having black themes and positive black central characters — has the time arrived when black people can tell their own stories?

Oluo: Yes and no. There's certainly an increase in stories about black life, which is a good thing. It's important not only that we see black faces on screen but that films are directed and written by black people. And I'm disappointed that this isn't extending more to other people of color. We need more indigenous representation, more Asian American representation. For too long people of color have been allowed to tell only certain kinds of stories. We are hopefully leaving behind a decade in which slavery was one of the few topics black people were allowed to make movies about. I can't sit through those films. I already have to live as a black woman in this country; I don't need to see two hours of brutality on the big screen. Those images kept me up at night as a kid and still traumatize me.

I want to see a shift in how black people are portrayed in day-to-day life. I'm not seeing enough films that show a real understanding that black lives can be as complex and nuanced — as heroic, as romantic, as *anything* — as those of whites.

Leviton: You've pointed out how the lives of black people, especially young black males, are not seen as "normal." This has had profound effects in the educational system.

Oluo: Numerous studies have shown that school systems treat students differently based on race and ethnicity. Black students are about 16 percent of the school population in California, for instance, but they are 31 percent of students suspended and 40 percent of those expelled. And they get into trouble for their "attitude" and for being "disrespectful" much more often than white students. Not for fighting. Not for drugs. They're getting suspended for rolling their eyes at a teacher. Give me a break: teenagers roll their eyes like it's their job.

Communication gaps between teachers and black and brown students are viewed as disciplinary issues. Studies have shown that when white and black children are engaged in the same type of play, teachers are more likely to say the black children are being "violent" or "aggressive." Black and brown children are often seen as disruptive. Their language is monitored. I was just in St. Louis, Missouri, at the school Michael Brown attended. [*Michael Brown was an unarmed black teenager fatally shot by a police officer in 2014. — Ed.*] One girl told me she'd previously been bussed to a predominantly white school, where she found it difficult to participate because she couldn't say anything without being criticized by a teacher. She was criticized for saying "axed" instead of "asked." This is how black people talk. The way she talked with her parents and members of her community was not allowed in the predominantly white school. It was considered disrespectful.

Leviton: You were always a high achiever in school. You didn't have disciplinary problems.

Oluo: Yes, I was well suited for Western education. I scored high on standardized tests — which are very prejudiced in many ways. While I was growing up, my mom was going to college, and because she couldn't afford day care, she would sneak my brother and me into her big auditorium classes. My father was a college professor; he didn't raise us, but I was aware of that heritage. So education was always something I loved.

But there were costs. One was that my blackness was erased. People could accept that I was talented and smart only if they saw me as less black. I had teachers who would insist I was "mixed," not black. Many people told me I didn't "act black" — I guess because doing well in school and loving to read were not "black" behaviors to them. And in many ways that robbed me of my sense of community and identity. I was often used as an example to other black students: "Why can't you be more like Ijeoma?" I became a reason to withhold sympathy from other black students: "She gets it. Why can't you?"

I grew up in Seattle, and I talk like someone who grew up in Seattle. I was raised by a white single mom. I have a lighter skin tone than many black people. And I was treated as if I were fundamentally better than my black peers, because I looked and sounded whiter. I grew up feeling very isolated as a result. I was the only black kid in the advanced programs up to seventh grade. In high school there was *one* other black kid. Today my son is in an advanced school program, and there's only one other black kid in there with him. So my son has to carry that burden of representing black students.

At my son's school there was a discussion of dress codes. Someone had dug up an old guideline that said students weren't allowed to wear hoodies. Now, Seattle is a hoodie town, so the rule seemed odd. The teacher said to the class, "This must have something to do with gang affiliation." I don't know why she thought that was appropriate, but my son knew that *gang* means "black." He was ten years old, and now he had to think about how this policy was probably targeting black kids. He was upset enough to tell me about it as soon as I picked him up — and, in my experience, ten-year-olds have to be pretty upset to tell you about their day at school. *[Laughs.]*

He decided to make a list for his teacher of all the reasons people might choose to wear hoodies: They're cold. They're an athlete. They're pretending to be a ninja. Hoodies look good. I was proud of him, and I was also thankful that there were some white kids at his school who backed him up.

Leviton: Are you raising your kids differently than your mom raised you? You have said that you didn't have serious conversations about race with your mom until you were in your mid-thirties.

Oluo: My mom's a white woman who loves black people and who loved her children's blackness. I'm very grateful for that. Not all mixed-race black kids get that support. My mom loved that we were black and still thinks we are the most beautiful kids ever! (It can be *really annoying*.) But she was also a white woman, so her idea of blackness came from a white perspective.

My mom is the kindest, most generous person I've known, but she never fully saw the ways in which being black can limit a person's opportunities. She thought having black kids meant she understood what it was like to be black, but she didn't. My mom was a fierce fighter for us; I even saw her physically fight someone she thought was trying to harm us — twice. But she didn't always know how to help us stand up for ourselves.

My dad was from Nigeria and certainly didn't have to deal with any "black people are not academically capable" stereotypes. He was a college professor and a member of the Nigerian legislature. So I was raised with the expectation that I would do well, and this helped shield me when I was told I was less than — or, worse, that I didn't have to work hard to get good grades, because affirmative action would vault me over white kids.

My dad left when I was just a few years old. At first my mom was convinced he'd come back. She waited and waited. We were dirt poor — no phone, no electricity, eating charity meals at the church, sometimes sleeping in our car when we didn't have a place to stay. And my white grandparents refused to help us. We would visit them sometimes — they lived nearby — but we weren't allowed to talk about my dad. For about eight years my mom held on to the fantasy that he would return.

My grandparents were really upset with her for marrying a black man, although they rarely said so explicitly. My grandparents loved my brother and me, but our dad had never really been welcome around them. My brother and I spoke to him over the phone only once, and it didn't go well.

I parent with the same devotion and fierceness that my mom had, but definitely with more awareness of the issues that black people face. I'm helping my sons understand that what they see happening to them is real, and they have a right to feel as they do about it.

Leviton: In 2015 you were stopped by a traffic cop for going a couple of miles over the speed limit on the freeway. Your brother, Aham, and your Nigerian half brother were in the car with you. How did you and your brothers interact with the policeman?

Oluo: When black people get pulled over by a cop, we don't really have a choice but to be very vigilant about where we put our hands, how we speak, how we reach for the glove compartment, and so forth. But I also have to say: it doesn't matter what we do.

Black people can do everything “right” for self-preservation and still end up dead. I don’t know any steps that will guarantee our safety in those situations. And that’s terrifying.

Aham was in the front passenger seat during that traffic stop, and I watched his hands shake. He said slowly and calmly, “And now I’m reaching for the registration . . .,” and he waited for the cop to nod before going ahead.

It broke my heart to see the terror my brother had to face. And this was far from the first time I’d been afraid during a traffic stop. I got pulled over when I was sixteen, and when I reached for the glove compartment to get my ID, the cop screamed, “Stop!” and put his hand on his gun. He actually said, “That’s a good way to get shot, young lady,” as if he’d done me a favor by not shooting. The experience pretty much killed my joy of driving before I even got started.

The officer that day with my brothers was brusque and professional and didn’t shout or reach for his gun. I knew enough not to ask why I’d been pulled over. The last time my brother had asked a policeman why he’d been stopped, the cop had leaned in the window and said ominously, “Are we going to have a problem here?”

Truthfully I don’t know if that traffic stop was about race. Maybe it was just bad luck that my car, with three black individuals in it, was pulled over.

Last fall I was gardening outside my house, and a cop stopped down the street. Cops drive by my house all the time, because I live next to a park. And I thought, *You know what? I’d better put down these garden shears.* Who knew what that cop might think I had in my hand? So I walked in the house nonchalantly because I didn’t feel safe out there, on a perfectly sunny day in my neighborhood.

Leviton: In 1999 Amadou Diallo was shot by New York City police while holding his wallet. In March of this year Stephon Clark was killed by police in Sacramento, in the backyard of his grandmother’s house, because one of the cops thought Clark’s cellphone was a weapon. When police feel afraid of black citizens, it’s usually considered justification for lethal force. Is there any “fix” to police procedures that would make a difference?

Oluo: There are quite a few things that could be done. First, black people need legal recourse for there to be any justice. Police officers know there’s little chance they’ll be charged, much less tried or punished, for using lethal force against a black person. But police are scared to shoot a white person; they’re more likely to stop and think first, because they know they could get in trouble. According to Mapping Police Violence (mappingpoliceviolence.org), black people are three times more likely to be killed by police than whites. And the number of people killed by police is not related to overall crime rates in a location.

Police departments are not going to win the hearts and minds of people of color until there are serious consequences for officers who kill unarmed black citizens. If police commissioners make it clear that officers who engage in biased policing or brutality will lose their jobs, their behavior will change. We also need every police officer to be trained in how to avoid implicit bias — and not just a quick seminar but training that is followed up and incorporated into precinct procedures. It’s not enough to give new hires two days of classes and then assign them to the “worst” neighborhoods.

The police are just the armed wing of the justice system. The entire justice system itself needs to be revolutionized. It’s not necessarily that police go into certain neighborhoods intending to “get” people of color — it’s the way the system is set up. Read Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* to understand this better. From the way we talk about policing crime, to sentencing disparities, to policies about bail, to the ethnic and racial makeup of judges and prosecutors, the system is aimed at controlling populations of color.

If you are a prosecutor who won’t prosecute *any* cases of police brutality, you need to lose your job. We also have to do something about judges who hand down harsher sentences to darker defendants. A Villanova University study of twelve thousand incarcerated African American women in North Carolina showed that women with lighter skin tones received less jail time.

If you're a politician and your campaign is based on making streets safer through "stop-and-frisk" policies, you need to be challenged. And the American public needs to consider what is meant by "safer." Safer for who? Too many people believe that poor neighborhoods are inherently crime-ridden and that the "thin blue line" of the police is all that's keeping the country from being engulfed in crime. Yet violent-crime rates have been dropping steadily since the early nineties. Property crime is down, too. A Pew survey found that half the country believes crime rates have gone up in the last decade, even though FBI crime statistics show double-digit *declines*. This kind of thinking, encouraged by Donald Trump and his enablers, is actively supporting white supremacy and destroying lives.

“ When black people get pulled over by a cop, we don't really have a choice but to be very vigilant about where we put our hands, how we speak, how we reach for the glove compartment, and so forth. But . . . black people can do everything “right” for self-preservation and still end up dead.

Leviton: A nurse at Kaiser Permanente in Sacramento was recently fired after posting on Facebook that Stephon Clark “deserved” to be killed by police because he ran away from them. Do you think businesses and civic institutions should be able to fire employees for opinions they express outside the workplace?

Oluo: I would say her firing was justified because of what her job entails. If she was a waitress, no. But as a nurse she's responsible for saving the lives of people of color. Saying that a person of color deserves to die is at odds with that. That nurse's Facebook post speaks to decisions she might make at work. It sounds to me like her employer concluded she wasn't fit to serve the entire population of patients at that hospital. Also racial bias shows up most under stress, and being a nurse is stressful. If you're having a long day and feeling unappreciated, are you going to give your all to the black man complaining of chest pains?

It's been shown that the medical field has a significant bias when it comes to how hard its professionals work to save the lives of people of color. A University of Virginia study, for instance, found that black Americans are systematically undertreated for pain compared to white Americans. Bias in medicine is killing people.

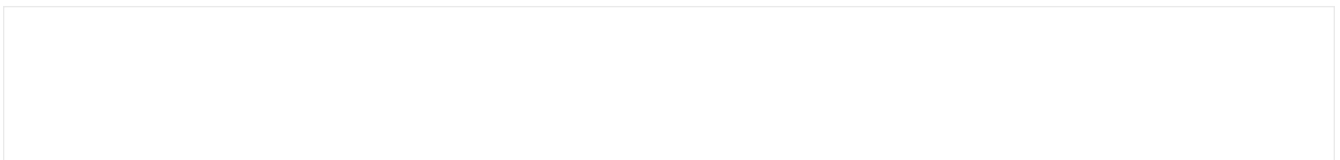
Leviton: You say you didn't write *So You Want to Talk about Race* explicitly for white people.

Oluo: No, although I always have to write knowing that the majority of my readers will be white. I find that frustrating, by the way. White readers slow me down! [*Laughs.*] It's hard being a writer who just wants to explore words and instead has to find different ways to explain the most basic things about race to white people. I couldn't do that for an entire book.

Leviton: What has the reaction been from white readers?

Oluo: I find that the amount of white anger I get in response to my writing is inversely related to the number of words. A five-hundred-word essay online will get more criticism than a book of many pages — because, you know, who's going to read several hundred pages of something they hate?

I'm not really interested in receiving thanks from white people, but I am interested to know what they are doing with the information. I don't need white people to toss their privilege out, to *disempower* themselves. What I need them to do is look for where their relative power lies and use it for my benefit. What I want is for them to speak up in boardrooms, where policies are being made; to have a tough conversation with a Republican congressman who wants their vote — and who's working hard to make sure I can't vote. I only have a few ways of being heard, and you have hundreds: Go use that power.



MARK LEVITON sometimes wishes our national anthem could be Funkadelic’s “Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow.” He lives in Nevada City, California.

Correspondence

WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR •

Mark Leviton’s interview with Ijeoma Oluo [“White Lies,” December 2018] was disturbing, inflammatory, candid, and courageous. Oluo is one of the many writers we need to shake us out of the complacency that allows racism to continue unabated.

As a white person, my truth is not Oluo’s truth, but hers is just as valid as mine. Each time I felt myself bristle at her response to a question, I stopped and let her answer sit with me for a while. This is what I love about *The Sun*: my heart and my point of view are continually challenged.

S. Kay Murphy
Calimesa, California

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