

Decolonizing Identity with Joe & Zoya

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, identity, Caribbean, essay, speak, thought, form, point, identity formation, part, creativity, person, question, self-inquiry, world, consciousness, research, land, version

Joe

Hey-o! Welcome to another episode of Inclusive Conversations. You're probably thinking that I am not your normal host. And you would be right. My name is Joe York, you might recognize my voice from the third episode of the podcast about money where I was the guest, or more recently, the seventh episode where I was hosting and interviewing Jen Serdetchnaia about tech, but I am friends and colleagues with your normal host, Tania and Zoya. And today, we're flipping things around, instead of Zoya playing the role of host, we're going to do the thing that she will probably hate most, put her in the spotlight and make her the guest.

To introduce Zoya— of the four of us at manifold the little design project that's producing Inclusive Conversations, I would say Zoya is the most complex. And I mean, that is a compliment. Imagine that you're sitting at a table with the four of us, me and Zoya Tania, and Nahin who you have not met yet. And we're playing a game of poker, Tania and Nahin, would probably turn around immediately and show you all their cards. And in no time, they'd have you talking and distracted, and you'd be laughing, and you'd probably forget that you're playing cards at all.

I on the other hand, would probably initially take things way too seriously, I'd be competitive. Before long though, I would get insecure, that Tania and Nahin were being more fun than I was, and I would be afraid people thought I was boring. And so, then I try and pretend to be more fun, all the while over analyzing things in my own head. And then Zoya would be the one who would keep her cards close. She'd be the smart one, she probably eventually would win. If you stuck around long enough, you'd probably realize that she's super smart, but also soulful. And during the episode, you'll hear me describe her as a little mysterious. But eventually that fades in my experience. And you see somebody who is thinking and feeling very, very deeply.

She comes from Barbados, originally. And that's the focus of her graduate research, which he calls contexture, which you can find online at our website, www.hellomanifold.com, or www.thisiscontexture.com. In the research, she is painting a picture of a decolonized Caribbean future, pursued through the nurturing of their own unique brand of creativity. And she set the research up in three parts. Today, we'll talk about just one of them called 'For the Future', which examines the formation of decolonized identity through visual arts specifically. So, in terms of my personal objectives for our conversation, just to be transparent, I've got two. One, obviously, I'd like to understand more about Zoya's research. There are some beautiful, really nuanced ideas in there that obviously deserve more discussion and thought. But secondly, and more importantly, to me, personally, at least, I would

like to use this conversation as an excuse to covertly uncover stories about what makes Zoya tick. As I said, she's kind of mysterious, akin to an onion with a bunch of secret layers, a layer cake, pick your metaphor. So, I hope you enjoy this conversation, where I will hopefully do some peeling.

Joe

It's happening.

Zoya

[laughter] Stop it. Don't tease me.

Joe

Are you nervous about speaking publicly in a way that's going to be durable such that if you say something that ultimately disqualifies you from being Prime Minister of Barbados, that 10 years from now, someone's going to dig this up and be like, 'No, she can't. She can't be the head of the UN because she said this in an interview with Joe York in 2021.'

Zoya

Okay, well, firstly, I would never be the Prime Minister of anything.

I don't think I have....

Joe

It sounds like a self-limiting belief.

Zoya

Okay, sure. I don't think I have the stomach for politics.

Joe

That's probably true. Me either. But stomachs can evolve.

Zoya

That's true. But the head of the UN is interesting.

Joe

[laughter] You're interested, okay!

Joe

All right. Well, let's position this interview as part of the foundation of your future candidacy for head of the UN.

Zoya

Okay, that's a bit much but sure.

You know what I'd like to know! I'd like to know, what did you get from reading the essay? My case study on decolonizing identity for the future for the Caribbean future.

Joe

Now who's being mischievous taking over?

Zoya

I just want to know.

Joe

I thought it was fascinating!

I've been reading this book that's about, it's like a, it's a book about religion, but it was basically about how, like the way that people in Africa were divorced from their land and how that shaped the identity formation processes, and the impact that that has on my religion specifically. And so, when I was reading that, and then reading your writing about, you know, what, what is the legacy of colonialism in what it means to be somebody from the Caribbean now, if it felt kind of like a continuation of the same discussion. So, it was it was definitely thought provoking. Illuminating.

And I especially liked the I've also, I had a friend who did a consulting project last year, that was about technology, and healthy relationship with technology. And one of his findings was that the creative process is kind of like a restorative mechanism for normalizing our relationship with technology and giving us tools to form identities. Amidst you know, all the ways that technology makes us crazy. And so, when you were looking at the ways that contemporary visual art, specifically offers this path forward to de colonialist identity. It made sense to me. It kind of aligned with that same line of thinking, so I definitely believed you.

Zoya

That's nice to hear. Because sometimes, I'm still questioning myself.

Like, it makes sense. I think it makes sense. And then I'm like, does it make sense? Does it make sense to anybody else? I don't know.

Joe

So let me take back the reins of my interview. How did this all start? Like I remember early in school.... for anybody that's listening to this in the future.... our program was pretty remote friendly. I was doing it from San Francisco, you were in Toronto on campus at OCAD, meeting in person. But I was just seeing you on screen and seeing our other classmates on screen. And I remember we had an early breakout session or something where you and me in Tania and Nahin (the folks that now make Manifold), we're all in a small group. And at that point, you were thinking that you would research and study, handwriting and cursive and the role that that plays in education. And you know, what's the cost associated with taking that away from what kids learn in school now. And now we're talking about Caribbean identity, decolonization, how creative practice fits into that? What was the journey between those two?

Zoya

So, when I started out looking at cursive handwriting, it was never really what I wanted to do. I was trying to figure out what was calling me and what was pulling me. And in giving examples and trying to explain to the professor's and so forth, the whole context of the Caribbean and how it operates. And in trying to give an example of the lack of creativity, that came out in one of our conversations, and then it just kind of spawned into its own thing. And then I did end up presenting it as what I was going to do not because I intended ever to do it. What happened was....

I don't know if you remember the timeline. But do you remember we were like working with advisors on what we would potentially do and so forth. And then it was like, end of semester you have to present! And I was like, "oh shit, I have to present!" And I went to Nancy my advisor and I was like "Nancy, I have to present I don't know what I'm doing!" And she was like, let's do this: you're going to present this cursive handwriting thing. It sounds interesting, this is your research plan, go forth, get your grade. And we'll figure it out later.

So that's actually what happened there. But there was something in there that was calling me. I think what it is in hindsight was, handwriting to me because I'm trained as a graphic designer, is just a form of calligraphy, it's typography. So that connects in my mind is something creative, that's sort of disintegrating in a wider context. But that in itself wasn't it. I was lacking theory at the point to get to where I needed to get to. And then eventually, I got there when I read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. And everything just sort of fell in place. I was like, I know exactly what I need to do. And I had no intentions of doing anything surrounding colonialism, decolonization, the Caribbean, nothing. I thought it was just education, I didn't realize it was within that context. But the things that we resist are sometimes the things we need to do the most.

Joe

Wise words. I remember.... I think I had a similar.... I think most of the people in our program had similar journeys with their topics where they thought it should be one thing at the beginning, and you start peeling back layers, peeling back layers, and you get to something that's true or at the core.

And *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is something that I've picked up to read like seven different times, and I think I'm still 50 pages in, I still haven't finished it.

Zoya

It's a hard read!

Joe

There's a lot of good stuff in those 50 pages.

Zoya

It's really good, but it's a hard read. Like I read it, like in, I don't know, a week, a couple weeks something because I had to, but I didn't grasp everything in it. Like there were parts it just kind of went over my head and I was like, yeah, I'm gonna come back to that later. And I just had to keep going because I was on a time crunch but also the way it was written I think it's like seventy years old.

Joe

One other kind of question on background, your I know you're from Barbados, you're Barbadian. What, what would you say...and maybe you could place this back....you know, where you were at two years ago when you're coming up with what you wanted to research...Or you could talk about it in the present tense, but what is being Barbadian mean to you?

Zoya

Oh wow, that's a good question. Oh, I don't know that I can answer that right now.

Joe

Yeah? Well maybe that's the point. Maybe that's the point.

Zoya

I think I'm on the journey to discover the answer to that question, to be very honest. I am proud to be where I'm from. But I discovered I'm on the journey to discover what it means to be Barbadian. Actually, I think and you might get this from my essay, that the answer to that is in the leaving of home and positioning yourself in different parts of the world to be mirrored and to uncover those parts....I don't think that you can.... I'm not sure, maybe you can... but I am not sure that anyone, regardless of their nationality, can fully know what it is to be where they're from, until they leave where they're from.

Joe

That's well said.

In your comments, when you're talking about the genesis of your research and starting with....not really starting, but I mean, at one point feeling like you needed to talk about the cursive thing for the sake of completing course requirements, and then evolving into this place where you landed... that creativity was part of what you were exploring, you know, what the role of creativity was, in terms of reimagining a new decolonial version of what it means to be Caribbean or West Indian or Barbadian. How did you land on that? Like, what's the significance of creativity, the visual arts, in general, in terms of what you were trying to explore in the research, why is it that and not accounting or biology or pick another less interesting thing.

Zoya

Yeah. So I think I have to take a step back and talk about first decolonizing identity, which is what the essay is about. When I speak about decolonizing identity, what I'm talking about is deconstructing two things, deconstructing social systems and elevating consciousness. Those are the two elements. And I see it in three parts. There's the micro, the macro, the meta. So the micro is for me, repositioning Caribbean identity by rebuilding appropriate visual representation, that is my micro, because that's where I'm from, I think, if I were from somewhere else, thenor for anybody else, if you're from Brazil, and maybe it's rebuilding Brazilian identity, or if you're from America, or wherever it is [you're from]. The macro for me is deconstructing identity, regardless of your personal circumstance, because almost everything we grasp at, or grasp to is just a social construct. And then the meta is tapping into

consciousness, and understanding our relational existence to one another, as fundamental to creating more inclusive spaces and communities.

So today, we live in a very, like polarized and divisive world. And I think in my rejection to politics earlier, is because it's so.... almost morally decrepit these days that I think that the only way to get the moral and the spiritual back into elements of our society that need needed the most like the political, like the economic, like the judicial...is to have an element of creativity. And so, when I speak of creativity, it's not always pottery and painting things. It's the raising of our consciousness collectively. And within that there can be creative outputs, such as music, such as writing, such as whatever else you want to do, like storytelling.... but that's not the only thing.... I think those forms are the purest essence of our consciousness that makes sense. And usually tend to tell a more authentic story to the human experience. So for me, creativity – that's what it is and that's why I look at creativity, because I think we were missing that element. In our everything... accounting, sure, we need accounting, but whatever. [laughter].

Joe

Yeah, I mean, I guess there's something fundamental in that, you know, in so much as creativity is the generation of something new, not enough prescriptive way, but in an organic way. If the goal is the introduction of the spiritual or the moral, or, you know, these elements that have been lost, then the addition of those things is inherently creative. So, I guess that I follow you there. And then art I guess, or visual art as a manifestation makes sense.

Zoya

Exactly. Exactly.

I was going to say when I focused on visual arts, I wasn't limited to doing just visual arts. I could have done any subject really, but I felt like (1) well in my specific MRP that was the subject that showed me it was lacking most and was actually like an area for me to go in and penetrate for research study. But also (2) I felt like particularly in my case study decolonization identity, that people tend to need a visual. So, it just made sense to start there.

Joe

And you specifically zeroed in on a particular artist, Sheena rose, who's from Barbados. How did you pick her or what about her felt especially fitting for what you were trying to explore?

Zoya

Um, to two parts of that answer, First the assignment I was doing required that I pick an artist. I chose her because I happen to be familiar with her art already. I actually went to art school with her. I was in the graphic design program, she was in the fine arts program. And I own one of her pieces... it's in my office on the wall and I've been meaning to buy more art but someday...so, she just fit the criteria of the story that I wanted to tell. And there was a real, like, I think I didn't quite realize how unique the experience was until I started piecing together bits of her art to try and tell the story because I was using different decolonial theories, which was decolonization and globalization, the global movement theory, I forget what it's called. But anyways, it's in my essay [laughter].

And her pieces of her art really, helped to piece together this story. She has so much more art, but that was it. Those pieces that I spoke about were really, I think, critical. And through writing of her experience, I saw my own experience as well.

Joe

One, I mean, I guess I stepped on my own point, when you're asking the question in the beginning about what I made of your essay? But I mean, something that I was exploring in the stuff I researched in school was also globalization and what impact that had specifically on financial wellness in my case, but in general, I'm also just curious about what that does to identity formation, like being from a specific place, identifying your yourself with being from some place, I think, is a thing, you know, maybe eventually we'll evolve out of that. But as it stands today, that's a part of how people define themselves. And so, I really liked that you referenced in your essay this one Sheena Rose piece called *Cognitive*. It's this really huge, detailed black and white mural at the Perez in Miami I specifically liked, you know, some of my tattoos are just black and white, and they're all line drawings. And her thing is kind of like that. So, I was naturally predisposed to like it.

But the thing you're drawing out when you're talking about it is that it divorces the Barbadian people in the artwork from their landscape. As you write the landscape is rolled up in this colonized imagination of the Caribbean, there's beautiful beaches and sunshine that draws tourists and their money in, but that is problematic or frustrating in the way that it's still defining the Caribbean aesthetic relative to the colonial powers, the places where these people are coming from in order to vacation or whatever, you use the word metropolises – which I did not know what that meant, until I read your essay – I am going to use metropole... I don't know what in natural life I will use metropole for but I'm going to try and tie it in.

Joe

So, I guess I really thought that was an illuminating point of the cost of colonialism, for folks who come from the West Indies. At the same time, it felt like, I don't know, it was hard to imagine, you know, like having to write off something like the natural beauty of the place you come from, to give yourself distance from that in order to define yourself on your own terms. So, I'm curious about how you think about that, like the necessity of letting go of the island's natural beauty versus the possibility of reclaiming that in some way. So that you get to take back power over your own identity formation.

Zoya

I think that piece *Cognitive*, I think one has to juxtapose it with the first piece that I spoke about in the essay, *Town*, which is about hollow bodies, but on solid land. And then you go through this journey and you end up solid body, no land.

I don't think that it's divorcing oneself from the beauty of the islands because that's always going to be there. Well we don't know if it will always be there, but hopefully it will always be there.

I think it is an effort to try and have people see you as a person and not as representative of a place. So, tourists come to the Caribbean, not for the people, they come there for the beauty of the landscape. That's what they care about when they have their vacation, and then they go. And interestingly, when I

moved abroad, and I'm not the only one, when I speak to other people, the most curious thing they want to know about me is that I'm from the Caribbean. Again, it goes back to like that landscape, or that connection to that land.

And I'm like you know, that's like, this much about me like that is such a small portion, and so it's a form of resistance, I think. I think it is a very subtle form of resistance to... and we'll use critical theory terms here; the imperial gaze. See me as a person not as your dream vacation, or whatever it is. You asked a very elaborate question and I'm forgetting parts of it, so ask me something else I can keep going.

Joe

Well, so what does it mean? Like let's say you have your act of resistance against the imperial gaze, where does that leave your relationship to the land?

Zoya

I think that's to be discovered. I think it is to be discovered. I don't really know. I just know that there is a relationship with tourism that needs to be I think, redefined. Definitely redefined and reshaped. And perhaps part of the reason why I don't really know how to answer that is because as a people, we are people that have a connection to land – historically speaking.

It's interesting the word you use – reclaiming - reclaim – reclamation - reclamation reclamation - got it, I got it! Reclamation of the land, because this is one of the differences in indigenous futures and afrofuturism. Indigenous futures are very motivated to revive the past, to hold on to their traditions and their cultures to reclaim their land, rightfully so. Afrofuturism doesn't have that connection, and is very much like, this is where we are now let's create the future. So maybe that's part of my lack of clarity on how to give you a definite answer is coming from that place as well. I don't know.

Joe

Well in a way that's kind of coherently aligned with the idea of creativity being part of that equation of what because the future is the thing in question.

Another piece that you reference in the paper is, is this performance piece, *Island and Monster*. And it is looking at the relationship between the island, similar topics to what we were just talking about. And then the people who choose to leave, and then they come back. And the monster in the performance is the people who have left and tried to come back and now have this, they're faced with this very complicated reception from the folks who have stayed.

So I think my question is what does the future look like? Or what's the model of change? When the folks who leave, come back and at least one of them, Sheena Rose, the artist, feels like a monster. It just feels hard to imagine what it would look like to reshape, you know, an integrated future for a place like Barbados, when it's so hard for folks to leave go through this process that you're describing so eloquently, and then come back and feel like aliens are monsters.

Zoya

Yeah.

I think, I think part of the challenge is....and I feel like maybe more people can relate to this than just being from the Caribbean....there's something that happens when you leave a small place. Doesn't even necessarily have to be a small place, but because not all the islands are small. There's something that happens where you outgrow certain things. Your energy changes. Your habits change so that you can survive and thrive and so forth. And when you return, I think the energy just doesn't match in the same way. And particularly in smaller places where there's a set way of doing things, it takes a lot longer for people to want to change and to sort of innovate in a way. And I almost feel bad to say this, but I think that in those cases, the only time that something really will change, collectively, is when there's a really hard time, like really like collectively some kind of devastation or something that forces people to create something new.

And I speak in my case study about Fanon a lot. And I don't know if you're familiar with him before?

Joe

A little but not deeply so.

Zoya

Yeah, he is like, legend, legend. And anyways, he speaks about affirming national culture, and how having to fight or having to form a resistance is what affirms national culture. What I get out of what Fanon speaks on critically and theoretically, is that it is from those struggles one forms a new identity and one forms, a national culture, that will have a new operating system. I don't know how else anything might change. Certainly, when looking at *Contexture*, the last part, which wasn't the best execution that I wanted, but I spoke about you know, the devastation of the pandemic and what it might do, and I think that we're at a point now, regionally, where we might see certain changes start to come out of desperation.

I know that I did not answer your question specifically, because I don't remember what your question was. [laughter]

Joe

It's okay. [laughter]

I'm interested in all of that. I guess you reference in the essay, the idea of the shaking of the soul, a moment of shaking of the soul. At least in part or in reference to some of Fanon's ideas, which maybe I was thinking about more on a personal level, but it sounds like there's application more at a cultural level, and a collective level as well.

For you at the individual level, I think you mentioned that in the writing around the idea of, you know, people who leave the island, go someplace else, see themselves reflected through the eyes of other people. And then as I was reading it, kind of as that splitting of identity ... that you have a quote in there from W.E.B DuBois, who says, double consciousness. And so I was curious, just on a personal level, like what was that process like for you, as someone who was leaving?

Zoya

I have not tried to articulate that until this point. It's very interesting that I'm having this specific conversation with you. But for me, that process lasted several years after I moved here, and in some ways, I think maybe I'm still even now coming out of it, but it's the first three years were very, very, very difficult. I would say, having to kind of reorient yourself and just having a sort of a conceptual framework collapse. A conceptual framework of whatever you thought was the way things are sort of collapsing. Having to learn how to read people in a different way takes some time. And I'm a person that I do fairly okay in unfamiliar settings, like I don't crumble and cry or run off into a corner. Like I can navigate.

But sometimes when you're like navigating all the time you don't stop, you don't pause, then you only catch the aftereffects later.

Ummm, you are religious? So, there is something in Christian mysticism, that you may or may not know the term, you can go look it up on your own. It's called a dark night of the soul. You're familiar?

Joe

Yeah.

Zoya

So, I definitely had that for several years.

Yeah, I don't know what else to say about that.

You can ask me but....

Joe

So I guess it sounds like a process of kind of.... this might not be the right word, but crumbling or deconstructing, or you know, some things falling apart? And then I'm assuming there's a process of kind of reassembly in a new form. Where are you at with? With that?

Zoya

Yes, you're right. It is deconstructing and reconstructing. It is, I would say, one of the most difficult and painful things the soul can go through, but it's also one of the most beautiful.

So, if you can get through it, it's like a complete rebirth. I feel like I'm at the point of my rebirth now. And kind of excited for the future, whenever I can get out of this apartment, because we're in a pandemic. But I'm not the same person that I was before. I think I'm more of myself in the best way possible. And what I mean by that is no people say like, oh, people don't, people don't change, or sometimes people change, I think you can change but become more of yourself in that changing. You can like drop all of the "hang ups" that you had before, and I don't necessarily want everyone to go through what I went through. But I do think that deconstructing your identity and having to reconstruct would help so many people. Like the world in general.

So, when I speak about decolonizing identity, it's not just about deconstructing the identity of the oppressed. It's also about deconstructing the identity of those who uphold or benefit from oppression, because they too, have adopted a belief about themselves, that has warped their psyche. And that warped reality creates a cognitive dissonance, there's no way that it can't. There's no way that something like colonization can occur and all of the atrocities that go on within that system to be witnessed and to be engaged with, and it could not create a PTSD on other people onto people witnessing it. Even if that's just a lack of empathy. So, I think one of the largest issues that we have in society as humans today is an inability for self-inquiry. People cannot handle their emotions, and they cannot control their mind. And if we have more of that we have more going into self – it would change so many things. It would change so much in the world.

When you realize certain things when you've been through what I've been through, and you are a little bit more awake in the world, the work that you have to do and the purpose in the world just sort of changes naturally. You know people ask me, why did I do *Contexture*? I had to – simple. It chose me. I did not choose it. So, there's a sort of an element of allowing the work to come through you, if that makes sense.

Joe

Yeah, I think that's one of the tensions I felt in the last year. Specifically, in the US with the ways that you know, people talk about coming awake to the reality of what race means in our country. And I think that, as a white person, to sincerely engage with that, means the type of self-inquiry and identity deconstruction, that you're describing some version of it, different I'm sure, but similar in some ways. And I don't know what percentage of the folks are actually, you know, wrestling with that. But it's not, it's not that high, I don't think. And I think it's a lot easier to like, you know, go on a march or go you know, retweet some stuff, or whatever, I don't understand social media. But I mean, it's an easier way of approximating the surface version of it. Especially like once companies get their hands on it, you know, that the soul of the actual internal work has died, and that scares me and makes me sad, because I think there's such an opportunity. I mean, to your point, the elevation of consciousness, or being able to see things more fully, that's available, but it requires a different level of investment, a different level of engagement than other stuff, you know, the version of things I think is more common.

Zoya

So well said. So well said.

Joe

I had a question about...I mean, basically, like reading the whole thing, and then knowing you, the whole picture just feels overwhelming to me. You know, like there's...at home is obviously complicated. Home being Barbados is obviously complicated. Toronto is obviously another place, but a place in which you experience or have experienced this double consciousness splitting of identity. It just left me feeling like where's the safe-space? Like, what's the place where you feel like you can exhale?

Zoya

That would be in my apartment. [laughter] That's why I'm such a homebody. Yeah, that would be my home. I've worked very hard to cultivate a certain level of peace in my life, and I'm very particular about

who can, you know, just come up and disturb my peace kind of thing, but I'm also a very, like, internally grounded person. I don't get attached to external things. I've never I've never quite been that -- been a person that attached to material things or the external world much. I was much more so than I am now though... like before, all of my experiences. But now there's, there's very little in the material world that drives me.

Joe

But I do also like knowing that ... I know that you love your apartment, you also have a very nice apartment, which probably makes it easier.... but that's your monastery, your silent retreat.

Zoya

This is my silent retreat. Yeah. I like it.

Joe

As you know, this thing about your essay that I particularly enjoyed above other things, was just reading it was reading a piece of you. It was like a personal extension of you as all of our work was but again, since you're a mystery, it was fun. There aren't many I statements in there directly, but you can kind of see, like I said, some of the places where it felt like it was an extension of something you must have experienced directly. And you, I guess, describe within the paper kind of the identity formation journey or a conception of an identity formation journey. Somebody born into the colonized Caribbean world, they're prescribed a specific set of expectations about who they are, that they become.

You have a specific sentence in there where you say, you know, who "they" say you are, "they" being the imperial gaze. So, I was wondering, like, what your experience of that was, who did they say you are?

Zoya

Um, I think when I was the way that I can frame that, because it's never quite explicit. But the way that I can frame that is in the experiences that I've had, with people uncovering their expectations of me. And there's three things that I find always just keep showing up. It may be me as an individual, but I think when I've spoken to other people, they have similar experiences. So there's a little bit of a pattern.

The first thing and this is I've experienced this at home, and here, particularly in professional settings. There's this expectation that I should be grateful for whatever is given to me.

[laughter]

You look so uncomfortable.

Joe

Not uncomfortable, I was going to say disgusted for a second, or put off. Who's doing that?

Zoya

Yeah, that that comes up a lot. Yeah, that I should be grateful. Like, I have experienced that in almost every work environment that I've been in. And, I mean, this can segue into the gender pay gap and

racial pay gap and all that stuff, but we won't go down that rabbit hole. But I've experienced that, like, I should be grateful for whatever is given to me, and to expect more, or to demand more for myself is you know, like, "who is she?!" I get that a lot.

Um, the second thing is. I find that people expect me to be nice. A lot of the time, and I've spoken to other black women, they get that too. Like, I'm a kind person. I think I'm professional, I think I'm pleasant and easy to work with, but I'm under no obligation to be nice to you, particularly when I'm in a tough position. And I have been in situations and work where....I can give one from several years ago. Oh my gosh, I have so many. So many. They're coming up. Okay, so back home, I can definitely think of situations where I was being treated a particular way. And I was the attitude is like, who am I to speak up for myself? I don't know if you've ever met me, but I have a lot to say when things get going.

I've also been in a situation here not too long ago, where I had a co-worker who just wasn't quite effective in his role. Nice person, but I think just couldn't quite grow in the role. And his inefficiency would directly impact me, and he would skirt accountability and I tried to address things many times, and I'm like this,....I'm like level for a long time and then when I get to a certain point, I will change my tone to make sure that you get it. And I started changing my tone. Because nobody else who should be addressing it was addressing it. So, I started changing my tone. And of course, then it became one day, he actually had the audacity to say to me, "you're never nice to me". And I say audacity because it's like, wow, so even as you continue to place me in between a rock and a hard place, even as you have your knee on my neck, you're so entitled, you expect me to be nice to you.

And so, my point with that is, when I speak up for myself, there is an attitude of no you're just supposed to be nice and that comes out in several ways, and the risk that I have in speaking out for myself is and they'll say, "oh well, she's angry" or "she has an attitude", or something and it's like no I don't, I just want to leave here at 5pm and you're really fucking up.

Joe

And if I did that, it would be good leadership. That's the unfair part.

Zoya

Yes. So, the first thing is, I should be grateful for whatever you give me. The second is, I'm expected to be nice. The third thing is... I find this a lot.... people tend to expect me to take on their problems.

Like, there is something in the psyche of a post-colonial society, that includes North America, where black women are looked at as buckets for your problems. Like and we're expected to nurture you. Because historically, that's what we did.

Joe

How does that play out? I'm curious.

Zoya

Well, um, I have found that, and this happens a lot, I think with women, especially, who sort of come toward me. They project onto me that I am going to take care of them, and often, then they are very

disturbed when they're rejected by me and it becomes like, I'm not like, well, not mysterious, but I'm not vulnerable enough. Or I'm not caring. I'm actually very caring, deeply emotional. I'm very, very, highly sensitive, and I care for you, but I'm not your caretaker.

Joe

To “yes and” that. It is my experience that there are so many people who feel alone – I'm not old enough to have like a historical survey of how this has progressed – but it seems to me there's several forces at play that leads to lots of people these days feeling lonely, broken and hurting and in need of some sort of support. And I am naturally predisposed to engage with their neediness. And, so I spent a lot of time in my early and mid-twenties, late twenties, engaging in relationships where I did not have the emotional capacity in order to provide what the person needed. And I wasn't getting anything out of it and there was no mutuality to the relationship at all. It was just take, take, take. And it's not sustainable. I ended up just feeling depleted, insufficient and they didn't get what they needed. And so a lot of my personal growth has been to recognize my own set of boundaries ...

Zoya

Yeah, same here.

Joe

But I'll say – so I think that's a thing happening in the world in general. And so then you add on this layer of there's something about postcolonial North America in which there's probably some stuff happening that relates specifically to you being a black woman – I don't envy your position. Because as a white guy I've got my own version of that... I think just because for a long time I let myself walk into those situations. If you take that plus....

Joe

This, this is something I was thinking about earlier today. Like, do you ever have the times like when you're thinking about inclusive design, or ethical design or whatever, you know, diversity and inclusion in the workplace, or whatever the thing is, and we're talking about all of these, you know, really complicated strategies or, you know, developing new language for things. And sometimes I just wonder, wouldn't it be easier if everybody just got like, five years' worth of free therapy from a good therapist, like, we had some way of ensuring that people got a specific experience in the home as a kid growing up to where they were just less hurt and insecure? Like, aren't those we like talking about a lot of stuff that I'm sure is, you know, specific in particular, and there's not an excuse for not, that's not an excuse for not learning about history and all sorts of things that are important, but at the end of the day, like, sucky people, hurt people. Like if people suck less, I feel like 90% out of ...that's probably aggressive... but a lot of the problems would go.

Zoya

Yeah. This goes back to self-inquiry, and knowing yourself and doing the work, the internal work, which a lot of people just, they just don't do. It is actually shocking to me I've been, I've been realizing recently, because I have this thing where, and this is something that I should work on, like, I can be so like, consumed and whatever I'm focused on that I forget, they're like, oh, like, I'm just one person. Like, there's a lot of people who don't even don't even cross paths with this, like you and me, like my world

changes. And so, I just figured, like, oh, yeah, well, everyone knows this. They don't, and I just feel like people need to learn how to do how to do the internal emotional work.

Joe

I was having the same conversation. I was having a similar conversation, not, with the additional layer of the colonialities world, but with a friend earlier this week. And I mean, to be fair, there's probably tons that you and I are not aware of. And there's somebody, there's many layers of people who have superior, elevated self-awareness that I will never achieve in my life, but with that said, I think part of what I find compelling about the process that you outlined in the essay is like, what if that... what if it's like the deconstruction of identity, the self-inquiry and that having to, like, grapple with how the world sees you, and how you see yourself? And what's true in that, and how do you rebuild a version of yourself that you're happy with? Like, what if that is the process that is required to develop these muscles of self-inquiry? And that is part of the superpower, but also like the crime committed against people who have been oppressed, is that that was foisted upon you. And as part of the cost that is, I guess, it just strikes me that there's a bunch of people from dominant culture who never have to wrestle with those questions, because it's just their cultural default. And they never have to go through the self-inquiry, and so they never build the muscle, and then they're just kind of floating along and they missed the chance.

Zoya

Yeah, that's true. I think there's a lot of that. There's a lot of people in a lot of privileged positions that don't really know what it is to live, to be honest.

Joe

Yeah

Zoya

I don't have an answer. It's just thought.

Joe

Yeah, I mean, I'm just making stuff up. But I mean, yeah, I guess that's part if I had to articulate like, what makes me sad for people that, you know, come from my same cultural experience, it would be that. It's an illusion.

Zoya

It's an illusion?

Joe

Yeah, I think it is an illusion, like that this is normal. You know, that your identity is what was dictated to you by a specific vein of culture. And that there's nothing to unpack and wrestle with.

Zoya

Are you trying to say that? Were you trying to say that being white is normal?

Joe

Yeah and that's the illusion. That's the illusion.

Zoya

That is the illusion. So that's what I was talking about, where I said that decolonizing identity is not just about deconstructing the identity of the oppressed, but also of those who benefit from the oppression. Because one of the biggest things I see in people who are trying to do, like allyship and anti-racism work or whatever, is the best of intentions and wanting to do things, but I'm always like, so when does it get to a point where you realize that you do have a constructed race? Because even in doing all the wonderful things that you may be trying to do, for the benefit of others who don't look like you... if you can't decenter yourself then you're still missing the point...because ultimately, the same way my race is constructed your race was constructed to.

And that's what I'm getting at. When I said 'the meta' is about tapping into consciousness and understanding our relational existence to one another – it's that you couldn't be white if I wasn't black. Literally.

Joe

Yup. What I feel like we – we being white people – I feel like what gets missed in that, for us, is a positive articulation of, like, what we were lacking is a positive articulation of what it would look like, to not be white, but to be yourself. You know, like, when you say, when is it going to get to a point where you're not putting yourself at the center? The cost that comes with that is, there is no, like the center is, is an illusion, the idea that there is like some normal, that's fake. And when you buy that, all the stuff that's weird, and unique about you and makes you a snowflake, all the things that your parents said, those get lost, because like you don't have the chance to define the truly uniquely human version of yourself, because so much of it gets co-opted by what whatever whiteness is supposed to represent. And I just feel like there's a there's a lot of folks who have written about you know, an anti-racist thing that white people can do is reconnect themselves with their ethnic heritage. Like I'm, I'm not white, I'm Welsh, by descent. I have no idea what it means to be Welsh. Like, I think I'm half Scottish too. So why don't I have a kilt? Why don't I know more stuff about the thing where you throw the giant logs over your shoulder? I know nothing about that because in my opinion, in the version of things that I got it was just I'm a white person and I'm American. Which is the whole foundation of oppressing people but also losing a truer version of who I am.

Joe

You're going to be so screwed trying to turn this into a podcast. I know. We need to stop. Because it's just getting worse. It's getting worse.

Zoya

Yeah, I know. Ok I'm going to stop this.

1:02:37

Thank you so much for listening to this conversation as Joe and I, as usual *Inclusive Conversations* presented to you by Manifold and inclusive design consultancy. If you learned anything today, if you just want to connect with us, if you're intrigued at all, please feel free to connect with us on social media @hellomanifold and you can find the show notes for this episode on our website www.hellomanifold.com