

Transcript: Panel discussion about 'The Niceties'

Feb. 10, 2021

Captions provided by McBurney Disability Resource Center staff

(Standby)

(Music)

SPEAKER: Thank you for joining this evening. We will start with Jen Uphoff Gray.

SPEAKER: Hello. Welcome, everybody. I'm Jen Uphoff Gray. I am artistic director of Forward Theater Company. Also have the privilege of being the co-director of the production of The Niceties that this panel sort of inspired.

Just wanted to talk about why we wanted to do this play. We were really struck by the way it tackled in a traumatic and engaging way issues of race, of history, of power. And really fundamentally how hard conversations about race and power and privilege can be, and how dangerous it is if we don't have those conversations.

That was our underlies story we felt we were focusing on in choosing to do the play and rehearsing and producing it.

I want to express my gratitude to everybody at UW for signing onto partner with us and put this conversation together. I also on a personal level want to say how pleased I am that we have Dr. Gee and Lexi Gee here this evening. The accounts they have shared publicly about some of her experiences on campus were influential to us as we rehearsed this play.

I'm looking forward to hearing from them and grateful to all of you showing up tonight. I know the Forward Theater Company audience is -- I'm grateful.

I am going to turn this over to Renita Clayton.

SPEAKER: Thank you. I am the external relations administrator and I'm grateful for the opportunity. Before we get started I want.

(This meeting is being recorded).

SPEAKER: That the University of Wisconsin Madison occupies. A place that they're nation has called -- we respect the inherit of the nation and 11 other first nations of Wisconsin.

We'd like to understand it's imperative to include all aspects of diversity and racial equity. To be inclusive of race, ethnicity, social class, disability, gender and sexual

orientation and to focus on classification which addresses individual and institutional explicit and implicit bias.

Just to tie it all in an old house in a book, reveals the broken structure of American history. In the American cast system the signal of rank is what we call race. The divisions of humanless. Race is a visible agent of unseen force of cast. Cast is the bone, race is the skin. Race is what we can see if the physical traits have been given and become shorthand for who a person is. Cast is a powerful infrastructure. It gives it power and -- in particular tonight for African-Americans, cast is a subconscious code of obstruction for maintaining a 400-year-old social order in which we remember as slavery.

Looking at cast is holding country's x-ray up to the light. In order to address cast we have to continue to shed light on its dehumanization and have discussions such as this tonight to address power, assumptions, competence, resources and respect.

So with that, I want to thank you for all joining us tonight as we take a closer look at some the underlying themes that speak to African-American experience from the Forward Theater Company production.

I will begin with the file so that I can introduce our panelists today. We have here, Lexi Gee. She is a distinguished scholar, a multilingual communicator, a published author with a degree from university of Wisconsin. A double badger pursuing master's in library science.

We also have Reverend Dr. Alexander Gee. Pastor. Justified anger. He's a loving husband, a father, as well as a writer, community activist, life coach, international lecturer, relief worker and social entrepreneur. Has work earned him numerous honors including the humanitarian award. He studied' University of Wisconsin Madison. He earned his doctorate. Author of two books and host for the popular podcast.

We also have Dr. Paul C. Harris, associate professor at the University of Virginia. Research focuses on achieving three goals. Number one, improving college and career readiness. Development of black male student athletes and facilitating the empowerment of anti-racist school counselors.

Jen Uphoff Gray is the director of the Forward Theater Company. I want you to help me welcome our panelists and we will get started on tonight's discussion.

My first -- I want to start off with a group question. If we could have the panelists on the screen and we'll just kind of go down the line and have everyone shed their perspective on this question.

So the first question is when someone says they don't see color, you know, how do you respond to that? Playing off the theme of tonight's events, do you believe in colorblindness? How do you, you know, respond or is there a teaching moment there when you hear a comment such as that? We request start with Dr. Harris.

Sure. First let me say thanks, Renita for hosting and facilitating tonight, everyone, all of you who are here tonight. It's a pleasure. It really is and wonderful job for all who had a hand in coordinating this play. It was quite instructive in a lot of ways.

Colorblindness, I am always quite intrigued by that statement. Yes, I still hear it rather often. Someone says to me that they're colorblind or they don't see color, depending on the level of rapport and relational capital that I have, my response is you don't see me.

There's a privilege associated with that for one. And you're not seeing me because race has been interwoven into the fabric of my existence. To say that denies who am I. I think that's privilege to be able to say that and this complete narrative that separates the link of history to present, which others have said that race has mattered.

It's troubling but I think it's a point of entry for conversation and learning together about whatever blind spots we both might share. But that's typically how I would respond.

Sure. Lexi, do you have a response for that one?

Hi, everyone. I also want to say as you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here with you all tonight.

I think when I hear people say that they don't see color, it's usually in response to something that has happened race based. Someone will make an offhand comment and there will be a response in which I'll say something along the lines like, please don't say something like that for X, Y, Z reasons and their response will be along the lines oh, no I'm not racist. I don't see color.

So I think that there is, as Dr. Harris said, there is an active selective blindness there where people are, I think often think their refusal to see race acts as a shield from keep them from being racist.

I think it's important to honestly say as much as you may not want to see color, there is obviously an awareness that exists between the two of us and like, it needs to be discussed. It has to be talked about, otherwise, it's just an elephant in the room.

Then we can go to Dr. Alexander Gee.

Sure. I'm following in the footsteps of others. I really appreciate being asked to be here. I also want to say that the last speaker is both beautiful and brilliant and I agree with everything she said. (Laughing).

I'm sorry, I'm biased. That's my baby. I'm proud to be here with her. I would say if someone says they don't see color, I don't believe anything and then I don't believe anything else that comes from their mouth at that point.

It ties into James Baldwin's quote. He basically said, to the extent that white people do not understand the plight, he said the word Negroes, they do not understand themselves. When a person says they do not see color, there is no ownership to address it, no onus to share it, absolutely no ability to be responsible, pull themselves up by their bootstraps which are probably my great, great, great grandmother and father.

I've spent the last 51 year in Madison. So to be able to deal with that level of sincerity and foolishness, it's insulting to the nth degree because my color does not only tell the my story and of my great, great grandmother, but white Americans as their grandmother as well.

Thank you for that. And Jen.

Thank you to the thoughts you all shared. I'll just answer it really as a theater director. I've been working for about 30 years now and when I hear someone now or any time in the last 15, 20 years use that phrase, it's someone who is really not paying attention to or educating themselves to the ways in which perspective and acceptable language are changing.

When I started my career in the early 90s, within admittedly predominantly white, believedly colorblind casting was the word of the day. That meant you were trying to bring people of all backgrounds into the theater. That was the language that was used then to indicate that perspective.

Well, about 15, 20 years ago that language shifted to color conscious casting and that's addressing what my predecessors thoughtfully expressed, which is you can't do it by negating, but we can be more conscious.

In the last several weeks I'm seeing articles advocating a change in the language -- now we can really embrace all of the aspects that any human brings on to the stage and aspects that a character they would be asked to portray as a part of reality.

I've been really lucky to see that language evolve in my career and to learn from it as a human as well as a theater maker.

Thank you, Jen. For me to add in my two cents. I also agree. I want individuals to see me, everything that I behold. I do not believe in colorblindness, and I'll cover this later, but I think that there's power in using our lens to truly see a person for who they are outside of their skin and outside of our assumptions that we have either growing up to understand or based on unfortunate experiences. I definitely speak out what someone says that.

That doesn't help me. That doesn't make it we'll be better friends. I definitely want someone to acknowledge my very being

With that, I want to thank you. And dive into individual questions and we're going to start with Dr. Harris.

In the play there was a lot of dialogue between the student, Zoe, and her teacher, Janine. And there was a lot of back and forth dancer about American history, and the teacher proceeded to say that slavery didn't have a part in American history. That we basically didn't have enough information to say that not necessarily that slavery didn't exist but that it didn't have power.

My question to you when they discussed the universal outlook on American history or the American revolution, and the teacher questioned slavery and white rival, how would you respond to that? Would you say it is more difficult to write black history than it's easy to erase black history?

What would your follow up be if you were that student?

You know, to the latter part of that question, if I were that student, that shifted what is sort of the power hierarchy that I would have to navigate a bit more delicately perhaps than I would in the role I assume right now.

I was talking to someone the other day about 11th grade US history and I kind of joked, though serious, about how I often got up and walked around the halls for 30 to 40 minutes in the class because one, he told us don't interrupt, just leave and he was reading from a textbook and I figured I could do that myself.

Thirdly, it was a universal outlook, right, this book, and what I was commenting on to the conversation I was in was how much of that history was incomplete.

So I just wanted to touch firstly on that. What is a universal outlook mean? It means that it's been normed on whiteness, right? So much of our disrupting and dismantling structures and policies, integrating them at the very least is to understand further the terms on which such systems have been built and whose terms those are and who has been included.

First, I would engage that operational definition on the part of Janine of what universal means, and to that end, it was a pretty, again, provocative dialogue at that point because certainly it's going to be harder for black history to be written when that is the paradigm through which one is viewing it. The paradigm who's evidenced, who collected it, and said that it is evidence and most often is not going to be the voices of the marginalized.

It would be more difficult because there wasn't any credence given to the lived experience. Yes, it would be harder, but if we were to reject that paradigm, that status quo, the very oppressive, if you will, framework through which to view such work, then I think there are data points all around us. All around that are not colonized, decolonized

artifacts and oral histories, you name it, that can give a row bust enriched history that center voices of black people in America. So then it's not hard to share.

As a student, again, to that latter part of the question, you threw that piece in there, that shifts how do I navigate that this such a way that I'm communicating what is true, in a way that definitely has all the things, when you are trying to reduce the threat to one's ego, like those kinds of thoughts as students, I think we are -- I know, personally in my own experience at University of Virginia where I attended, it was ever present in my mind that I had to think about that as I navigated those spaces. An unnecessary burden, but one I dealt with.

That's how I would try to engage that conversation around universal, what that means and on whose terms are we -- on whose terms are we deciding what is harder or not to write.

Right. So I guess, kind of to sum that up, when you say there is no American history without slavery.

It is -- it is -- I mean, you probably want a short answer, but not too long of a walk. It's like where I'm at right now at the university of Virginia, we told the history of the university mentioning them. We got to the point where we said that's not the history.

To your question, absolutely, it's not a complete narrative, if you are not including those who built the country, right, and on whose back, you know, the wealth that's been accumulated has opinion able to have been accumulated.

Thank you. Thank you for dodging that curve ball. I know that wasn't exactly in the script, but I knew you could answer that as being a black male and the profession that you hold. So thank you for being able to answer that question.

I do want to kind of switch gears going to Lexi Gee. Just we've already talked about, you know, kind of a dynamic between Zoe and Janine. So I want to ask you, there's a lot of, you know, question around millennials being considered digital natives.

First, is there a truth to that? And then following that answer, do you think that there is an assumption that millennials are out here being activists or fighting for causes that we have no found knowledge on? Are we just angry or do we have reason for the things that we're doing?

Okay. I think to answer the digital natives question, I -- I've always thought that terminology was always kind of interesting. I think, you know, for myself, I'm 24, so some people consider me on the younger end of the millennial spectrum. Also the gen Z, but not quite. Because of that weird overlap, and like I have, you know, like memories of childhood plea, you know, digital world and pre Internet world that I know the younger generation didn't necessarily have.

But I think to consider us digital natives, it doesn't feel incorrect, but I think that it led to us having a really intense flooding of information really quickly. So I think for the second question where you asked if we're just angry and just sort of running out towards whatever cause we find, I think for the most part, I would argue that any cause we're running head first towards is heart led rather than just being the first thing that we see, you know, on our twitter feed.

I think -- I know speaking from my own experience and from my friends and people I surround myself with, I think there is a lot of anger in our generation, but I also think that it's very justified and that we have, you know, our reasoning and we have our place for the strong feelings that we have.

And I think that we see a lot of potential. We see a lot of room where change needs to happen, and I think that we kind of happen to be in the right place at the right time where --

Right.

-- we're kind of grabbing that opportunity with both hands.

I think it's also pretty awesome in what you are currently studying for your masters. Can you kind of give us a short glimpse of what led you to pursuing that subject matter?

Sure. I have always loved libraries. They have been just my favorite place ever since I was little. I've always been a big reader. And so I think as I went through undergrad and trying to figure out what next steps are going to look like, I realized that the thing that I loved most about being a student was the research.

Um-h'm.

As I learned more about what librarianship looks like and being in that professional looks like, I learned a lot about how the field is predominantly white women. So, you know, as I think about my own experience growing up in Madison and how most of the, you know, like all of my teachers and doctors and librarians and everything were predominantly white people

As I think about the younger generation and like my friend's kids and all of those, you know, the generation to come, I think I know I want them to grow up seeing people like me, people who look like me, you know, in a variety of positions so that they know what they can be capable of.

Right.

So I think that really is what has sort of led my profits through this graduate program. I want to be a role model for marginalized kids as a whole, but especially for black kids, I want them to be able to see themselves.

That's great. Thank you for adding that additional information. I thought it piggy backed well after we talked about the digital natives and here you are going to pursue a degree to be a research expert. You love the library and I think that is phenomenal.

I want to go back to Dr. Harris. I want to revisit that conversation that Zoe had with her instructor regarding systematic persecution. Basically, Zoe told her teacher she was tired of carrying the weight of injustice and she wanted whites to share in the pain.

And I guess, reaching out to you to see what would be the best way to address this heaviness of being black in America and kind of passing the torch or passing the responsibility to one, admit that this is still an issue, and two, how can we, I guess, kind of navigate through this while there are some persons who are kind of turning a deaf ear to it?

Wow, that's -- there's is much there. You know, racial battlety is real. The weight of injustice is overwhelming. And so there's -- there was this very palpable, visceral response to Zoe's feeling in that moment of just how overwhelming that weight is.

I mentioned I lived in Charlottesville, my has had the opportunity to about the issues of race. And last year was a banner year again. She written a piece called whiteness can't save us.

In the piece, it was for this magazine, what was striking to me about that particular piece, as it relates to your question, Renita, is that it didn't deny the -- it didn't deny the added value of white coconspirators. It didn't deny that.

But it did resist, as I do resist, this historical narrative of looking to whiteness to somehow step in and save. And so that's the tension that I hold in answering that question or speaking particularly to the piece about having white folks to carry the burden with us. On some level, yes, again, not denying the add value, but I want to be very careful to not feed that historical narrative of waiting.

Right.

Waiting for there to be this, you know, this savior, if you will. To that end, when I think of movement particularly that are sort of mobilized by those on the margin, there's a collective power that can be leveraged amongst the marginalized that can put appropriate pressure, I think, such that it would provoke the kind of change we want to see.

And I have found that oftentimes the kind of pressure that's put on the self-interest of others, right?

Yeah.

This idea -- I mean, the moral imperative oftentimes isn't enough. So I think there's something to be said about how do we, sort of, leverage the energy, if you will, or the capital that exists right now to put the appropriate pressure in spaces that would provoke the kind of change that we want to see.

So again, added value, no doubt, but very careful to almost expect and wait for there to be a carrying of that burden alongside racial minorities.

I agree. I want to be mindful of time so I'm going to ask you one follow up. When you and I connected the other day, in particular on this question, you mentioned something about a hope versus an expectation.

Can you kind of reiterate? You talked about like you may not have a particular expectation of a certain class helping to carry the weight, but you have a hope that maybe that will change.

I like that. I don't -- I don't know who said --

You said it.

I said that?

Yes.

Oh, wow. Well -- speak to you just that dynamic hope versus expectation?

Yeah.

Again, I think it speaks again to this optimistic frame and posture, right, that even as a researcher, I take a very positive psychology lens to all the work I do in looking how we can help others to thrive and all find the strength to go where we want to go.

That's a very hopeful frame in general. But in this space, the expectation can be an added burden I don't need to bear to the overwhelming nature of injustice. And this sometimes implicit and very explicit in the marketplace where there's this expectation to even teach others. I'm trying to navigate and negotiate the crises that are for me and don't want that added burden.

And expectation is similar in that respect. But hope, I'll always be hopeful.

That's good. Since you don't remember that, I'm going to put my name behind it and push it out there. Okay? (Laughing)

Just tag me in the post.

Okay. I have another question for Lexi. Just really quickly towards the end of are the play write Janine met back up with her student, Zoe and offered an apology. My question to you is do you accept it? Do you think it was genuine or do we think there

was something behind it because she was pushing ideas of publishing more books and having speaking engagements?

What are your quick thoughts on that?

I think that's hard. But I think, you know, in my own emotional response, I found it hard to find any sort of genuine emotion in Janine's apology. I think an apology has to require some awareness of the harm caused, and then regrets for having caused it.

And I think Janine, you know, had some awareness of why -- of why Zoe reacted the way they did and why Zoe was feeling the way she did. But I don't know if Janine fully was able to completely address and acknowledge, you know, why and therefore properly apologize for the harm that was caused. I think part of that is because of the way she talks about wanting to publish more work or being -- the way she talks about trying to explain to Zoe why it would be good for her to co-write with Janine. Like, a lot of the ways she talks about her next step make the apology not feel completely genuine.

And so especially as their dialogue goes on and Janine starts to get angry with the way that Zoe responds to her, I think that it just further proves that I don't think Janine had come to terms with why what she did was harmful.

Right. I do believe that there was a moment where she admits fault and she could understand the damage of her words, but I don't quite agree that there was a connection, her understand or in her believing she was wrong.

I would accept it just to move on and have peace and continue to have those teaching moment discussions, but my eyes would be very wide open in interacting with her further.

I want to speak with Dr. Alex Gee, in particular, because you have had quite a different experience from what was demonstrated in this play write. You produced or were a part of a short video that was titled why I love UW. And if that production, you had discussed your family moving, coming to school, your mother going to school. You seemed to have had a great opportunity full of resources and being welcomed here on campus.

I'm hoping you can speak to us and give us an idea of what being university material meant.

Sure. I think in full transparency, my experience at UW Madison's campus was not all great. I was on campus (indiscernible) I was on campus when the trials holey report came out, when my advisors in the academic advancement program, Lisa Scott, Yvonne, had to move offices from south hall to 905 university because there was bomb threats against them.

And so I want to make sure that as we're talking, I'm very honest about those experiences. My love for UW Madison really stems back to 1970 when my family moved here so my mom could go to college. In those days I feel there was a real effort to recruit nontraditional students.

The program later known as academic advanced program, it was started by the governor's wife. It admitted my mother who was a high school dropout freshman year of high school. She crushed the entrance exam. But the campus and city at that time rolled out a red carpet. They gave her support so she could go to school. They showed me and my sister movies while she took her placement test.

So I love Wisconsin because my mom stepped out of depression. She shook the residual effects of being a battered wife. I love the way the campus helped to give me mother back to me.

I loved she was able to turn poverty around in my family. We lived below the poverty line. We ate what we called commodities and government cheese and what not. She paid for my tuition. She gave me down payment for my house. Bought a home a few years after being married. I love what it did to her. I give back to this community because of what it did.

I'm still a proud badger. You see I'm wearing my stuff. When Lexi finishes her master in May, that will be our 12th degree from Wisconsin, and we love it.

But we also want to push it to be -- to be its best. And so my experience was that I knew that if I could, you know, there's a song about, you know, New York New York from the musical, if you can make it here, you can make it anywhere. I knew as a black male -- I went to college with my male, sort of a 1.5 generation. I knew if I could make it at UW Madison, I could make it anywhere.

If I could sit in a con with 600 students only six of us black, I could make it anywhere. Sharing my voice in a predominantly white space. I feel Wisconsin prepared for me that. But it was not because it was always welcoming. Having strong black mother, strong faith it helped me to navigate the weather and putting my own programs together with my advisor were not that interested or equipped to help me with my program, I put my own program together.

Again, I love Wisconsin because of how my mother changed, but in the 80s, 81 to 85, we saw a lot of stuff. I was a recruiter in the 80s. I was an assistance to the chancellor. And that was before social media.

Word got out that black women being were attacked, there was a slave auction. So Wisconsin, these issues are not new. But in the face of that, I knew that I had to survive in that environment if I was going to model something like that for her people.

Yeah. Would you say that UW Madison is a must attend? Is this a school that you really wanted Lexi to come to? Is this something that, you know, was discussed or known in your household? Or were you just in support of her going for an education?

I wanted to support her getting an education. But I definitely wanted her to go to Wisconsin because I knew it was a world class institution having worked here. I knew in spite of this issue, it would prepare her to know how to thrive and how to navigate in this sea of whiteness.

What I didn't know then was the racial battle fatigue that would ensue. At that time, I didn't realize the micro aggressions we would accrue by having to do this kind of work. We didn't know it would have an impact on folks. We thought about the opportunity.

As a former recruiter, I taught students apply at the state college or college closer to home and if you want to go to a university, apply, but always apply home.

Lexi, we had one of the biggest arguments because Lexi, her mom and I, because she refused to apply to Wisconsin.

Wow.

And it was -- and we pushed here. It was actually during the campus visit that she did. She wasn't an attitude kid, but she was very attitudinal. Halfway through the tour, she said, dad, I'm feeling this. This is the first time she told, she told me my guidance counselor told me I wouldn't get in. That's why I haven't applied. I didn't want this to be my first failure. You all went here, I didn't want to be the first Gee to apply and not get in so that's why I have not applied.

And now, you know, she's --

Now she's knocking goals out left and right.

Left and right. Left and right. And even think about what's next for her. So --

That's awesome.

-- I don't think it's a must, but I still encourage people to go. And Wisconsin is not through with the Gees. We have a freshman here in I think marine biology and he's from Memphis. So it's continuing.

If I may just throw something out for 30 seconds. My work with justified anger is training white allies. I will say my views are slightly different than others who have spoken. I don't know that I have a need personally, but I believe that white people must carry on this. I don't think it's my job to soft shoot for while people or continue to rehearse history.

But our work, like right now we are currently leading a US black history course. We have 1600 people taking the class synchronous and asynchronous in US black history and we are getting into it. We have taken a thousand through the course and these folks are helping to raise money, write grants, to become volunteers, to write letters, helping to press systems and their challenge is not just objectify this information and learn it and cry, they must absorb it and help dismantle systemic white system.

It is not for me, but it is their responsibility because of their inheritance of the benefits of systemic racism. So what helps me to get up each day is I don't have to carry this. My job is to build up black leaders, but I need white people to talk to white people about white people's stuff.

Thank you. That's a lot. And I definitely will be reaching out on information on that course.

Please.

Because I have not heard of anything like that.

Please. I'd love to talk to you about that. People are taking it on both coast and in Singapore and Hong Kong. They said I want to know what's happening with black people when light of everything that's going on. So there's a real interest and UW is a partner in this.

All right. Well, maybe you and Lexi can tag team this question. I assigned it to Lexi, but with you coming to UW from your mother and your family moving here, I want to know when our parents make sacrifices for our benefit, does it lead us with a clouded lens on the struggle that other black students might have who don't have the same resources or funding?

And with that, when other black students find out you have resources, have you ever been labeled? You know, I've heard of the term Oreo or better than or not really black. Can you speak to either of those thoughts?

Lexi, you want to go first or do you want me to go?

You can go.

Okay. I would say what was helpful to us is we moved here from Chicago's west side. And so I remember being closeup on disparities. I did notice that there were opportunities afforded me that maybe my cousins in other places didn't have. In part because my mother pushed me and she was really -- she was really -- she believed in integration.

She believed we could rise above any of our obstacles and be just as sharp as our white counterparts. So that helped me to not forget others. My mom's a social worker.

She helped me start my nonprofit. And my sister helped me start it and my wife. So it was really a family business.

We took that UW stuff and built 30 years in the community. She taught me to give back. So I never felt those -- I never felt like I was forgetting, but I think -- but younger, my relatives who lived in Chicago, they would say why do you talk white or sound like that?

I've had my share of Oreo name calling. It's very interesting. I think what happens is we want to give our children the best and this is where I think I'll tag team to Lexi. My wife and I bought a home in Pittsburgh 25 years ago when it was still farmland, pretty much.

But my daughter didn't grow up on the street where there was no black people. I grew up in south Madison, the boys and girls club. I had black teachers, black neighbors, black babysitters. But in wanting to move up and thinking we were giving more, I realized what was next door do me was never Lexi's experience at all. That's why I pitched to her about maybe some of the downsize being raised by black folks who are trying to give their children a new experience.

Lexi, did you have anything to add or did dad sum that up?

I mean, I think he really covered a lot of the bases there. But I think he's definitely right. I mean, I think yeah, a lot of being raised where I was, I think that, you know, my childhood was like predominantly surrounded by, you know, white neighbors and white teachers and white doctors and everything in those veins.

And I think a saving grace for me is like family, and, you know, family friends who pretty much are considered family. But I think for me the most -- at least the one that stands out to me the most in terms of like being called an Oreo or something along those lines is I had -- I think I was about 15 and a friend's boyfriend said, you're really articulate for a black person.

And, you know, at the time I don't think that registered what that meant. It was my first time meeting him. He's a white guy from Oshkosh. I think most of the comments of that kind have come from white people for me.

But I think beyond that, I think my dad really covered the basis of answering that question.

Yeah. He knows how to work the room, that's for sure. He's got a lot of wisdom

I did want to invite Jen to the stage. My question for you is have you experienced defensiveness when discussing issues of privilege to a person considered upper class?

Kind of some things to think about if you overhear whether it's friends, colleagues, family, at the dinner table or what have you, and you hear things that are not correct, do you speak up, do you kind of download those and like let it marinate and try to understand better, you know, where did they get this thought from or how do you handle that?

Thanks, Renita. Obviously, it's -- honestly, a little bit all of the above, you know. It's so human. At least it is for me to want to avoid conflict. And also learning the importance of navigating situations where conflict is what's needed and how to recognize those different situations when they occur.

And to recognize in myself the defensive feelings on a human level occur sometimes when presented with someone who is saying that their experience of something is different than your own.

So, you know, I'm working on getting better at that. I hope all of us on this call are working on that. It's how we learn. It's how we better recognize our own privilege. It's how we build more expansive group of allies.

I would argue we all could be valuable to creating a just world. We definitely need as Zoe says in the play for privilege to give up some of their power.

I'm always thinking about in my own life, how do we make the case that there's value for all of us to gain from a more just world. To me that's the tragedy of this play. Both characters have a lot to offer. And if they were able to recognize what both of them bring to the table for long lasting success, what they could accomplish together would be remarkable. And Janine just can't get there in this play and I find that tragic on a lot of different levels.

How do we show people how change happens? Not to dismiss the impatience and righteous and justified anger of sometimes young revolutionaries and how do we teach revolutionaries that someone's patience or willingness to work within the system doesn't automatically make them the enemy. We need both and we talked about this is lot. There's a rule called yes and, you never negate what somebody else offers.

If either of the characters in the play went to yes, and instead of no, but, start from the place of your experience is valid, so is mine, let's build on that and learn from each other and see how we can do this vital work together. It would have been a much shorter play.

I hope that answered your question.

Yeah, that was fantastic because it speaks to if we don't say anything right away, it doesn't mean that we're agreeing. Sometimes you need time to let it download or perhaps check your emotions because whatever you say if you're fired up, may not translate correctly, anyway. So I think you made some really great points, Jen.

I see so many of our audience members on this call and so many people who I know are good allies that I think the reason I said I'm really working on speaking up more is because I'm becoming ever more conscious of how much the burden of addressing inequity is falling on the people of color in our community.

So trying to recognize every opportunity to take some of that labor onto my own shoulders where I can. And it's not always easy, but the effort's there.

Thank you. In the effort of time, I hope you don't mind, I'm going to call on Dr. Harris to give us one minute to answer this final question and that is, how can we be better activists or changing the dialogue in letting America, you know, or getting America to understand that our black is beautiful, our black is here to stay? That we belong here?

Oh, gosh. Awareness, knowledge and skills. That's probably the summary for me. For all of us to increase our awareness, our knowledge and our skill set at engaging and embracing difference. I talk a lot about the Jahari window and other spaces, which includes a blind spot we all have, things other know about us that we don't. There's room for all of us to grow. Culture competence is a spectrum on which we all fall.

I think that's humbling and allows us to grow and create safe spaces for the vulnerability necessary. I think awareness, knowledge and skills is a great place to start and courage to disrupt and dismantle is also an added thread.

Thank you. I want to wrap up. I do want to close with a quote from a Ted talk by Verna Myers. She has her own consulting group. She's an attorney and she talks about how we can overcome our biases.

It was never that we didn't see color. It was what we did when we saw color. It's a false ideal and while we're pretending not to racial difference is changing people's possibilities. It's keeping them from thriving and sometimes causing them an early death. Scientists who stare at awesome black people and memorize because it help us de-associate -- I'm urging you to reset our association. Starting tonight even as you look at me across the screen. Associate me with vice president Kamala Harris, Michelle Obama, Harriet Tubman, Maya Angelou and the like. I want you to look with such intent that you see beyond my distinct features and coiled hair and that you gain an understanding of who I am on the inside.

Associate me with the powerful women we have all come to love and admire and paved the way for some many of us. Tomorrow be persons of color, remove your blinders, walk towards your fear and look within. I want to give a special thank to the cast of the production team of The Niceties, our panelist, university of Wisconsin and all of you for joining us tonight.

Until next time, take care and be well. Thank you.

Thank you so much.
Thank you.

Thank you.
Thank you so much.