

**CRITICAL**

**CONVERSATIONS**

Event transcript featuring Professor Loretta J. Ross

# **CALLING IN THE CALLING OUT CULTURE: CONVERSATIONS INSTEAD OF CONFLICTS**

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**CRITICAL**

**CONVERSATIONS**

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# Critical Conversations Speaker Series

## Featuring Professor Loretta J. Ross

### TRANSCRIPT



Guest  
**Loretta J. Ross**



Moderator  
**Luther Williams**  
Head of School  
New Roads School



Moderator  
**Mario Johanson**  
Director of Student Life, Access,  
Equity & Inclusion  
New Roads School

### MARIO JOHONSON

Good evening, friends. Welcome to the Critical Conversation speaker series. Great to have you all with us this evening. My name is Mario Johanson and I will serve as this evening's event moderator. I'd like to welcome our esteem feature guests, Miss Professor Loretta J. Ross, New Roads Head of school, Luther Williams, our local and national partner schools, our corporate sponsors, and New Roads Spanish language, culture, and literature instructor, and critical conversations interpreter Carmen Anders. Thank you all so much for being with us this evening.

We're also please used to welcome graphic recorder, Jessamy Gee from Think In Colour Australia, who's here to help capture our thinking. Jessamy will be creating a live visual representation of the output from our session today that will be made available to our partners. Loretta J. Ross is a professor at Smith College in the program for the of women and gender, where she teaches courses on white supremacy, human rights, and calling in the calling out culture.

Professor Ross's activism began when she was teargassed at a demonstration as a first year student at Howard university in 1970. As a teenager, she was involved in anti-apartheid and anti-gentrification activism in Washington D.C. as the founding member of the D.C. study group. As part of the 50 year history and social justice activism until her retirement from community organizing in 2012. She was the national coordinator of the SisterSong women of color reproductive justice collective from 2005 to 2012 and created the theory of reproductive justice in 1994.

Professor Ross was national co-director of the April 25th, 2004 March for Women's Lives in Washington D.C. the largest protest march in U.S history at the time. She founded The National Center for Human Rights Education in Atlanta, Georgia. Launched the Women of Color Program for The National Organization of Women, NOW, and was the national program director of the National Black Women's Health project.

One of the first African American women to direct the Rape Crisis Center. Professor Ross was the third executive director of the D C Rape Crisis Center. Professor Ross has co-written three books on reproductive justice and her newest book *Calling In The Calling Out Culture* is forthcoming later this year. Of course, we're super excited about that. It's our pleasure to welcome professor Loretta J. Ross as our guest this evening.

I'm going to give everyone a second to just make some noise and show some love and appreciation from the Zoom stage. In recognition of our time limitation I'm going to jump right into the heart of things. This conversation will be centered around three areas of inquiry that correspond to Professor Ross's social justice contributions. When it's time to transition to another question, I would deliver a gentle tap of this chime. And you must listen to it Luthern.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

What are you trying to say Mario?

MARIO JOHONSON

Let us begin with the first segment. The social and relational impacts of cancel culture. Professor Ross, in your opinion, what are the major impacts of cancel culture and how is it affecting the very fabric of our society?

LORETTA J. ROSS

Well, I think the sad thing about the cancel culture is people use it thinking that they're doing the right thing, but they're doing it the wrong way. So you can't flout people for wanting to hold others accountable for things that they think they've done wrong. But in fact, when you use the call out or demand that someone loses their job or their reputation or their platform, in other words, get canceled instead of inviting people to a conversation, you invited them to a fight.

So socially is making things much worse, is making it difficult for people to have critical conversation. People are afraid to speak up for fear that they will be the next target. So people feel worse about themselves as part of the cancel culture. Then it carries this whole atmosphere of unforgettability and unforgivability. So once someone says you've done something wrong and they've attached that wrong thing to your moral character and made a judgment on you, then it will never be forgiven because there's due process or anything. It's just you said something that was X and now you are that X kind of quick judgmentalism. So it'll never be forgiven and it'll never be forgotten.

So even if one wants to apologize for what you might have said wrong, or what someone took wrong, you're going to be seen as gaming the system. But if you don't think you did anything wrong and you don't apologize, then everybody thinks you're trying to avoid responsibility or accountability. So it's a lose-lose proposition when the call out culture is the dominant way that we think we need to do human rights work and people couldn't be more wrong.

## LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Well, I'm going to follow-up on that Professor Ross, because you said a phrase in there, the right thing, the wrong way. So what do you think underline this cancel culture people want to do that is actually the right thing, but why is it the wrong way?

## LORETTA J. ROSS

Well, I think the whole call out cancel culture impulse is precipitated by the fact that people do harm and they're not held accountable for it. So people are desperate for saying, I'm not only not want to be harmed myself, but I don't want this person to continue to do harm to others. So that's the right impulse where you want to stop people from being hurt. But the problem, if you choose the wrong tactic is that you not only increase the harm, but you increase the chances that the person will double down and continue.

That's just human by the way, if you think that someone is going to jump down your throat and you have no choices, then first of all, you're going to deny that you did anything wrong in the first place. You're going to turn your listening off to them because why would you want to volunteer for the firing squad, so to speak, and you're going to avoid or deflect the conversation because that's only human.

So when people are humiliated or punished or blamed for things that someone else thinks they've done wrong, that actually decreases the likelihood of accountability rather than increases it. So a better option is to call people in, instead of calling them out where you can hold people accountable, but you do so with grace, love, and respect instead of blame, shame, and punishment.

By offering that grace, love, and respect, all you're offering is a chance for the person to be heard. You don't have to agree with someone to listen to them. I should say also a lot of people think they're calling in is what you do for somebody else but in reality, calling in is what you do for yourself. Because you get to decide how you're going to walk through the world, not them.

I'll just tell a little story quickly. About two weeks ago, someone on my campus got my attention because I was walking through campus center and there was a poster with my face on it yet the person who put up that poster, and apparently had a month to get them printed, had failed to ask me if I would keynote her program. That was a big, oops, and the program was like the next night. I went nuclear because I thought that was such a breach of protocol. It was so rude to assume that I could be your keynote speaker and if you had a month to do a poster, you had a couple of days at least to call me and ask me.

So at first I was going to just ignore it and no show the person and then write a public letter people know that I didn't default, it was messed up how it all happened. But then I had to call myself in, because this is someone I didn't know very well and that's not how I wanted to start a relationship with them. So I was free that night and I went to the program and I did the keynote and then I made an appointment with that person to talk about how that's not going to happen again.

LORETTA J. ROSS

But I chose to call myself in and what that meant was that I didn't publicly humiliate her and incidentally, I learned that she was just a highly disorganized person. So it really wasn't even about me anyway. It's how she is. So I'm very proud of the fact that I'm learning to manage my own quick temper because I go nuclear fast and call myself in so that I walk through the world and into relationships with my best self rather than just blowing things up because I like blowing things up.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Well, Professor Ross, I want to just stick with this accountability for a second because, I mean, can it be argued that people who are canceling others, that in some ways this is coming from a sense of powerlessness and as you were saying, a sense of wanting to stop the harm. So how are then people held accountable and what does accountability look like if they're not canceled?

LORETTA J. ROSS

Well, first of all, directionality matters. I mean, as a member of the Human Rights Movement, calling people, calling governments, calling corporations out, that's what we do because we like using the power of public shaming as a way to create change. But what people don't understand about the use of that tactic is that it's not the first thing you take out of the toolbox. It's the last. You try other methods of accountability first before you get to the call out stage.

So people leap to the call out stage when they haven't even picked up the phone to talk to the person or tried another way or anything like that. But directionality matters because in the Human Rights Movement, we're punching up towards people or corporations or entities that are powerful who've been offered a chance to change and they've chosen not to.

Then sometimes people use calling out to punch down where they pick on people who are more vulnerable than they are, who can't punch back or positionally they can't punch back. Like one thing that happens a lot at my school is people always punch up at the president because they know the president can't punch back. Can't punch back on a student, right?

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

I don't know anything about that.

LORETTA J. ROSS

So positionally, they size up the fact that they would rather go after the president than anybody else. Let me give you another story. I teach through stories.

MARIO JOHONSON

We love that.

LORETTA J. ROSS

Years ago, some people came and painted swastikas on our buildings on campus. Of course the president didn't want that to happen and so she sent out a letter offering support to students who were harmed by that and declaring that I was not representative of our campus. Well, by the time I returned to school after traveling, the campus was in an uproar and they were so angry at the president because they thought that she should have protected them from antisemitism.

It took me a while to figure out that the students were more angry at the president for not protecting them than a person who actually painted the swastikas. Because it's more dangerous to go after a neo-Nazi than the president. You see what I'm saying? I got to clarify whatever you think the president is doing right or wrong, I can pretty much guarantee you that she did not want swastikas painted on our building. So have a better threat assessment when you're pursuing accountability. Don't just be a rapid machine gun mowing everybody down simply because you're hurt and you think that gives you the power to hurt others and the privilege to hurt others.

MARIO JOHONSON

It's a wonderful transition to our next segment. Let's now move on to the next segment. The meaning significance and power of calling in as an integrative pedagogical practice for building and sustaining community. Professor, what best describes your vision of calling people in instead of calling people out when you're teaching? What frameworks do you establish in your classes to ensure this vision is implemented within the climate and culture you encourage?

LORETTA J. ROSS

Well, I'm very fortunate to not have to be smart enough to figure out what vision I'm pursuing. I was very lucky to have been mentored by Rev. C.T. Vivian, who was the A to Dr. Martin Luther King. C.T. was my boss for five years when I worked at the National Anti-Klan Network reprogramming white supremacists. C.T. used to say all the time, "When you ask people to give up hate, then you need to be there for them when they do."

That was a very profound message because frankly, if the klan hated me, I was right hating him back. I didn't see anything wrong with that transactional relationship, but he told us that Dr. King meant to build not a civil rights movement, but a human rights movement. That was very frustrating to me because that means that the people I oppose have the same human rights I'm trying to defend.

So I can't violate their human rights trying to my own. That became a much more complicated way and motivation and vision for doing the work. When he gifted it to me, he also pointed out that the first time the phrase human

rights had been used in the civil rights movement was in 1850 by Frederick Douglas. So he pointed out to me this long lineage of African Americans fighting for human rights, even 90 years before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was written.

So our ancestors had a vision that we have yet to both know about, understand, and realize. So thank goodness, I don't have to be smart enough to figure that out. I just have to listen to my ancestor. That's why in 1996, Reverend Vivian and I ... Actually, wasn't just Reverend Vivian and I, it was me, Rev C.T. Vivian, [Shulamith Koenig 00:16:31] who was an Israeli American and [Abdullahi An-Na'im 00:16:37] who was a Sudanese lawyer

So it ended up being a Muslim, a Christian, a Jew, and an atheist. I'll tell you, we forgot who was, who founded the National Center for Human Rights Education. We made it our mission for 10 years to go around teaching people what their human rights are, so that we can start working towards that vision. That's why I'm very clear on where I'm going. It's just so hard to try to get there because, first of all, people don't know about the human rights framework. I think there should be human rights education K through 12 like they do and the more developed countries around the world.

Secondly, people can't fight for rights they don't know they have. So I'm frustrated when everybody offers these very sharp and punt critiques of what's wrong with the world, but nobody knows what the vision we should have in order to change it.

So I just used the gift of my ancestors and say, we've got to build a human rights culture in every aspect of our lives. That means that I can't do work against racism in a homophobic way, I can't do work against transphobia in a misogynistic way, on and on and on because we're all sectors of the same human rights movement.

I was so blessed when Rev. Byron told me Dr. King dream, no vision. Because when I first heard that, I really burned out the stupid thing, but I said, everybody told me he had a dream, nobody told me he had a plan. And he rocked my world with that copy of the March 31st, 1968 speech Dr. King Day. Four days before he was assassinated, he called on us to build a Human Rights Movement but most of us only heard the I have a dream part, not I have a plan part.

#### MARIO JOHONSON

So how do you translate the calling in culture of human rights into your school community classroom and teaching practice?

#### LORETTA J. ROSS

Well, there're ways to actually establish calling in guidelines from the outset so that people know that they will not get punished for not their unfolding thoughts for the things that they believe because they believe these things because of their lived experiences. The young people are quite thankful when they hear that they don't have to constantly be ready to pounce on somebody or fear getting pounced on themselves.



When you create these cultures, this understanding and a student actually she said it to me in the most beautiful way. She said calling out is the expectation that you've already grown, not the realization that you're still growing. So I start off teaching that way. We expect you to be growing, not to be already grown. We don't expect you to know everything. No one knows everything. So the students are so great. One of the things I did in one of my classes is that I misgendered the student once and I literally froze expecting someone to jump down my throat because that's very important to get someone's gender pronoun right.

Instead, this 18 year old looked at me and said, "That's all right, Professor, I misgender myself sometimes." This 18 year old offered me forgiveness, and I never made that mistake again, but I'll never forget that at 18, that student understood that I was still growing to. That's the kind of culture you create in our classrooms where people can speak up without fear of being torn down for speaking up.

I think that's what keeps people silent, afraid to say something. Then unfortunately, once a call out has erupted, then people gang up on a person for fear of being the next target for being the next one getting bullied by the call out. So showing people that there's a continuum, I mean, you can call people out. You can call cancel people, but you can call people in, or you can call on people to do better and your fifth option is simply to call it off.

You have no obligation to actually engage in non-productive conversations. I call that the five C continuum that I teach. So showing people that they have a range of options, all people feel relieved about that because they didn't know that it wasn't just a simplistic binary calling them in or calling them out or letting it pass.

When you let an injustice pass, it's like a tanker in your soul. You don't feel good about yourself over your would, or could, or should moments. So they really do like hearing that there're things that you can do that really is productive, keeps people in the conversation, doesn't punish people for thinking differently than you do and makes it feel safer.

Then one last thing I'll say, one student also said it's a big relief figuring out that I ain't got to walk through the world trying to change everybody because I can barely control myself. I was like, "Yeah, that's really an important realization." Because if anybody had the magic words to change people, couples wouldn't fight, families wouldn't fight, coworkers wouldn't fight. We don't have that magic power, but we do have the power to change how we engage with the world.

If you really focus on your integrity instead of your reputation, you will feel so relieved because you're no longer assuming responsibility for how other people are but secondly, you're not blaming yourself for your inability to change that other person. There's a lot of that happening.

## LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Professor Ross. I'd like to follow up with that and just make sure that I'm getting your assumption clearly because one of the things that it seems to me that you're saying is that there seems to be in the call in call out relationship a superior, an inferior kind of. There is the morally superior position and there is the inferior position. That what

you're suggesting because I think you used the phrase, your thoughts are unfolding and in front of other people and having the safety to have those thoughts be unfolding.

So it seems to me, you're suggesting that we all are on a continuum and always growing and all of these areas and therefore very few people are in that position to call out in that way.

#### LORETTA J. ROSS

Well, it's true. I mean, if you're not growing, you might as well just curl the toes up and quit living. So we should all be growing constantly. It is through that growth, you really get to understand how fascinating joyful life is. The other thing about the call out culture for me is that it sucks all the joy and the excitement of being in the Human Rights Movement. I frequently say, if you're not having fun fighting for justice, you're doing something wrong.

Because fighting fascism should be fun. It's being a fascist that suck. So if you're not doing it in a way that brings you joy and brings joy to the people around you, you need to question. Why do you think there's that we all have to play the oppression Olympics and compete with each other in our social justice work or claim the most violated status. Yeah, I sometimes call it the Walk Olympics, but my girlfriend calls it, The Walking Dead.

Why are you trying to be part of The Walking Dead thinking that your way or the highway is that there's only one pathway up to the mountaintop or one way to do what you think is right. I mean, we live in a very competitive society that creates these false binaries and expectations of each other, but we get choices about whether we are going to live out those patterns that we ingested as children or make different pattern, some different decisions as adult.

So I'm enjoying the growth. I'm almost 70 years old and I'm eager to see what's going to be on the other side always. I think what really helps me is that when I was young and mouthy and insufferable, my older people who were around me, they didn't give up on me. They allowed me the space to grow, to make mistakes and they never dismissed me or disposed me because I made usually large, very vocal, and very public mistakes.

So teaching people how making a mistake isn't the problem because we're imperfect. We're supposed to make mistakes. The question is, do you handle your mistakes as a child trying to deny them, trying to sweep the broken glass under the rug, or do you handle your mistakes as an adult? Look them straight in the eye without any shame and like Maya says, when you know, better do better. I like to know better, do better approach to my mistakes rather than the trying to paper over them or pretend they didn't happen like a bad part or something.

#### MARIO JOHONSON

So Professor what frustrates the attempts to foster a calling in culture that can strategically promote equity and build a movement on common ground?

## LORETTA J. ROSS

Well, a lot of people are wedded to the idea of calling out because it is a great attention gathering mechanism. So I find that a lot of people seek attention, particularly through social media that perhaps they're not getting that affirmative attention in their real lives. So I ask them, "Why is the affirmer attention of strangers so important to you? Because these people are the most pickle people in the world. As soon as the next scandal are rushed their off and then you got to become even more outrageous to get them to come back and all of that."

I really do ask people with all sincerity, how well is that working for you? Because people are experiencing you as an angry person, calling everybody out, judging everybody else and is that how you want to be seen in the world? Because the other thing about a call out is that it says more about the person doing the calling out than the person being called out.

It tells us what's actually in your heart. So when I get called out and I get called out all the time, because I'm mouthy and opinionated. But when I get called out, I've learned to say, first of all, take a deep breath and then I say, "Thank you for bringing that to my attention." With that statement. I'm not necessarily agreeing with the call out, but I'm offering it a chance to be heard.

Then my next statement is, "You know that's an interesting point that you just made, but I want to ask you a question what's going on with you that made you come at me that way? Because I sincerely want to know why you didn't just tap me on the shoulder or write me a letter or do a couple of other things. But you chose to call me out. So I want to know what's going on with you." At the same time I'm going to be considering what you just said. So you can even turn a call out into a call in which is what I just did.

## LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Well, Professor Ross you have-

## MARIO JOHONSON

One second Luthern, I'm going to set you both up for this next conversation because the professor just stepped right into it, which is, could you give us an example of a time in which you were able to shift the perspective of a person who enjoyed calling people out to one in which they call people in and how did this process unfold for you both and what did you learn along the way? So I just want to engage the two of you around that because you opened the door to that professor. Please Luthern, you were saying?

## LUTHERN WILLIAMS

No, I'm going to let her to go into that conversation, Mario. But I had another question that I was going to ask.

LORETTA J. ROSS

Okay, we'll come back to that one then. I practiced my best calling in tactics with my family because I have a relative, I call him my uncle Frank, but he's neither my uncle nor noisy named Frank, but he's alive so I don't talk about him publicly. But uncle Frank always would come to the family reunions or dinners and say something very hateful about somebody. He was an equal opportunity hater. It would be, gay people or Mexican or white people. He always had something negative to say.

I used to just go toe to toe with uncle Frank because that was his point. He wanted the attention so I'd go toe to toe with him while the rest of the family buried their faces in the plates and tried to ignore what he was doing. Finally, I decided to change my tactic and I looked at uncle Frank and I said, "Uncle Frank, I know you're a good man." And I literally said, "I think you would run into a burning building and rescue somebody if you could and you wouldn't care whether they were gay, straight, Mexican, white. I know you. You're a good man, uncle Frank. So tell me Frank ..."

Again, remember I'm emphasizing our relationship with this repetition of uncle Frank. "Tell me uncle Frank, how can I reconcile the good man that I know you are with the words that just came out of your mouth?"

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Wow.

LORETTA J. ROSS

With that tactic, I didn't call him out nor did I called him in. I called on him to tell me which kind of uncle do I actually have. That means that until I could see where he was going and I could then tell what my next step would be with uncle Frank. He spent the rest of the family reunion trying to answer that question for himself, how did he want to be seen by his family?

The bad uncle Frank, who's always calling people out or the good uncle Frank that the family can rely upon because of his inner goodness. The reason I offer that example is that we all have that cognitive decadence that we think more highly of ourselves inside than often we display outside. So you can use calling in techniques to help people align their inner goodness with their outer behaviors.

I find joy in doing that because quite often people have not been offered a loving chance to be that introspective in a way where they don't feel like they're getting judged.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Well. Professor Ross in trying to, because it seems clear that you were talking about sort of how do you promote a society that guarantees human rights for all and in which all people can thrive. I think one of the things that's interesting is that as an African American woman who has encountered racism and encountered many other issues

along the way, why do you still hold on to this particular tactic of calling in rather than what people would say a more hardcore tactic? Why do you think this is more efficacious? Why have you held on to it?

LORETTA J. ROSS

I've held onto it a transition to it because my anger was only eating me up. It wasn't even being visited on the people who hurt me. I mean there was some logic if I could hurt the people who hurt me, but that wasn't happening, I was just hurting myself and internalized my anger. I found that that was a very unsatisfactory way to be in the world, walking through the world as if every sexist comment was a preamble to getting raped again.

Or every comment that I thought was rapist was a preamble to getting shot in Mississippi again. I mean, I do just had to control my own triggers, my own emotions. I found that I didn't like handing off the remote control to my emotions to all these people because I often didn't like the channels that they chose. So self mastery became my mission and once I decided that I was going to be ultimately self-determining because your feelings are involuntary. What you do with the feelings are choices and making that distinction.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

I want to get at this. It's really interesting because as you know in our country right now, there is such polarization and there is a sense of a victim narrative. It's interesting because I know even as an African American man growing up the way I did, my parents never let me see myself as anybody's victim. I mean, they let me see that there were challenges and things that might be harder for me, but they never allowed me to see myself as a victim. I feel like you're getting at this whole issue of how it is you either see yourself as a victim or you see yourself as a subject of your own existence.

LORETTA J. ROSS

I don't know if it's quite that clear cut because I have been a victim. I don't know how clean we should keep this, but at age 11 I was kidnapped from a girl scout outing and raped. I don't have any problem claiming victimhood for that particular incident that happened to me because that wasn't psychological, that was physical. At 10 years old family got shot at in Mississippi that ain't psychological, that's physical. The point I'm making instead is that I make the conscious decision that I'm not going to let other people's dirty fingerprints determine who I am.

Bad stuff happens to everybody. We get the choice to determine whether or not it's going to be the definer of us. That's what I'm saying. So it's not just about saying I'm nobody's victim. I was victimized but there's more to Loretta Ross than that victim. I am going to be who I want to be while the hurt people who hurt me, they're who they are.

I'm not going to take responsibility for what they've done. I can only take responsibility for what I do. So it's not about whether or not as a black person, we should call ourselves the victims of white supremacy. I think that goes without saying white supremacy is an ideology that has victimized black people. I mean, let's not try to hide that,

but obviously there's a difference between white supremacy, the ideology and whiteness is an identity. I mean because obviously all white people aren't white supremacist and all white supremacists unfortunately are not white.

#### MARIO JOHONSON

Yeah, really great point. Wonderful transition to the last segment. So the last segment is hijacking progress, halting the movement and derailing the social justice process. Professor Ross, can you talk about how personal trauma can inspire and/or undermine a social justice movement? If possible, please relate your response to the notion of social justice bridge builders, which you've spoken of on various occasions. Thank you.

#### LORETTA J. ROSS

Well, one of the things that complicates our social justice and human rights work is that by definition, we include a lot of people who have been traumatized by life. That's what draws them into the work. What they've been through. Now the problem is, is that we have not learned to use that trauma as fuel instead of using it as a way to attack each other with it. So I say a couple of things, why are we surprised by everybody we work with has traumatized.

We should be better prepared because we should anticipate that. Secondly, our movement is not your personal therapy space. When you have been traumatized, you need professional help not just bringing it to the movement and act like we're going to sit there and figure out how to keep you 'safe', how to keep you from being triggered and all that stuff.

Because there's no such thing as a safe space. I never used trigger warning, for example. I mean there's no such thing as a safe space, we can create safe but not space, but safe spaces is nothing but an over promise. Even at the Rape Crisis Center, we would provide counseling to victims but we knew we were sending them back out into the world at best what could be spread as an emotional bandage, but we couldn't guarantee that they would not be violated again.

So I really trouble the expectation that people coming into social justice or human rights work won't be made uncomfortable. Won't be afraid. I'm afraid every day and I still do the right thing. I mean, this is called adulting in my opinion. So I don't over promise that, "Oh, we're never going to say anything that troubles you or make you uncomfortable." I mean, growth by definition is uncomfortable. I'd love to be able to go to the gym and get slim with no pain, but that's not how it works. Broke by definition is painful, but it should be joyfully painful as opposed to punishingly painful.

#### LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Well, I think that there's the whole ... It's interesting because I think you used the word safe. I think both at the college level and at the school level trying to figure out what a safe space looks like for students, particularly as it

relates to the issues of racism and other isms is difficult. What is your take on what that classroom space should look like and is the goal to make it safe or as safe as can be?

LORETTA J. ROSS

Well, I often ask my students that they get to tell me what they want me to do and I'll tell you whether I can deliver it. I said, there's basically two options. I can protect you from reality or I can teach you about it, but I cannot do both at the same time. So tell me which one you want. Then in one role, I'm going to euphemizing and hide all the pain from you because that's the mommy role so you know that's not my preference.

But as an educator, my job is to teach you about reality. But the difference is how do you teach it? Because the most effective, competent teachers in the world do it with love, not hazing, not punishment. I want you to feel fun learning about this hard stuff. I want you to feel joy of growth, not the fear of growth. There is no reason we have to be so punitive in how we teach. I think that's an awful pedagogical approach because it makes people afraid of learning, fearful of saying the wrong thing, fearful of getting the answer wrong, all of those kinds of things.

So just because some of us were brutalized in our education, there's no reason for us to replicate that brutality nowadays, we should know better. So I get 50 white kids every semester who take joy in learning about white supremacy because I don't teach them how to feel guilty about being white, I teach them to feel joy in being a white person, fighting against white supremacy. I teach them how to repurpose that identity, not feel ashamed of that identity.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Well, I think there's an interesting point that you're making Professor Ross about, when I think about it, the scholarship and what the calling out culture does to scholarship and does to education in terms of what is the role of education and how should it play out? So I'd like to hear a little more about your thoughts on that in terms of what calling out you think does to scholarship and what it does to educational institutions.

LORETTA J. ROSS

Well, the current academic system is set up as a hazing ritual. I mean every thesis or dissertation you ever read first outlines what everybody else did wrong so that then you can come and correct the record with your paper, right? So we're taught that rigorous scholarship demands that we be hyper critical of everybody else.

Well, that's one way to teach. I'm saying it is not the only way to teach. So we have to in a way overcome that academic training in order to become more effective in my mind, free every based empowerment teachers, because you can't teach people effectively if you make them feel bad about the learning process. Why would anybody walk into a setting where they're going to feel worse about themselves than before they came?

We're trying to go up against human nature here and then we call it rigor or discipline or whatever we imagine that we're calling it. When in fact we're basically disempowering people through our knowledge, we weaponize our knowledge and power instead of sharing it, distributing it and by the way admitting what we don't know. So I prefer a shared learning environment and I certainly don't like it being punitive or all the different ways that people imagine that academic rigor is achieved.

I think we've got much more options than we've used in the past for fear. Yeah, I remember when bell hooks wrote her first book, bell hooks is a famous black feminist and she wrote her first book *Ain't I A Woman* and I bought bell to Washington D.C. Because it was the first black feminist book that I just read with.

I mean she explained all these things that I had felt, but I couldn't put into words, but it was so accessible. So when I first talked to bell, bell said, "I wanted my first book to be the one my grandma could understand." Then she got attacked for it not being academically sturdy or whatever. So then she came back and wrote her second book *feminism From Margin to Center* and it took me three dictionaries to understand all that postmodern. So she proved she could, but with her writing, she also proves that she doesn't have to do it that way. She's making a choice.

MARIO JOHNSON

So on this topic of weaponizing, Professor Ross, what are some insights you can share around the phenomenon of weaponizing personal identity within a larger social justice and human rights movement?

LORETTA J. ROSS

Well, I find that maybe we have not been as good as passing along the lessons that Bernice Reagon had in her article *Coalition Politics* or The Combahee River Collective offered us in 1977. But the whole purpose of identity politics is to find out who you are, number one, what are your key issues and who shares that identity with you who have those shared experiences.

But that's just the first step. That's not the final step because once you figure out who you are and what your key issues are, your second step should be now, who can I work with whether it's overlap, who don't share my identity, who don't share my lived experiences. But right now too many people are using identity politics as an ideological trap and they assume that someone must share their own identity or their own experiences in order to work with them.

That's nothing but identity determinism, that's assuming. Of course, it's just illogical too because Zora Neale Hurston said *All my skinfolk ain't kinfolk*. I mean, did you miss that memo, kind of did. I've seen a lot of young people get caught up in that identity politics thing. Like if you're not black firm like I am, then you can't at all understand what I am going through kind of approach.

Because they actually feel unsafe people who don't share their identity, but that identity primitivism is really what's making them fail to see the political overlap that they may benefit from, from people who don't have their identity.



Where just because someone doesn't have your doesn't mean they don't have your politics. Well, you might be trying to coalesce with people who have politics that are totally antithetical to what you believe in just because they share a race or a gender with you.

So I try to get people to elevate their analysis, to elevate their activism so that they can do a better threat assessment, but also a more effective way to do solidarity work and build a power through solidarity work necessary to bring about the changes that you deserve and require. You can't do that of a coalition of people who are only just like you. That ain't going to ever build enough power.

Then within those coalition, there's all kinds of micro dividing going on. So you could also assume you have the same identity till you come across. Well, who's urban, who's rural, who listens to rap, who listens to this, who rides a bike, who eats vegetarian. I mean if you use a framework of micro divisiveness, eventually it's all going to turn inward anyway.

#### LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Well it's interesting, Professor Ross, because it seems like on some levels you've really focused in on efficacy on what is the most efficacious approach to promote human rights and systemic change. Again, I think it bears going back to given your own history and all you've been through, why do you believe this is the way?

#### LORETTA J. ROSS

Because nobody's come up with anything better. After I've been 50 years of trying and thousands and thousands of books and analysis. I keep saying to people who think that they're going to poo-poo Dr. King or poo-poo Ella Baker or poo-poo all our ancestors. I'm tired of people trying to out King king. Because unless you come up with something better, I don't have to listen to your half developed, and trying to keep it clean, have people dismissal of what's gone on before when you don't have anything better to offer in its place.

Now there're reasons to be skeptical of the human rights framework. I'm not denying that, it's a very fragile system depending on nation state systems and we can talk about that. Why we America has never lived up to its human rights promise, but that doesn't mean human rights is a bad framework. It means that America has encoded human rights violations into its DNA. That's a different question. So, yeah, we've got our critics, our skeptics, and our naysayers, but like I simplified it. I said, why are you trying to out King king when you haven't even tried his formula yet?

#### MARIO JOHONSON

Wow. So my last question has to do with the radical power of love. You often center love as the framework for profound, deep human rights work, that it comes back to the most simple idea that we all seek, which is love. Can you

speaking to the radical conception you have of love as the framework for building the socially just and human rights, conscious social fabric and framework that we all desire

LORETTA J. ROSS

To me, radical love starts with radical self love and I'm not talking about it in a narcissistic way. But I believe so strongly in my integrity that I basically say protect the integrity damn the reputation. Because your reputation as a science fiction writer once wrote. Is what others think that they know about you, but your integrity is what you know about yourself. So my practice of radical love starts with guarding my integrity so fiercely that I actually keep indifferent to my reputation because I have no control over what other people think about me, but I always want to be in control of what I think about myself.

Once I express radical love for myself, that means that I have an endless fountain of it to offer to other people. But if I feel self hatred, then generally that's how you express that to other people, as well. Because how you feel about yourself is always relieved in how you treat and feel about others.

MARIO JOHNSON

Luthern, I'm going to let you present our last question to Professor Ross.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Yeah. Professor Ross, it's interesting because one of the reasons we have these Critical Conversations is I think that the member schools that have joined, part of the mission is that we realize there's an urgent need to cultivate human beings with the kind of consciousness where they can embrace the full spectrum of humanity and can build cooperation across differences and reach compromise to deal with the global challenges they face.

You have a room full of educators and institutions throughout the nation. What do you want us to do in order to be able to make this calling in culture come alive so that we can develop these kinds of human beings.

LORETTA J. ROSS

I'd like us to reimagine our pedagogy, reimagine what effective learning is, reimagine what affirming the full humanity of every one of our students is and reimagine our ability to work together to solve common problems. Instead of just assuming that they're intractable, they can't be solved. I just love seeing us. I love debate and I love struggles. Let me just say that, because this ain't about just being nice and civil to each other. I am so not that girl.

So I love effective debate, but I dislike [ad hominem 00:55:19] attacks because once you started personally attacking me, I know you've lost the argument on its points and that's the refuge of the ill equipped of the people who want to make me feel as bad as they presently feel.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

LORETTA J. ROSS

I don't have to own that narrative, that's yours. But so I think that we have lots of possibilities here. I'm so excited. I didn't start teaching until I was 62 years old. So I'm late to this educational project. I did community organizing for 50 years before I became ... Well, I've always been a community educator, but a formal academic. So I think is a wonderful chance to reimagine what we're offering in our classrooms what we're doing as preparation.

I'm a little peeved as a college professor, how ill prepared the K through 12 students come to our classroom. It's like at age 18, we're supposed to help them become adults and overcome all the knowledge that was kept from them before age 18. The students in my class, particularly the first year, the first thing they say is, "I am so angry that none of this information was given to me before I came to college." Why? Why do we allow that?

MARIO JOHONSON

That makes us certainly proud of our school. Thank you, Professor Ross and Luthern Williams. This has been an incredibly informative, engaging discussion. We would like to invite participants to join New Roads, its partner schools and corporate sponsors to a debriefing session of this dynamic discussion with professor Loretta J. Ross. This event will take place on December 2nd at 5:00 PM, Pacific Standard Times and invitations will be sent out via email.

We are so incredibly grateful for your presence with us today. We feel sustained. We feel nurtured. We feel supported. We feel held and we feel enlightened by everything that you shared with us here today. We hope that you will come back and join us again and maybe even we'll get a chance to have you in our theater with us in real life, we will actually be able to be together.

LORETTA J. ROSS

Well, now that we've thought talked about theory. I hope that you all do some intentional work around the practice of this theory. How to implement this stuff because we have a vision, but we need all of our minds and all of our generations and all of our identity to figure out how to make this a working plan.

MARIO JOHONSON

That's round two Luthern, Head of school, that's round two.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Well, that's the next step. Martin Luther King had a dream and now we know he had a plan too.

LORETTA J. ROSS

Well, thank you all for having me.

MARIO JOHONSON

Thank you so much, Professor.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Thank you So much, Loretta, for sharing your wisdom. I mean, cannot wait to read your book and I think you did a bell hooks tonight.

LORETTA J. ROSS

I wish. Thank you. That was quite an honor to [crosstalk 00:58:37] someone who's one of my heros. Bye-bye you all.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Bye-bye.

MARIO JOHONSON

Goodnight everyone.

**CRITICAL**

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