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What if Instead of Calling People Out, We Called Them In?

Prof. Loretta J. Ross is combating cancel culture
with a popular class at Smith College.

By Jessica Bennett

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THE GREAT READ: Every weekday, we recommend one piece of exceptional writing from The Times — a narrative or essay that takes you someplace you might not expect to go.

Nyla Conaway, 19, remembers being “called out” for changing her profile picture on Instagram in solidarity for ... something. She can’t quite remember what for, only that an older student she didn’t know told her it was a scam. “It just made me feel really embarrassed, like a ton of people had seen it and now I just looked really stupid,” she said.

Katie Wehrman, 18, still feels guilty for calling out a boy in her high school for something he said about a local politician and L.G.B.T.Q. rights — schooling him in an all-class Snapchat group.

Sophia Hanna, 18, has never been called out herself, but has spent more time than she’d like to admit during this pandemic watching two beauty bloggers call each other out.

“It just fires something emotionally,” she said, noting that she doesn’t even like makeup tutorials. “There’s like a dopamine trigger that makes me keep scrolling.”

The women are students in a class taught by Loretta J. Ross, a visiting professor at Smith College who is challenging them to identify the characteristics, and limits,

of call-out culture: the act of publicly shaming another person for behavior deemed unacceptable. Calling out may be described as a sister to dragging, cousin to problematic, and one of the many things that can add up to cancellation.

“I am challenging the call-out culture,” Professor Ross said from her home in Atlanta, where she was lecturing on Zoom to students on a recent evening, in a blue muumuu from Ghana. “I think you can understand how calling out is toxic. It really does alienate people, and makes them fearful of speaking up.”

‘Uncomfortable Conversations’

That perspective has made Professor Ross, 67, an unlikely figure in the culture wars. A radical Black feminist who has been doing human rights work for four decades, she was one of the signatories of a widely denounced letter in Harper’s Magazine, for which she herself was called out. “There’s such an irony for being called out for calling out the calling-out culture,” she said. “It really was amusing.”

At Smith College, Professor Ross teaches courses called White Supremacy in the Age of Trump, of which the “calling in” module is part, and Reproductive Justice. Yet she tells students when they enroll: “If you need a trigger warning or a safe space, I urge you to drop this class.”

“I think we overuse that word ‘trigger’ when really we mean discomfort,” she said. “And we should be able to have uncomfortable conversations.”

She doesn’t believe people should be publicly shamed for accidentally misgendering a classmate, which she once did, leading to a Title IX complaint that was later dismissed; for sending a stupid tweet they now regret; or for, say, admitting they once liked a piece of pop culture now viewed in a different light, such as “The Cosby Show.”

“If it were on TV right now, I’d watch the reruns,” she said.

“What I’m really impatient with is calling people out for something they said when they were a teenager when they’re now 55. I mean, we all at some point did some unbelievably stupid stuff as teenagers, right?”

Professor Ross thinks call-out culture has taken conversations that could have once been learning opportunities and turned them into mud wrestling on message boards, YouTube comments, Twitter and at colleges like Smith, where proving one's commitment to social justice has become something of a varsity sport.

"I think this is also related to something I just discovered called doom scrolling," Professor Ross told the students. "I think we actually sabotage our own happiness with this unrestrained anger. And I have to honestly ask: Why are you making choices to make the world crueler than it needs to be and calling that being 'woke'?"

The antidote to that outrage cycle, Professor Ross believes, is "calling in." Calling in is like calling out, but done privately and with respect. "It's a call out done with love," she said. That may mean simply sending someone a private message, or even ringing them on the telephone (!) to discuss the matter, or simply taking a breath before commenting, screen-shotting or demanding one "do better" without explaining how.

Calling out assumes the worst. Calling in involves conversation, compassion and context. It doesn't mean a person should ignore harm, slight or damage, but nor should she, he or they exaggerate it. "Every time somebody disagrees with me it's not 'verbal violence.'" Professor Ross said. "I'm not getting 're-raped.' Overstatement of harm is not helpful when you're trying to create a culture of compassion."

There was call-out culture when Professor Ross was young. "We called it 'trashing,'" she said, referring to a term used by Jo Freeman, in an essay in Ms., to describe infighting within the women's movement.

"It used to be you'd be calling someone out to a duel. This is how Alexander Hamilton got shot!" Professor Ross said. "What's new is the virality and the speed and the anonymity."

Civil conversation between parties who disagree has also been part of activism, including her own, for quite some time.

As executive director of the D.C. Rape Crisis Center from 1979 to 1982, she used her own story of sexual assault to facilitate a conversation with incarcerated rapists, teaching them Black feminist theory.

She worked to improve the participation of women of color as a program director at the National Organization for Women and is credited, along with 11 others, as having coined the term “reproductive justice” — a combination of “reproductive rights” and “social justice” in response to what they believed was missing from Bill Clinton’s 1994 health care reform plan.

Later, as the program and research director for the Center for Democratic Renewal, which monitored hate groups, she found herself on a mountaintop in rural Tennessee, teaching antiracism to women whose families were members of the Ku Klux Klan.

She thought of what her organization’s founder, the Rev. C.T. Vivian — who had been Martin Luther King’s field general — told her when she started her job: “When you ask people to give up hate, you have to be there for them when they do.”

And so she was.

In the early 1990s, Professor Ross accompanied Floyd Cochran, once the national spokesman for the Aryan Nations, on a national atonement tour.

“Here’s a guy who had never done anything but be a Nazi since he was 14 years old, and now he was 35 with no job, no education, no hope. And we helped people like them,” she said. After The Los Angeles Times wrote an article about their unlikely friendship, in 1997, Professor Ross and Mr. Cochran were each paid \$10,000 for a Hollywood adaptation option of their story. But when the script came back, there was a fatal flaw: It ended with the two falling in love.

“Floyd was married, and I don’t fall in love with Nazis,” Professor Ross said.

Sometime in those years, Professor Ross found herself on a street corner in Janesville, Wis., in the dead of winter, watching as Ken Peterson — a defector from the K.K.K. — filmed an interview with “The Geraldo Rivera Show.” Mr.

Peterson and his wife, Carol, had to flee their home quickly, and Ms. Peterson was shivering in the cold.

“I stood there for the first half-hour watching her, and at some point I made the decision to share my coat with her,” Professor Ross said. “I just couldn’t maintain that anger, I couldn’t maintain that posture.”

The idea of “calling in” occurred to Professor Ross at a speech she was organizing at Smith in 2015 to honor Gloria Steinem. What was up with all the nastiness she saw on Twitter, she asked a young woman.

“Oh, you mean ‘calling out’?” the woman said.

“You-all named it?” Professor Ross said in surprise.

She soon assembled a group of students to practice the techniques of “calling in” and took the message on the road. During quarantine this summer, she began offering an online course called Calling In the Calling Out Culture, and is working on a book of the same name.

She has also been hired by nonprofits and women’s organizations to help them grapple with their own reckonings around race and gender. “I wouldn’t call myself a mediator,” she said. “I’m like a one-time consultant, rearranging relationships. ‘We’re on Indian land,’ ‘we’ve got trans students,’ ‘we’ve got buildings named after slave owners.’” The hardest part, she said, is “to convince them is that they aren’t each other’s enemies.”

‘Should I Be Concerned?’

Not that Professor Ross is conflict averse. “I have no problem calling out politicians who aren’t living up to the oaths that they swore to,” she said. She cited Colin Kaepernick, someone who quite effectively called out a powerful organization, the N.F.L. “The thing I am sharply critical of is punching down, calling out people who have less power than you simply because you can get away with it. But there is a very strategic use of punching up.”

Indeed, after the #MeToo movement and global protests of police violence in response to the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, employees have called out bosses, consumers have called out corporations, students have called out peers, and victims have called out abusers.

“Folks have figured out that social media shaming and attention makes things happen,” said Meredith Clark, an assistant professor of media studies at the University of Virginia who recently published a study of call-out culture called “Drag Them.” “It evokes apology from things and places that wouldn’t normally enter into that sort of dialogue, and it allows people who otherwise would have no recourse to influence their own experiences.”

More troublesome, Professor Ross and others agree, is when small infractions become big infractions; when context gets lost and facts are distorted, or it becomes difficult to discern between the two.

“These algorithms can’t distinguish between outrage and shaming that is proportionate and outrage and shaming that is disproportionate to the original transgression,” said Molly Crockett, an assistant professor of psychology at Yale University who studies moral outrage online.

Back on her Zoom call, Professor Ross pulled up another slide, this one with a photo of Natalie Wynn, a popular YouTuber who has put together a kind of taxonomy of call-out culture after being “canceled” multiple times.

Its characteristics include presumption of guilt (without facts or nuance getting in the way); essentialism (when criticism of bad behavior becomes criticism of a bad person); pseudo-intellectualism (proclaiming one’s moral high ground); unforgivability (no apology is good enough); and, of course, contamination, or guilt by association.

“This happened to me with the Harper’s letter,” Professor Ross said, referring to the last point. “Just the fact that my name appeared on the same letter with J.K. Rowling. I mean, give me a break. I wish I knew her and I wish she knew me, but that’s not the truth.”

As it turns out, all of that shaming may be counterproductive. Multiple studies, Ms. Crockett said, have found that shaming can make people more resistant to change.

And, as anyone who has partaken in a game of casual doom scrolling knows, it can also be bad for health — physical and mental.

When Professor Ross's students were asked to describe how thinking about a call out made them feel, they used descriptions like "pit in stomach," "nauseous" and "sweating through all my clothes."

Some said later that the prospect of call outs had made them hesitant to speak up or ask questions in classes, or endlessly planning for the arguments that might ensue.

"I had this weird moment recently where I was, like, 'Oh man, J.K. Rowling is saying some real bad stuff. It's too bad that I once supported Harry Potter,'" said Ms. Hanna, a first-year student from Nebraska, referring to comments about transgender people made by the author. "And then I took five seconds to be, like, 'I am concerned about someone finding out that I, until quite recently a child, liked a children's series?' Should I be concerned about this? This feels like it's no great thing to be concerned about."

Katherine Albert-Aranovich, a sophomore from Los Angeles, said she has deleted all of her social profiles, to try to be "removed from that negativity."

Rebecca Alvara, of Phoenix, described the mental gymnastics of trying to buy herself a hoodie with the image of a band she liked. "I was, like, 'but what if they've done something terrible? And I just don't know about it yet? Should I not buy this?' And so I panicked and I was, like, 'No, it's fine. I don't need it anyway.'"

The students are eager to practice calling in, or least trying. But they have questions.

Is interjecting calling in? What's the difference between calling in and a regular confrontation? What if calling out in fact is the most effective way to seek progress — as with, say, in the case of a public figure? And when is politely trying to "call in" simply no longer effective?

“You can’t be responsible for someone else’s inability to grow,” Professor Ross said. “So take comfort in the fact that you offered a new perspective of information and you did so with love and respect, and then you walk away.

“We have a saying in the movement: Some people you can work with and some people you can work around. But the thing that I want to emphasize is that the calling-in practice means you always keep a seat at the table for them if they come back.”

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