

LISTEN: Longtime Activist Loretta Ross Speaks Out Against The Call-Out Culture  
By MORGAN SPRINGER • AUG 13, 2020

Morgan Springer ([00:00](#)):

I'm Morgan Springer from NEXT and the New England News Collaborative. When a peer says something you think is racist, ignorant, or wrong, what do you do? Most people agree that staying silent is not a good idea, but do you talk to them privately or take them to task publicly. Known as call-out culture, some think public shaming is a way to further social justice and change, but not everyone agrees with that approach. Loretta Ross is one of them. She's an activist, visiting associate professor at Smith College in Massachusetts and the author of the upcoming book "Calling In the Calling Out Culture: Detoxing Our Movement." Ross strongly supports calling out people in power, but says, call-out culture among peers of the same social status is toxic. Last year, we spoke to her on NEXT.

Loretta Ross ([00:49](#)):

They immediately get defensive because they feel like you're attacking their character, their morality. And so it doesn't produce the positive outcome that you may desire when the people have shut down, become defensive, become angry and doubled down on what they've said or done

Morgan Springer ([01:10](#)):

Today, we want to continue that conversation with Professor Ross in the context of recent protests that have brought more awareness of systemic racism in America. Professor Ross, welcome back to NEXT.

Loretta Ross

Thanks for having me on your show.

Morgan Springer

So before we get to your views on call-out culture, I want to learn a little bit more about what motivated you to become an activist. And it's my understanding that your activism began in the 1970s at the age of 16, when you were a first-year student at Howard University, what happened?

Speaker 2 ([01:42](#)):

My consciousness began to get raised even before I came to Howard. I was the victim of rape and incest in my high school years. And I ended up having that baby. And so I came to Howard as a single mother with trauma. And the first things that people put in my hands were the Autobiography of Malcolm X and The Black Woman by Toni Cade. And that rocked my world because I had not really been exposed to a lot of political reading before that. I came from a very conservative family. And so it took off from there. Washington DC was a hotbed of political activism.

Morgan Springer ([02:27](#)):

So amongst all those experiences, your role as an activist is born. Was it apparent to you at that age that call-out culture or cancel culture was toxic?

Loretta Ross ([02:37](#)):

We used to spend a lot of time trying to decide who was politically relevant – cause that was our favorite word at the time. It became quite sectarian. People criticizing each other for the wrong way they were thinking or the wrong way they were dressing because it was the day of the big Afro. And through the years, what I noticed was that many times, even though we argued, fussed and fought, we

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really did figure out a way to unite in the face of a common opponent. And so what drew me to the call-out book that I'm writing, was about six years ago, I observed that somehow social media had made the criticisms that we were making privately to each other, become a very public and very minor. Because they weren't really over anything substantive sometimes, it was just the way someone looked or the way someone used the wrong word. And so I said, well, why aren't we calling each other in? Because in fact, a call in is a call out done with love.

Morgan Springer ([03:53](#)):

It seems like anger could be a main emotion behind calling out. Would part of this practice of calling in, be about channeling that anger into something else?

Loretta Ross ([04:06](#)):

Well, anger is a logical response to be hurt. Your first impulse is to hurt others, but anger is not a real sustainable emotion because I've found in my experience that anger eats me up inside. It doesn't provide me any joy. It doesn't provide me any peace. It really depends on my analysis of how intentional the harm was. I mean, if you hurt me on purpose, then you're going to get a totally different response than calling in. But if it was inadvertent, then I'm going to pause, stop and ask, 'Well, when you said that, could you tell me a little bit about more of what was going on with you when you said that?'

I've had dreadlocks for 40 years? For example, I actually had a woman searching for a way to compliment my hair. And she said, 'I love your hair. Do you wash it?' And it took me aback. I wanted to respond, 'Yes, I washed my hair. Do you wash yours?' But I realized that she was trying to figure out what dreadlocks were. And so I said to her, 'Yes, I do. And do you want to know more about my hair?'

Morgan Springer ([05:30](#)):

And, and just to clarify, I mean, you're not suggesting that people just let things go at all. You're just saying, hold people accountable in a different way.

Loretta Ross ([05:40](#)):

Absolutely. It's not about letting people off the hook or giving people a pass, but it's seeking to not do more harm when you're trying to hold someone accountable. I think that we need to seek a different set of tools that are centered on respecting not only the human rights of the person who was harmed, but the human rights of the person who did the harm because no one comes out the wound wanting to be a human rights violator. That is a trained conditioning. Now there are people that I do de-platform: hypocrites and Nazis are at the top of my list. But at the same time, I really don't think that I'm surrounded by hypocrites and Nazis.

Morgan Springer ([06:25](#)):

As I mentioned at the top, you've said that you fully support calling out people in positions of power. Now, some would argue that many white people like myself are inherently in a position of power because they're white and have benefited from white supremacy. So they might say it's not a problem if they're held accountable publicly. What do you think about that?

Loretta Ross ([06:50](#)):

Well, white supremacy is a body of ideas. It's not a race of people. If you have those toxic ideas around white privilege and white superiority, then I'm probably going to have a different conversation with you,

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because that means you subscribe to those ideas. If you are living whiteness differently, where you're rejecting white supremacy and trying to manage and deal with your white entitlement, then I'm going to have a different conversation with you. The other thing about white supremacist ideas is that you don't have to be white to have them.

Morgan Springer ([07:30](#)):

One of the things that seems to be happening – and maybe you have a different perspective on this – is this kind of group-think, like there is one way to be anti-racist, there is one way to be an activist and if you don't do that one way, you're not anti-racist, you're not a good ally, you're not a good activist. Are you seeing that heightened in this moment?

Loretta Ross ([07:51](#)):

Well, I think that people are leaning far more into judging each other's activism than perhaps I've experienced in the past, because they have an artificially induced expectation of how pure politics should be or how pure activism should be. And that doesn't deal with the messiness of life, politics or activism. You don't really have to criticize other people's activism because there's enough oppression to go around, and they can work on it in their way, and you can work on it in your way, and trust me, you'll never run out of oppression. And yet I find that young people have this false illusion that there's only one perfect way to be an activist, and they are immensely self-critical because they always think they're not doing enough, that they should be doing more. That they've got to stay silent in case somebody calls them out because they might use the wrong word or suggest the wrong strategy. And instead of building the movement, we're building fear in the movement.

Speaker 1 ([09:05](#)):

That was Loretta Ross, an activist and visiting associate professor at Smith College in Massachusetts. Her book “Calling In the Calling Out Culture: Detoxing Our Movement” comes out in 2021. Listen to NEXT on NPR one or wherever you get your podcasts.