



When Our Parents Don't See Their Bias

When Oriana opened an online bookstore focused on BIPOC authors, her Venezuelan parents didn't understand why it was necessary to highlight the identity and work of writers of color. And, facilitator Liza Talusan offers advice on how to discuss anti-racism and inclusion with our parents.

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Hi, everybody. Today, I'm speaking with Oriana. She recently opened an online bookstore to amplify the work of Black, Latino, Indigenous, and writers of color in general. Her Venezuelan parents were really supportive of her career change, but the bookstore's mission is prompting difficult conversations around race and structural racism that Oriana and her family have never had before. Let's get into it.

Oriana Peñaranda:

My name is Oriana Peñaranda. I was born in Venezuela. I grew up in Miami, Florida. And I'm currently the jefa and founder of Xolo Books. That's X-O-L-O Books, an online independent bookstore dedicated to promoting BIPOC authors and stories. And in my house, we called my parents mamá y papí. I was so worried when I wanted to tell my parents that I wanted to open my own bookstore. I was worried because... You know, that they might be worried about what this meant financially. They surprised me very much. They were incredibly supportive of the career pivot, but they struggled to understand the focus of having a bookstore that was dedicated to BIPOC authors and stories.

A lot of the conversations that we had were around why is it important to focus on someone's race or racial identity when they should just be celebrated for being an author or being who they are, not so much focusing on the color of their skin. And we had to kind of go through several conversations to understand where I was coming from and explaining the bigger context that there's a lot of barriers in the world of literature, entertainment, publishing that doesn't give the books written by BIPOC authors as much support.

Growing up, we never had a lot of conversations about race. Conversations about race are pretty uncomfortable across the board and so I think growing up it was just something that was never brought up. But now with the bookstore and the specific focus, if I'm catching up with a tía, with my family members of like how the bookstore is doing, the conversation naturally comes up. There was a conversation once where I believe I posted on social media like, "Oh, this is a very

exciting Afro-Latina author. She's amazing. We have her books available in the store. Go check them out." And so, a conversation that I've had with my mother in this specific instance is, "Why are you emphasizing so much about the fact that she's Afro Latina? She could just be Latina."

I will say it has been hard to have my parents understand the role of anti-Blackness in the Latinx community and how it feeds into the larger picture of systemic racism, racial oppression, both in Latin America and in the United States. That's not something that I... I put together for myself right away. It's hard. You think that oh, because I'm Latino, I know what it means to experience racism, right? So, like I already know. I don't need to take a nuance on that. I've experienced racism, y ya.

I think I realized that I can be both on the ends of receiving racism and perpetuating racism when I started reading more books about anti-racism. And so, I was able to piece together... Well, yes, it makes sense that I, as a white Latina, have been able to benefit from certain privileges in the sense that I, if I go into a store, a security guard is not going to watch my every move. These privileges I hold are not something that I asked for, but I should acknowledge, because if I don't acknowledge them, it comes at the expense of my Black friends, my Black colleagues, or other BIPOC folks in my life.

I think at the very beginning I would get really frustrated. There were times where internally, myself, I would think... I would have like an existential crisis and think, "Oh my God, have my parents just been so blind when it comes to race and racial issues?" I don't think I ever considered them to be racist, but I think that they had a lot of racial bias and prejudice. I was like, "How deep does it go?" And I would get frustrated. But then I realized over the different times we've had conversations that it's not that their intentions have ever been to keep these prejudices and hold these prejudices. I think it is truly that they have gone a long time without having these ideas challenged and talked about, and I know that they are trying to learn, because they are listening to me. Sometimes more than others, but they are listening to me, and they are curious, and they are trying to understand, but because it's just so many years of not needing to understand, it's hard to come to terms with the fact that not only can you be on the receiving end of systemic racism, but as well as the giving end of it.

And that hurts. It hurts. And not everyone is ready to understand and accept that. And so, that is something that I have to remind myself. It's a process.

Lantigua-Williams:

For many first gens like Oriana, who grew up learning about U.S. history and racial dynamics in a way that our immigrant parents just didn't, it can be hard to have conversations about race and racism, because our parents don't have the lived experience. And for some of us who intentionally align our lives and our work with our deeply held ideals about social justice and liberation, these conversations can

be deeply emotional and deeply personal. To help us figure out how to have these conversations in meaningful and productive ways, I called in an expert.

Liza Talusan: My name is Liza Talusan and I'm a scholar practitioner in areas of diversity, inclusion, and identity. I'm a second-generation Filipina American and the daughter of two immigrant parents. Currently, I teach courses on anti-racism and identity-centered practice and have spent my lifetime navigating both the joys and challenges of living in between two cultures.

Lantigua-Williams:

Tell me what in practice your work entails.

Talusan: So, I spend most of my time going to different schools, organizations, corporations, as more and more people are looking to develop what I call an identity-conscious practice, and essentially what that means is nothing that we do is identity neutral. So, how we teach, how we learn, how we engage, how we parent, so in a lot of my workshops, in my classes, it's about giving them a space to really uncover the aspects of identity that inform and impact how they see the world around them.

Lantigua-Williams:

What did you hear when you heard Oriana's story?

Talusan: So, the first thing that I really heard was the support that their family gave them. They used the phrase, "My family wasn't so concerned about my financial decision or the career pivot," and even then, I stopped listening and had to rewind and listen again because it brings me so much joy to hear when parents, caregivers, and loved ones, particularly from immigrant backgrounds, are so encouraging and supportive of when we are also trying to chart our own path in this country.

The rest of their story is also so familiar, which is Oriana had mentioned at one time they were amplifying the voice of an Afro-Latinx author, and the family's response was, "Why aren't they just Latinx?" And I get that question a lot, and I'm always so appreciative of the opportunity to engage in conversations, especially with my immigrant family, because there really are some nuances to these kinds of conversations that happen here in the United States.

Lantigua-Williams:

All right. So, of course now I want to know how you answer that question. Why do we have to signify the Blackness when we're talking about a group of people? Why is that important?

Talusan: Right. It's so important, especially in this country, to be able to amplify and detangle aspects of identity, because they matter in this country. Here in the United States, historically it's been the narrative of people who fit in and people who don't. Whether it's individually, or structurally, we can look at structural racism

for example, which Oriana brings up, as well, as part of the U.S. story. And whether we are paying attention since June 2020, or if we've been paying attention for decades, we in this country have a very complicated history and present with Blackness and anti-Blackness.

So, what I was hearing in Oriana's story is that amplifying the Afro part of that author's identity is also amplifying the ways in which Blackness can serve as a barrier. They mention that sometimes Black authors don't get publication deals, or don't have the same access, and so even what I'm hearing, and the purpose of Oriana's bookstore is to really provide new pathways for that. But similarly to Oriana's family, that is not something that my family understood as needing to do.

A similar immigration story is of oneness. This assumption that when we leave one country and come to the U.S., we become Americans. And as we know, that's not just actually the narrative of this country.

Lantigua-Williams:

One of the things that when I have these types of conversations about race and racism among Latinos and among other immigrant groups, it's that hesitance of admitting that we have a problem, admitting that collectively we all contribute to the anti-Blackness among Latinos, or among Asians, or even among Africans and Caribbeans, and so, what are some strategies that people can utilize who want to actually engage in meaningful conversations with their families about these very issues?

Talusan:

So, the first thing is we have to commit to the fact that they're difficult, right? There's almost nothing easy about the topic of race and racism, and I'll mention for me, culturally I was not raised to challenge authority. I was not raised to speak back to my elders. I mean, that just was not a thing. So, you can then connect my socialization, how I learned to engage in these topics was to never push back on elders, to never be argumentative, and to never be the source of conflict. Those were three really key messages I was given growing up.

So, you can imagine that engaging in difficult conversations then doesn't align with those experiences for me. So, one of the things, step one is I had to unlearn those messages. Step number two, I would say for children of immigrants, is it's important for us to have some compassion, and grace, and understanding for the context in which our elders came from. So, in my instance, my parents were fleeing martial law. They were fleeing a country where if you dissented, you were punished. And so, I had to really come to an appreciation for what my parents fled and understood why conflict was so hard for them.

The third step in all of this is then creating some sort of pathway or protocol for even having tough conversations. Neither my parents nor I had learned the skills of dialogue with each other. They also grew up in homes where adults told children what to do and children obeyed, and so that's what they did for us. It was this generational communication strategy. So, we had to unlearn together and

learn how to have conversations with each other. And we had to be open to the fact that we were going to do it well sometimes and we were going to do it horribly many other times.

So, that leads me to the fourth step, which is what does it mean to journey together in these tough conversations? I grew up here in the United States. I grew up with a very multiracial, multicultural community. My parents grew up in a pretty monolithic community of Filipinos. And so, they just didn't know the history of the United States. They didn't know the history of Blackness and anti-Blackness. They didn't know some of these concepts. And it was unfair for me as their child to assume that they would know those things. It's as if you were to throw me into the Philippines today, I would have 45 years of no context for Filipinos. And so, a lot... As frustrated as I was getting, why don't you understand this, why don't you understand oppression, it's because they didn't have the opportunity to learn it.

And so, once I realized that they were not bad people, just like Oriana says, that my family is not racist, once I realized that they didn't have the same access to habits and skills that I had, it meant that I could approach our conversations with genuine curiosity and compassion and kindness for learning together.

Lantigua-Williams:

In Oriana's case, there is the complication that her professional choice also aligns with her politics around this. So, what should people keep in mind who are making professional choices that also align with how essentially, they want to see the world, and how they want to contribute to that world, and immigrant parents who are like, "How are you gonna make a living out of that?"

Talusan:

Here's what's so beautiful about being a child of immigrants. So, on one hand, when I went and started my own business, just like Oriana was saying, actually my family wasn't... They didn't really have concerns about me financially or the career pivot. My parents got on a plane with two suitcases and two kids, so talk about taking a risk. And so, my parents were so supportive of that risk because they had done it, as well. So, for any of us who are kind of in that same space and may have had parents who took the risk, you come from those people, right? You come from those people who take a risk to follow this sort of dream or opportunity, so there's that.

The second thing is I do understand so deeply the advice from immigrant parents to please find a steady job with a salary, with benefits, all that kind of thing, because gosh, they risked so much for us to thrive. And so, honestly, I think that dialogue is really rich among families when we have this opportunity to talk about, well, why did you immigrate? What does it mean for you? Knowing that you had these struggles, what are a couple things I can do to minimize some of the struggles that you had? And how can you be this mentor, this role model for me as I start on this new path and follow my dream today?

Lantigua-Williams:

So, what are some of the strategies that you've seen work for folks where they want to not just talk about these things with their families, but also bring them in in significant ways?

Talusan: One of the things that I'm realizing that we, as children of immigrants, are sometimes worried or nervous about, and I will mention for good reason, is the opportunity to ask our elders, our parents, our tías, our tíos, those who came before us who immigrated here, about their stories. Tell me your story. I will say for some families, that is very traumatic. Some of our families did come here escaping a regime, were here as refugees, saw tragic and traumatic things happen in their home country, so I give that advice with a little bit of trepidation. And I don't believe that we, many of us, have engaged in that habit of asking our parents and our elders about their stories. And so, I think one of the ways to get families involved is to really center our families. Center their narratives. And truth be told, that's what Oriana's doing on a larger scale. How do I center these narratives and counternarratives of Black, Indigenous, and people of color?

I think in this particular case as some immigrant children are looking to build businesses or go in a direction that their families are unsure of, to bring them into that mix, into that fold, is honestly a way of continuing our traditions. It's a beautiful connection point that we can make when we engage our families in that professional process.

Lantigua-Williams:

I have to ask the opposite question, which is what are the telltale signs that the conversation is not gonna be fruitful, and that you are not going to move the person from where they are, and that you're better served using your energies elsewhere?

Talusan: You kind of feel it in your gut. When you feel like you're spending more time than generosity trying to convince somebody of an opinion. If you are looking to do your thing, whether it's to start your own business, to change your careers, that's going to take a lot of energy on your part, and so you start to really notice that balance between I'm spending a lot of time trying to convince my family to believe in me, which is taking energy from me believing in myself. That's probably when you know it's time to either change the conversation or just turn your attention elsewhere.

Lantigua-Williams:

Thank you. Thank you so much.

Talusan: Thank you so much for inviting me!

Lantigua-Williams:

All right. Let's recap what we learned from Liza. Unlearn old messaging. How you were socialized, the ideas you learned from your family about avoiding conflict,

and obeying authority, those are all really useless communication strategies, and if they're influencing how you approach difficult conversations, you should really try to work through them and around them. Be careful not to fall into these old communication patterns. Accept the messiness. Conversations will go smoothly sometimes and not so smoothly most of the time. Take them all with grace, kindness, and compassion, and accept that you are all in the process of learning together. And remember, center your family's narrative. Use your stories, experiences, the strengths in your relatives' background, and everything they bring to bear as immigrants and as new citizens in the United States into the dialogue to find common ground and to move the conversations forward.

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