So you want to talk about race

you have to try to adjust to the feelings of shame and pain that come from being confronted with your own racism. You have to get over the fear of facing the worst in yourself. You should instead fear unexamined racism. Fear the thought that right now, you could be contributing to the oppression of others and you don’t know it. But do not fear those who bring that oppression to light. Do not fear the opportunity to do better.

So You Want to Talk About Race
by Ijeoma Oluo
pp. 225 - 238

Talking is great, but what else can I do?

"I’m sure if we could just talk about it, you’d have me all straightened out."

This was the stubborn insistence from a theater director who had just finished loudly repeating “nigger” to a group of people of color at what had at first been a wonderful dinner discussing an upcoming art project and how we could ensure that it would be inclusive. A lot of painstaking effort had gone into making sure that the people of color (many queer and trans) felt safe in this environment. It is very hard as a person of color to feel comfortable in Seattle, especially in the upper echelons of the local art scene. But we were bringing a different show to this theater, one that focused on voices of color and hoped to bring in a community of color.
So you want to talk about race

So we had gathered for dinner to talk about how we could accomplish this.

Everything had been going well, until one of the theater directors, a white man, decided after what was likely a few too many drinks to tell a story that he felt required him to say “nigger” loudly and repeatedly, without warning. Each time he said it, people of color at the table flinched as the word hit. It wasn’t just the word “nigger”—we’ve all heard it. It was the fact that it had come after we’d let our guard down, after so much effort to let us know we were safe.

The dinner ended very quickly after that.

Once it was over, the head of the group that was going to be performing let the director know that what had just gone down was unacceptable and that they would not feel comfortable performing unless the staff of the theater underwent racial justice and awareness training to ensure that this would not happen again.

The director looked at me pleadingly. He didn’t need training. He knew a lot of black people. He grew up with black people. He was practically black himself. He just needed to talk. With me. He repeatedly insisted that if I could just sit with him in a bar and talk this out with him, whatever had caused him to drunkenly repeat “nigger” at a dinner table surrounded by people of color would never happen again.

But I did not want to talk with this man, especially not over drinks. I had just been talking with this man, we all had. We had just spent hours talking about racial and social justice, and he still decided to say “nigger.” I wanted this man to take some action for change.

Talking is great, but what else can I do?

If you want to talk about race, there is plenty of opportunity. There are countless memes you post, tons of outrage you can share, limitless “thought exercises” you can participate in. But it is easy to get caught up in this talk and think you are doing so much more than just that—talk.

While many people are afraid to talk about race, just as many use talk to hide from what they really fear: action. The more that I write about race, the more I’ve been surrounded by this talk disguised as action. From the white men using my Facebook and Twitter feeds as their own virtue signaling playground, to the white women sending me five-paragraph-long emails letting me know how the racial oppression of people of color makes them feel personally—I’ve seen how addicted people can get to the satisfaction of knowing they are saying all the right things, that they are having “deep conversations”—so addicted that it becomes the end-all and be-all of their racial justice goals.

I write about concepts that I think people are not understanding. I write about pieces of the puzzle that I think people aren’t seeing. I write from perspectives that I think many people don’t get to hear. I do not do this just to increase general knowledge. I do not do this just to make people feel better. I do this in the hopes that what I write and say, and what others write and say, will inform and inspire action.

But so often, that is missed.

Recently I was explaining online and on a local radio station why I will not be participating in a local protest March focusing on women’s issues. I had been asked to speak, and told how very important it was that the event have speakers who were
women of color, especially in a predominantly white area like Seattle. I asked what the commission for speaking was, and was told that speakers were expected to donate their time and services. I declined the invitation.

When I wrote about why I would not be participating in the march, I explained that I could not ignore how much the economic exploitation of women of color had contributed to the racial oppression of women of color. And I did not believe that women of color should be asked to put forth the emotional and mental labor of discussing their racial oppression to a majority white audience for free, especially an event with a large budget like this one. I was very careful in my explanation of why I felt that this ask was problematic, and how important it is for us to not further exploitation and oppression within our movements.

It wasn’t long before I got a message in response from a white woman I didn’t know. She understood that I didn’t want to work for free, but she didn’t understand how asking for that work had been exploitative. Could I please take the time to explain to her further, personally (and, I’m assuming, for free), so she could understand?

She is not alone. Countless people read my work about racial justice and instead of taking action, want to shake that Etch A Sketch like it never happened and ask for the same conversation all over again.

I’ve lost count of the times I’ve had to end a conversation with someone about race, because instead of listening and engaging they were trying to deny my experiences as a woman of color and bully me into agreeing with them, only to have them reach out later that day to ask me to join them for coffee in order to “talk some more” about the subject. After a few times of agreeing to “talk some more” and once again finding myself “talked over” I realized that “talk” was all they wanted to get out of it.

At least once a week an organization will ask me to come talk, free of charge, to them about race. They are big fans of my work and just want to be able to have their own private conversations with me. “We would like a safe space to really get educated,” one said. These are people who have read my work, had likely stopped by on social media to “like” posts and leave encouraging comments. These are people who have read my words on the mental, physical, and financial exploitation of black people and especially black women and the way in which it contributes to oppression. They have read the pain in my stories, and it resonated with them enough that they wanted me to repeat it all on demand, for free. This is talk that will make them sad, make them frustrated, make them cry. But it won’t make them take action. They want to feel better, but they don’t want to do better.

Words matter, and I’m not just saying that because they are my job. Words help us interpret our world, and can be used to change the way in which we think and act. Words are always at the heart of all our problems, and the beginning of all our solutions.

We cannot understand race and racial oppression if we cannot talk about it. And we can never stop the racial oppression affecting millions of lives in this country if we do not understand how and why it has been able to hold such power over us for hundreds of years.

But understanding, on its own, will never equal action. There are a lot of complex issues out there that many of us
So you want to talk about race

have talked a lot about and understand fairly well. Take, for example, global warming. The vast majority of Americans believe in global warming and understand that it is likely brought on by pollution. And while we talk about global warming and worry about global warming, most of us go about our days the same as we did before we ever heard the term because it’s just easier to talk than to do. And global warming continues.

Until we have dismantled the system of White Supremacy and racial oppression, we will always need to talk about it. And I hope that you will use what you’ve read in this book to talk about it more successfully. And I hope that, as you continue to have these conversations about race, you will see opportunities for action and use what you’ve learned from your conversations to make that action more effective at dismantling oppression.

Talk. Please talk and talk and talk some more. But also act. Act now, because people are dying now in this unjust system. How many lives have been ground up by racial prejudice and hate? How many opportunities have we already lost? Act and talk and learn and fuck up and learn some more and act again and do better. We have to do this all at once. We have to learn and fight at the same time. Because people have been waiting far too long for their chance to live as equals in this society.

Talking is great, but what else can I do?

right now to help create real change in the fight against racial oppression, if you are looking for your little piece of the system you can dismantle, here are some ideas:

- **Vote local.** Your vote will never have more power than in local elections. This is where politicians and city and state officials have to work for your vote. And so often, this opportunity to flex local power is flushed away by those who only vote in big, sexy, national elections. Vote local and demand that anybody asking for your vote (from school board to city council to state senator) make racial justice a top priority.

- **Get in schools.** Do you know what the racial achievement gap is in your school district? Find out, and then ask your school board, principals, and teachers what they are doing to address it. Are your schools erasing the history and accomplishments of people of color from your child’s textbooks? Are your children only learning about people of color in February? Let them know that an inclusive education that meets the needs of all students is a top priority for you, even if your child is not a child of color.

- **Bear witness.** If you are a white person and you see a person of color being stopped by police, if you see a person of color being harassed in a store: bear witness and offer to help, when it is safe to do so. Sometimes just the watchful presence of another white person will make others stop and consider their actions more carefully.

- **Speak up in your unions.** I’ve watched with pride these last few years as my mother has leveraged her privilege
So you want to talk about race

at her union to help make her workplace more inclusive. A longtime union representative, my mom has not let a single meeting go by without asking about the union’s goals to promote diversity and inclusivity. When her union wrote racial justice goals into their platform for the year, she called me beaming with pride. Unions have a lot of power to combat racial discrimination and disenfranchisement at work, but only if the union decides to make it a priority.

- **Support POC-owned business.** Economic exploitation is one of the cornerstones of racial oppression. You can help preserve financial independence for people of color by working with and spending your money with POC businesses.

- **Boycott banks that prey on people of color.** The recent housing crash brought many of the racist practices of some of our biggest banks to light, but banks have been exploiting and abusing people of color for hundreds of years. Banks that sell bad loans to people of color should not get your business. Banks that hike up interest rates for people of color should not get your business. Banks that discriminate against people of color should not get your business. If you make these despicable actions by banks too costly, they will stop doing them, but not before then.

- **Give money to organizations working to fight racial oppression and support communities of color.** There are groups out there fighting every day for people of color. They are running after-school programs, giving legal advice, providing job training, providing medical services, fighting school discrimination, and so much more. And this all costs money. Give what you can to groups like the ACLU, SPLC, Planned Parenthood, NAACP, National Immigrant Justice Center, National Council of La Raza, Native American Rights Fund, Native American Disability Law Center, Asian Americans Advancing Justice, and more. Reach out to people in your local community to see what local organizations could use your financial support.

- **Boycott businesses that exploit workers of color.** Many businesses rely on cheap labor from people of color working in unhealthy conditions. Boycott businesses that cut costs by cutting out respect and living wages for workers of color.

- **Support music, film, television, art, and books created by people of color.** So much of our cultural representation is white by default. Normalize the work of people of color by financially supporting it and asking your producers, museum owners, studios, radio stations, and publishers for more.

- **Support increases in the minimum wage.** Yes, there are many reasons why so many people of color are so much poorer than white people. But we cannot ignore the fact that a larger proportion of people of color work in lower-wage jobs, and that a raise in those wages will disproportionately help people of color and can help address the vast racial wealth gap in this country.

- **Push your mayor and city council for police reform.** It is almost guaranteed that whatever city or town you live in, its police force can better serve its population of
So you want to talk about race

color. Ask your mayor what he or she is doing to address racial bias in policing. What training are officers undergoing? Do your officers have body cams? What sort of civilian oversight is there when there has been a complaint of bias, discrimination, or abuse? Put pressure on your city government to make this a priority, and keep that pressure up, otherwise police unions will bully city government into supporting the status quo, even if it risks the lives of black and brown people in your neighborhood.

• **Demand college diversity.** If you are in college, getting ready for college, or have a kid going to college, let your college know that the diversity and inclusiveness of students, curriculum, and staff is a top priority for you. Make sure colleges know that you expect any quality higher-education institution to embrace and promote diversity if they expect your tuition money.

• **Vote for diverse government representatives.** Help put people of color into the positions of power where they can self-advocate for the change that their communities need. Support candidates of color and support platforms that make diversity, inclusion, and racial justice a priority.

I know that the issue of racism and racial oppression seems huge—and it is huge. But it is not insurmountable. When we look at it in its entirety, it seems like too much, but understand that the system is invested in you seeing it that way. The truth is, we all pull levers of this white supremacist system, every day. The way we vote, where we spend our money, what we do and do not call out—these are all pieces of the system. We cannot talk our way out of a racially oppressive system. We can talk our way into understanding, and we can then use that understanding to act.

I'll never forget the outrage in 2016 over a district prosecutor who refused to press charges against a cop who was filmed shooting an unarmed black man. People were tweeting their anger at the prosecutor, sharing Facebook posts about how frustrated they were that once again, a cop was going to get away with murder. But when I looked up information for the district attorney, I realized that he was up for reelection later that year. I immediately started replying to the Tweets and messages of frustration that I was seeing: "THIS PERSON IS RUNNING FOR REELECTION—GIVE YOUR MONEY TO HIS CHALLENGER. MAKE AN EXAMPLE OF HIM." Because I already knew that if moral arguments and outrage were going to persuade a district attorney to press charges against an officer for shooting an unarmed black person, we would have seen more than only eighteen officers charged with unlawful death in 2015, in over 1,100 killings of civilians by police that year. But everyone responds to threats to their livelihood. And declining to indict an officer when there is video proof of severe misconduct should be a decision that a prosecuting attorney cannot afford to make.

We saw that action take hold in the March 2015 reelection bid of Cook County State’s Attorney Anita Alvarez, who after numerous high-profile police brutality cases where Alvarez was seen as less than responsive—including what many view to be a cover-up and thirteen-month delay in pressing charges in the horrific shooting of seventeen-year-old Laquan McDonald, who was shot sixteen times as he walked away from officers—was handed a resounding defeat to challenger
So you want to talk about race

Kim Foxx. This defeat was the result not only of numerous protests in and around Chicago, but of organized efforts of Chicago activists to support Alvarez’s challenger and get out the vote on election day. Not only was a prosecutor that many felt was a defender of police brutality and corruption removed from office, but a warning message was sent to prosecutors around the country: you cannot afford to protect a corrupt and violent police system.

You don’t always win the fight at first, but small actions add up, especially when you don’t give up. In my hometown of Seattle in 2016, activists were engaged in a fight with the city over plans to build the most expensive new police precinct in the country. In a city with a housing crisis leading to rising homelessness, school funding so poor that the state supreme court has declared that it is in violation of the state constitution, and a rising opioid addiction problem—many balked at the thought of spending $160 million on a new police building. Add to that the fact that the Seattle Police Department was found by the federal government in 2011 to be practicing widespread abuse against its citizens and put under consent decree to reform its practices, and the fact that the consent decree process still had not been completed as of 2016, many felt that our cops who had been dragging their feet at reform did not deserve a shiny new building with taxpayer dollars.

Yes, we talked about it on social media—spreading the word about why the prevention of this new department headquarters (nicknamed “the bunker”) was important. But we also took action. City council meetings were filled with concerned citizens waiting hours for the public comment period to voice their shock that the city would be taking money that could go to so many in need, and giving it to a police system already found to be broken and failing in their promises of reform. At first, it was defeat after defeat. I remember taking my sons with me to a city council meeting where there were so many “Block the Bunker” people there that we were moved into an overflow room. We watched people get up to speak, sixty seconds each, for over two hours, only to have the City Council vote 11 to 1 to move forward with the project. My nine-year-old held his “Black Lives Matter” sign and asked “Why aren’t they listening to us?”

But we didn’t give up. The bunker was brought up at every public event the mayor or members of the city council attended. Every city council meeting, members of the council had to stare at an ocean of Seattleites wearing “Block the Bunker” T-shirts and holding “Black Lives Matter” signs. When the mayor voiced his intention to attend a highly popular community block party, he was informed by organizers that he could come, but they wanted him to know that they did not approve of his support of the new police headquarters. People wrote to our local newspapers and television stations asking them to increase their coverage of the Block the Bunker movement.

Eventually, the tide began to change. Our major local papers, usually the voice of the status quo, came out against the new headquarters. More city council members voiced their concern. Finally, after almost a year of protest, the mayor announced that he was shelving the $160 million project. Then activists, partnered with Seattle City Council member Kshama Sawant, were able to get the city to commit a large portion of
So you want to talk about race

those funds to low-income housing. It was one of the highlights of my year to be able to tell my kids that they had helped bring positive change to our city, that we can accomplish just about anything if we don’t give up.

All around the country people are effecting real change with small actions. Change that improves the lives of people of color in their towns and cities and weakens an oppressive system. Racial oppression starts in our homes, our offices, our cities, and our states, and it can end there as well. So start talking, not just problems, but solutions. We can do this, together.

Acknowledgments

There are so many people to thank. I have been so lucky in my life, I could fill an entire book with the names of those who have helped get me here. It is very stressful to boil down these acknowledgments to a page (or two), but I must try.

My mother, Susan, raised my brother and sister and me on her own, through extreme poverty and heartbreak. With all of the pressures that she was under, all of the ups and downs of being a single parent, not once in my life did I ever feel like she didn’t love me. Not once in my life did I ever feel like she didn’t believe in me, or that I had let her down. I realize now what a rare gift that is that she gave us. Mommy: Thank you. I love you. And I will change your diapers when you get old, I promise.