

TRANSCRIPT: Savala Trepczynski: Racial Hierarchy and Role of Whiteness

Ndjodi Ndeunyema (0:11) You're listening to RightsUp, a podcast from the Oxford Human Rights Hub. I'm Dr Ndjodi Ndeunyema, Modern Law Review Early Career Fellow at the University of Oxford and Research Director at the Oxford Human Rights Hub. In today's episode, we talk to Savala Trepczynski about racial hierarchy and the role of whiteness in the Black Lives Matter movement.

(0:52) This episode is part of a four-part series in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. The Oxford Human Rights Hub is an anti-racist organisation, and we are committed to continuously working to be better allies to our black brothers and sisters, who are resisting, organising, and protesting for the realisation of their basic rights. The horrific murder of George Floyd in the United States turned world attention towards the scourge of endemic police brutality perpetrated against black communities and communities of colour. It also exposed the complicit cruelty of white indifference. These are not new issues. The struggle for racial equality has been the unforgiving work of generations, the heavy mantle of justice yet to be served has been carried across centuries by defiant peoples whose only demand is the recognition of their basic humanity. We can all do better, we can all do something in our small yet significant corners of the world to support this imperative.

(2:10) In this spirit, this podcast series aims to amplify the voices of black and brown scholars, activists, and practitioners. We also want to acknowledge the long legacy of work that has collectively, across time and disciplines, built and bolstered the foundations of this present movement. Now is the time to listen, to learn, to support, and to amplify. We feel privileged at the Hub to have such a diverse and critical community of scholars and practitioners to call upon to share their expertise. But we also know that we cannot become complacent, and we must constantly ask — Who is missing? How can we do better? In addition to being in solidarity with black peoples across the world, we at the Hub hope to always answer by creating meaningful space to ensure that others are seen and are heard.

(3:18) Savala Trepczynski is an author, lawyer, and Executive Director of the Thelton E. Henderson Center for Social Justice at the University of California, Berkeley. She writes and lectures on structural racism, implicit bias, and understanding whiteness. Her new book, a collection of essays on race, gender, and the body, will be published in 2021.

(3:48) Thank you so much for joining us, Savala. And just to start off, we're considering the role that racial hierarchy plays in perpetuating inequalities. So, to start off with the basics, what is "whiteness" and how do its privileges manifest?

Savala Trepczynski (4:07) Well, first, I just want to say thank you so much for inviting me to have this conversation with you today. I've been looking forward to it. And I love this question. I love thinking about whiteness, and talking about whiteness, because it's something, at least in the United States (which is where I'm from and where I live and work, to where my knowledge and observations are rooted)— it's something that in the United States we don't tend to talk about very much. I mean, it sort of operates our lives in many ways, and yet we don't have a strong vocabulary to talk about whiteness, or a robust understanding across the board of what it is. So I love this question. And you know, the answer is both really simple and very complex.

(5:02) On the more simple side— And I should add, before I opine, that there are books and scholars and articles and a whole literature about what "whiteness" is and whiteness studies, so if people are interested in really digging into it, there's ways to do that. But for conversational purposes, you know, at its simplest, whiteness is just a category, right? It's just one way that human beings categorise each

other and separate themselves from each other, like any other category. It's an identity. Of course, it's a racial category. And it's one that's incredibly important because it operates as an identity on such a powerful level. We have other categories that are sort of rooted in the body, and rooted in phenotype, that are not as meaningful, you know— We don't think of things like whether someone is tall or short as being incredibly determinative, and sort of existentially important, the way we think of racial categories.

(6:18) So a few other things that I like to mention when I'm talking about what whiteness is, you know, just at a high level. It's important to remember that whiteness is made up, it's not real. It's a human invention, it's human construction. Of course, that doesn't mean it's not important. Money and time are also made up — those are human inventions that are not real. And yet, money and time, you know, govern much of our lives, and are key parts of the architecture of how our daily lives and how our institutions and cultures unfold over time. And the same is true of race, and of whiteness.

(7:06) I'd also add that whiteness is an exclusionary category, it's an exclusionary identity, meaning that not everyone can have it. And in the United States, you know, we still operate under this rule, that one drop of black blood, or non-white blood, makes you black, or makes you non-white. So whiteness has this false and strange, but historically useful, notion of purity embedded in it, and of being an exclusionary identity. Whiteness is malleable. At least in the United States, different groups come in and out of whiteness. You know, historically there were immigrant groups that came from Europe who were legally deemed not to be “white”, and then slowly became white over time. And even today, you know, we just had a Presidential election — you may have followed it — and there's a lot of conversation about the Latino and Hispanic vote that went to President Donald Trump, and how much of it came from Cuban Americans and Florida, and you know, the important thing to understand about— one of the important things to understand about that is that many Cuban Americans, and many Latino people, view themselves as white. So whiteness has— it's exclusionary, but it has a changing, malleable quality.

(8:47) A couple of other quick things I would add is that whiteness is an unfairly privileged identity, you know, it comes with all kinds of “goodies” that it doesn't merit any more than any other racial group would merit them. And in the United States, you can't divorce the category of whiteness from our history of chattel slavery, and the aftermath of chattel slavery. So those are a few qualities of whiteness that I think are useful to, kind of, have in your pocket when you're thinking about race and how whiteness functions, especially in the United States.

Ndjodi Ndeunyema (9:26) That's really, really helpful. As you referred to, sort of, the manifestations of whiteness, particularly in American society— Why do you think whiteness, as a social construct that has remained at the top of the racial hierarchy, has been so enduring, and how does it manifest itself today?

Savala Trepczynski (9:53) I think the simplest answer to why whiteness endures is because it benefits the people in power, who, in the United States, are often whites. And, you know, power concedes nothing, right? Any kind of power concedes nothing. What's the incentive for people who happen to be at the top of some particular hierarchy to dismantle the hierarchy? I mean, there are incentives, as you get into ethics and morality, and what it means to be a human being, sharing the planet, and all of those things. But, if you— if you're not going to dive into those deeper, almost moral and spiritual aspects of a hierarchy, or the human rights aspects of a hierarchy, then, you know, if you're at the top, it's all good, right?

(10:48) So, part of why whiteness endures is because there's little incentive, at least in the way we talk about these things— in my culture, there's little incentive— there has been little incentive for

white people to let go of whiteness, and to dismantle the racial hierarchy that we live under. For people of colour, the incentives are a lot more clear, because the racial hierarchy, or the racial caste system (as I think you can also call it), you know... We're on the losing end so often, you know?

(11:27) You talk— you asked about how these hierarchies tie to whiteness, and all of that, how they show up, and they show up everywhere. It might be a more kind of interesting question to think about where they *don't* show up — like, could we find a part of the culture, or a part of how we live, where racial hierarchy is not present? I mean, it's present in medicine, it's present in job interviews, it's present in the carceral State, it's present in housing education— or housing segregation, rather, and the sort of segregation of public schools that flows from that. It's present in COVID-19, right? You know, it's everywhere. It's sort of the water that we're swimming in, and it's baked in. So the trick is to kind of— how do we get enough white people to be interested in divesting from a system that harms them too — because it locks everybody into a certain kind of a structure — but that also benefits [them]? That's a question we haven't really figured out and that I don't think enough people have wanted to figure out... up until now, maybe, hopefully, we'll see.

Ndjodi Ndeunyema (12:57) That's a very poignant point that you make, where you highlight the harms that whiteness causes. And white people are often said to be blind to their whiteness, and the privileges that whiteness affords them as they navigate in society. Now, the greatest harm is probably the manifestation of whiteness as violence. And we've seen that in the summer just passed, particularly in the US. So perhaps we can just explore why whiteness manifests in violent ways against black bodies and people of colour?

Savala Trepczynski (13:44) Wow, that is an incredible question and point that you make, that whiteness, so often, manifests itself as violence against black and brown people, and black and brown bodies. And, you know, in this country, in the United States — not that the UK doesn't have its own version of this and its own history with these concepts of colonialism and slavery, but I have to speak about what I know— So in the United States, where whiteness emerges, kind of, as part of the infrastructure of chattel slavery, and as a way to uphold that system and justify that system over time, the violence is inherent, the violence is foundational. We're talking about trafficking human beings, we're talking about everything from torture, to assault, to murder. You know, the violence is— it's almost so huge that it's overwhelming to try and articulate it. So, there's a sense, you know, in a sort of deep historical sense, if we're looking back a few hundred years to when chattel slavery was getting going in this country, and when whiteness was sort of coming into being as a concept... The violence is— it's stitched into it, it's knit into it, it's inescapable.

(15:22) I think that it persists today because we have never fully reckoned with that. You know, to the contrary, we all sort of are taught that whiteness is kind of this benevolent, superior, pure thing — again, to get back to that idea of an exclusionary identity — and that doesn't seem to go along with violence. So there's, you know— The violence is kind of baked into the notion of whiteness, and then we're taught that it's not. We're taught that it's like, "Who are you going to believe — me or your lying eyes?" We're taught that what we're seeing is actually not real.

(16:07) And in this country, where I live, the myth of linear progress is so strong. I don't know if it feels that way in the UK, too, but there is a strong sense of always marching towards a more perfect union and wanting to, kind of, wipe our hands of the past and act as though it's not still definitional in the present moment. And because of that, there's this— there's this tendency to think that violence and whiteness are no longer connected, when in fact, they are, and the violence is sometimes more subtle than chattel slavery — you know, sometimes that violence against a body looks like white medical students actually believing that black people feel less pain than white people, and therefore prescribing pain medication, or even diagnostic tests, with less frequency. So it's— sometimes it's

subtle, sometimes it's not subtle. Sometimes it's Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. But we— it's almost as if we think, "Well if it's not chattel slavery, it's not really violence", even though we like to look back on that time and tell ourselves, "Oh, well, it wasn't that bad." You know, there's a lot of amnesia and confusion around whiteness and violence that I think we're starting to unpack.

(17:37) I just want to add — because it's really important for me to make this point — that I am not talking about white *people* as violent. Of course, there are white people who are violent, like there's every kind of people who are violent. I'm really talking about this system of whiteness that governs so much in our society, in terms of how resources are spread out, who gets what kind of advantages, who gets sort of pushed aside, and who is deemed not to matter, or [to] be as valuable as someone else. So I don't want to give the impression that I'm saying white people are violent. I'm saying that we are *all* caught up in the system of whiteness, in one way or another, and the system itself is violent. And if you are white, your position in that system is different than mine.

Ndjodi Ndeunyema (18:36) Yeah. And just coming to, sort of, understanding whiteness, and the positionality of white people, and the growth in language around "white fragility", "white guilt", critiques around this leading to an "us versus them" narrative and deepening political polarisation in society, which in the US has clearly been exploited— Do you think these critiques warrant merit? And how would you respond to those who critique this "us versus them" narrative in emphasising the whiteness of white people?

Savala Trepczynski (19:24) You're right. I mean, it is a popular critique, right? That if you talk about race, you somehow make it worse. I don't think that's true, but that is a critique. I think if you refuse to talk about race, you make it worse. It's sort of like, if we're all living in a building and the building is on fire, but nobody wants to talk about fire. Like, that doesn't make the fire go away, right? We have to be willing to say the word "fire" in order to put out the fire. So, you know, I view that kind of instinct among some people — especially white people, to want to move away from this conversation — as really a manifestation of some of the kind of buzzwords that you said a moment ago, of "white fragility", and of "white silence". You know, white people are very often insulated from thinking about themselves as racialised people, and— so they don't often have the chance to develop the same kind of vocabulary, and even the same type of vision that people of colour develop. And when I say "type of vision", I mean, a person of colour can spot a racialised issue pretty quickly, because we have to be able to do that as a matter of survival, and because we're taught to do it, for better and worse. When you're white, you don't have to be able to pick up on racialised issues and moments of racialised tension, violence, privilege, whatever — you're just not taught to see them.

(21:25) So it's not surprising that, down the line, if somebody starts saying to you, "Well, we really need to talk about race" and for your whole life you have been told in a thousand ways — subtle and overt — that you don't need to think about race, or even worse, that you ought to be "colour blind", of course there'll be some resistance among some people, right? Of course it will feel like wandering into the weeds, or kind of getting off topic, or division, to people who aren't, you know, well-educated and well-versed in the reality of the racialised nature of our world.

(22:07) I think one of the really, really tricky and unfortunate binds that white people find themselves in is that they are taught that their whiteness is of essential importance to who they are — almost on an existential level — but they're not— but at the same time, they're told to never talk about it, or think about it. And that's just an extremely odd place to be. You know, if you and I grew up in a world where the people in power always had curly red hair, and the people who were considered beautiful always had curly red hair, and anyone without curly red hair lived on the wrong side of town and couldn't get the same medicine and, you know, if you and I had curly red hair we would learn— we would see that, we would learn to associate the trait that we have with the good things in the world,

where we see the trait showing up. But if we were told that we could never ever discuss curly red hair, and we should act like we don't even see it? I mean, what an odd— what an odd place to be mentally, morally. And I think that's where a lot of white folks have been. And I also think that, hopefully, we're starting to unwind and unpack that very, very slowly.

Ndjodi Ndeunyema (23:28) So, moving on to race equality and human rights law — What protections are there in the US Constitution which can be used to advocate for race equality, and to combat discrimination on the grounds of race, particularly, which manifests through whiteness and white supremacy?

Savala Trepczynski (23:54) The laws are many. They're inadequate, and I'll get to that, but on a federal level, on a state level, and of course, in the Constitution, there are dozens of legal provisions that are designed to prevent racial hierarchy from harming people. Whether in the Constitution, it's the Equal Protection Clause, or in terms of federal law, there's the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act, the Fair Housing Act, the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, and many states have similar provisions within their own constitutions and their set of laws. So we have at least a basic legal infrastructure for protecting people of colour, protecting black people, and preventing white supremacy or white racial hierarchy to run amok, in theory.

(24:59) But I say they're inadequate for a couple of reasons. One is that these types of laws are only as effective as the people who are interpreting them. And, you know, there are instances where you may have a right, in theory, but there's no teeth to it, because you can't— there's no way to vindicate the right. If you don't have access to lawyers, who you would need to vindicate the violation of a right, or remedy the violation of a right, the right isn't all that useful. So there's issues of access, in addition to questions about who is going to be interpreting these laws — if it's someone who's sceptical about the value of the law, if it's someone who is an out-and-out racist, if it's someone who is not an out-and-out racist but who nevertheless is rather unsophisticated and they're thinking about racial caste and racial hierarchy, and therefore not possessed of a strong vocabulary or not able to "know it when they see it", in terms of racial discrimination, then the law is going to be less effective for that reason too.

(26:19) Many of these laws in the United States grew out of overt, facially horrifying examples of racism — undeniable, unquestionable examples of racism that was plain on its face. And that's not always the case now. Those two examples I mentioned earlier of— On the one hand, you have overt things like Breonna Taylor's murder happening, or George Floyd's murder. On the other hand, you have more subtle things happening, like medical students somehow believing that black people don't feel pain at the same level that white people do. Both of those obviously have an impact, and obviously are rooted in our particular form of racial hierarchy. But the law is better suited to handle the overt examples of racism that necessitated the law in the first place, and it's less agile when it comes to things that are more subtle, or kind of squishy, or "Well, I don't know, maybe it is, maybe it isn't, depending on who you ask." The law is just not that agile when it comes to unconscious bias, for example. So you know, we have the protections, but they're insufficient in many ways. They're necessary, but they don't do the whole job.

Ndjodi Ndeunyema (27:55) You mentioned Breonna Taylor, and I think, alongside George Floyd, the circumstances of their deaths really indicted the law, if I can put it that way. And you, as someone who is clearly working within the realm of the law— you are based at Berkeley law, and you are dedicated to social justice, and so I assume that you still recognise the relevance of law in as much as law has failed to address things such as "redlining",¹ for example in the US... Do we need to look

¹ "Redlining" is the discriminatory practice of denying services to residents of certain areas on the basis of their race or ethnicity. See generally, Camila Domonoske. "Interactive Redlining Map Zooms In On America's History of Discrimination"

beyond the law for solutions to issues around racial inequalities and injustices that black people continue to experience in spaces such as the US, where you do have a sophisticated legal landscape?

Savala Trepczynski (28:48) I think we do need to look beyond the law. (And by the way, yes, I do still assume the relevance of the law. Not the omnipotence, and not the inherent, unassailable wisdom of the law, but yeah, I do think it's relevant.) I think, you know, laws are opinions, right? They're just the notion of people who have some power, about what they want to protect, and what they don't think needs protection. And so their own interests are often very well taken care of, and then— you know, sometimes there's pressure, and there's enlightenment that leads people to want to protect things that are not necessarily in their direct interest, and I think that's how you get civil rights laws passed, but the laws are made by people, and they're interpreted by people, and they're enforced by people, and people are flawed, and so laws are flawed. Law can't be the solution to a human problem as deep, and as dynamic, and as varied, and as persistent as racial hierarchy. It's part of the solution, it's got to be part of the solution, otherwise you're living in an apartheid or a chattel slavery situation, otherwise it becomes inhuman. But, because laws derive from people and are interpreted by people, we also have to work on all the other aspects of what it means to be human being. I think we have to work on ethics, morality, spirituality (if that's relevant to a particular person) because the laws just flow out of human beings, and what we believe, and what we want to value. To ignore the kind of richness of a human being beyond legal thinking, we do that at our peril. Certainly, it's not enough to just have laws that help, you've got to go beyond laws.

Ndjodi Ndeunyema (31:19) I like that you introduce us to the shared humanity, across geographies, across national contexts. And I think, perhaps, this is a good time to reflect on the adequacy or otherwise of international human rights laws in promoting racial equality meaningfully in a domestic context, such as the US.

Savala Trepczynski (31:47) Yes, I think that we have a lot to learn and to embrace from the human rights model, that countries outside the United States have a more robust relationship — certainly not every country, but you know, there are countries that have a more robust relationship with the idea of human rights, than we have in the United States, I think... And where the notion of human rights is, sort of... it's just diffused throughout the culture, and people are more familiar with it.

(32:26) You know, I should say here, I am not a human rights lawyer, and I'm not a human rights scholar, so my knowledge is limited. But I do think that a lot of what we do in the social justice space in the United States is essentially human rights, at its core, right? It's about the— the reality is that we all have certain rights simply because we're human beings, and we're alive. And there's a universal— a universality and a way that these rights are not alienable. They can't be taken away, so long as we're alive.

(33:19) I think that, you know, one of the interesting things about the United States is that we tend to view rights as things that are derived from God — often a Christian God, you know, in this culture — or as things that are derived from the State, that are granted to us by some powerful State entity. And neither of those things is wholly consistent with the human rights framework. I think that we're— for a variety of reasons, we're less familiar with, and comfortable with, this notion that, no, our inherent dignity and value does not necessarily come from the State saying that we are valuable or from a particular God, but just from being alive, just from being a human being. And there's such a beautiful morality or spirituality there, you know, depending on how you want to think about it, that I think is really essential if the United States is going to move beyond racial hierarchy in a sustained, powerful way.

NPR (19 October 2016), available at: <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/10/19/498536077/interactive-redlining-map-zooms-in-on-americas-history-of-discrimination>

(34:41) It's not that in places that have a more robust sense of human rights in the culture, they don't have race problems — I'm not trying to say that it's a panacea. There is no panacea. I think it's an "all hands on deck" type of movement and type of moment where lots of different disciplines and lots of different architectures are necessary, including the international human rights framework.

Ndjodi Ndeunyema (35:08) That's really insightful and you refer to, sort of, the inherent humanity of black people, of people of colour, that they do not need the vindication of their humanity because a specific State instrument or international treaty says so, but yet— sort of moving on to the movements that have arisen as a result of the police brutality that has been perpetrated against black bodies in the US — Why then did it take a black man, George Floyd, being killed in the most horrific way, for international attention to be brought on this issue of police brutality and racial inequality when it has been a pervasive issue in the US and all around the world?

Savala Trepczynski (36:04) I think that we are going to be thinking about George Floyd and Breonna Taylor — although she's gotten somewhat less attention — and this summer that unfolded in the United States for a long, long time. I think we're going to be unpacking and dissecting so many things about 2020 in the years and decades to come. And I don't know exactly why George Floyd's murder seems to ring a bell around the world in a way that many other killings, and many other examples of violence, didn't.

(36:50) I mean, I think Emmett Till's murder and the open casket that his mother chose at his funeral...² Maybe I wasn't alive at that time, but maybe [that] had a similar— washed over the world and the culture in a similar way. I don't know exactly what it was about George Floyd's murder. You know, certainly, it was so astounding to see— to see someone be killed over a span of nearly 10 minutes. That is not something most people are used to seeing — we're used to seeing like, maybe a gunshot in a movie or, you know, um... But to see someone applying the lethal pressure of life-taking to someone else for almost 10 minutes, um... you know... it was astounding. So it's possible to me that this sort of callousness, and the *casualness* of how he was murdered, was just so unconscionable to people that there was nothing to do but respond in a big way around the world. But, you know, black bodies have been brutalised quickly and slowly for hundreds of years in this country, so I don't exactly know...

(38:35) I do think that, in the United States, we are literally starting from an assumption that black people are not fully human — like, that is the historical assumption that is built into this country. We can't get around that. Of course, if you walked down the street and asked 100 Americans, "Are black people human beings?", probably 100 of them would say, "Yes, absolutely". But we have never really done the work of fully excavating that sort of cancerous growth in the culture, this totally false, totally grotesque notion that black people are not quite as human as everybody else, in some indefinable way. And so, you know, that's another reason why I think that the human rights framework — where you root the value and the dignity of someone's life, and their right to safety, and all of those things, in their humanity — is potentially so powerful here, but also doesn't stick as much here because I truly think that, on some level, if we believe that black people were at deeply, beautifully human as white people, if we really truly, truly, 100% believe that, we couldn't stand for the State of things. It would be unbearable to more people.

² Emmett Till was lynched in Mississippi in 1955 after being accused of offending a white woman in her family's grocery store. He was 14 years old at the time he was lynched. For further details, see "The Murder of Emmett Till", *Library of Congress*, available at <https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/articles-and-essays/murder-of-emmett-till/>. **WARNING:** The following link contains a graphic image that may be disturbing to viewers. See also "Emmett Till", *TIME 100 Photos*, available at: <http://100photos.time.com/photos/emmett-till-david-jackson>

Ndjodi Ndeunyema (40:14) This notion of us being unable to stand the state of things, I think, spoke particularly to white people and the power that their whiteness gives them in society. And you know, of the many sound bites that came out of Black Lives Matter, you hear things such as "silence is violence", "white complicity", and so forth. What role should white people seek to play in movements such as Black Lives Matter, and how does their absence from actively participating in such movements perpetuate racism, and particularly anti-black racism?

Savala Trepczynski (41:03) Well, I think that, first of all, I'm excited to see so many of my white brothers and sisters and siblings seeming to want to take up the fight, being out in the streets, wanting to do this work, alongside us and with us. I think that's wonderful, and I think it's totally necessary — like, there's no way we're gonna shake ourselves free of racial hierarchy without the involvement of white people. They have to be part of it, the same way that, to speak with generalisation, men have to be part of ending sexual assault against women — like, you just can't do it by teaching women how to not be assaulted, you also have to teach men how not to assault. (And I know that assaults happen across all types of gender lines, I'm just, you know, speaking in generalities, to make a point.) So we need white people's engagement.

(42:09) I think that the— you know, there's two things that I think white people can and should do if they want to be involved in movements like Black Lives Matter. The first is to follow the lead of black people in the space. The black people in this space know what they're doing, and they are leading the space from deep experience, and deep knowledge, and deep vision. And it's important to be willing to be led, if you're white in that space, as opposed to needing to lead yourself. Another thing I think white folks need to do is the really difficult, sometimes emotional, sometimes spiritual, often cathartic, transformative work, of unpacking their own relationship to white supremacy, a deep and ongoing inventory of how white supremacy shows up in their own lives, in their relationships, in their spaces, in their preferences, in their choices, in their dreams, in their fears.

(43:30) And there are many, many tools that exist to help white people do that. So, one of my favourites is a book called "Me and White Supremacy" by Layla F. Saad. Essentially, it's a workbook for people who are white or hold white privilege. I mean, I'm talking a deep dive, a really deep dive into unpacking how racial hierarchy shows up in their lives. And the reason I think why people have to do that is because they do not have the same level of education on this topic that black and brown people have — they just don't, they're sheltered from it. And if they run into a space of racial justice activism without having some vocabulary and training and understanding, they can do more harm than good, even though they don't mean to. It would be like if I rushed into an emergency room with no medical training, and insisted upon helping the nurses and doctors — as well intentioned as I might be, I'm liable to do something wrong and make things worse, unintentionally. So white people have to do some homework and unpacking of their own to be really positive forces in the spaces.

Ndjodi Ndeunyema (44:50) In an article that you wrote that has gained quite a lot of traction you implore white people to be twice as kind to black people and people of colour. Why do you focus on kindness, and what do you hope this can achieve?

Savala Trepczynski (45:09) I focus on kindness, as a sort of unappreciated racial justice strategy, because it is easy, and it's accessible, and it's free, and it actually makes a difference in the day to day lives of black people and people of colour. We know what kindness looks like, we understand the basics of being kind. We don't always understand what racial equality looks like, especially white folks, they don't always understand what it— what— A question I hear all the time from my white friends is, "But what do I do?" You know, "How do I— how do I stop being a part of white supremacy?" And that's a complex question, it's a good question, and there are many, many, many, many strategies, all of which are important.

(46:13) Kindness, I think, is a fairly intuitive one. You know, my daughter, who's five years old, understands what kindness is, and she understands how to be kind. What I say in this article is that, for people who hold unconscious bias against black and brown people — which is basically everyone — being purposefully kind, and purposefully **twice** as kind, could be a way to counteract some of that bias. If you imagine the doctor, or the young medical student, who has the unconscious belief that black people don't feel as much physical pain as white people, and is therefore less likely to order a diagnostic test or to prescribe treatment... If that same doctor walked into the room, with their black patient, with a purposeful intention to be twice as kind as whatever their instinct was, you can see that perhaps, some of the time, it would make a difference in meaningful ways. And it makes a difference in the silly little ways, the small little moments that, you know, over our lifetime, are not so small and silly. That story grew out of a, kind of, micro-aggressive interaction I had with a white woman who lives on my street, and intentionally adding a little bit more kindness, friendliness, can take some of the sting out of daily life for black and brown people of colour — to be on the receiving end of white kindness is quite lovely.

(48:05) Another thing I say in that piece is, of course, it can't just be performative kindness, it has to be rooted in some intentionality, and something deeper. I'm not from the South, I don't know the South very well, but when I've been in the deep South in this country, it always strikes me how polite people are — white people and black people — even amidst an enduring sort of architecture and structure of racism that is **so** intense. So it can't just be about appearing to be polite — it has to be kindness in a deeper sense.

Ndjodi Ndeunyema (48:45) It's a really powerful idea and outlook and way of leading one's life, especially recognising the societal, structural issues that certain groups face. Black Lives Matter, rightly so, shines a light upon race-based discrimination and inequality and violence. How can we ensure that we have an attack on inequality that manifests in society running in parallel, on different fronts — gendered inequality, sexual inequality, geographic inequality, economic inequality, class inequality, and so forth?

Savala Trepczynski (49:35) There's a quote from Audre Lorde where she says, "There's no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single issue lives." I'm paraphrasing a little bit, but that's the gist of her quotation. And indeed, it's true, right? We can't expect to pursue separate silos of liberation and get very far because none of us live single-issue lives, right? I'm a woman, I'm black, I'm fat — you know, those are three things that are often kind of ticks against me in the culture. On the other hand, I'm cisgendered, I'm able bodied, I make a good living — you know, so I have some privileges to. I think that if we're going to— I mean, if we can dare to imagine a world that we've never seen, where people are free— I mean, it almost is— it almost feels too dreamy to say it — but if we can dare to imagine that, then of course the journey to arrive in that space, and the process of creating that space, has to be multivalent, multi-dimensional, and deeply intersected and interconnected, because human beings are, and human relationships are. So I hope that as people dive into this space of unpacking and dismantling racial hierarchy, and trying to imagine and create a world without racial hierarchy, that all the many issues and identities that are attached to race sort of come along for the ride, because if— it doesn't work to just sort of fix one, we have to fix them all at the same time. And that's what makes this work incredibly difficult — I mean, it's one of the things that makes it incredibly difficult. But it's also what makes it accessible and welcoming to **everyone**. Everyone has an entry point into these struggles and these acts of creation, because they touch everyone.

Ndjodi Ndeunyema (52:07) That's an excellent point to conclude on. Thank you so much, Savala, for taking the time to talk to us on this important understanding of racial hierarchy and whiteness in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement. You refer to your book, it's upcoming, I believe?

Savala Trepczynski (52:29) Yeah, I believe it's upcoming too, unless there's been a change of plans! It will be published in July of 2021, by Simon & Schuster, so just a few short months away, and it's a book of essays about race and gender and the body, and a lot of the really juicy stuff that we have been talking about today, so I'm super excited for that.³ And I thank you for letting me mention it. Ndjodi, this has been such a lovely conversation, I wish we could do it again tomorrow. I'm just really thankful for the chance to talk with you and to be on this podcast.

Ndjodi Ndeunyema (53:10) Thank you so much Savala.

(53:15) RightsUp is brought to you by the Human Rights Hub. The Executive Director is Kira Allmann. This episode was co-produced by Natasha Holcroft-Emmess and Christy Callaway-Gale, edited by Christy Callaway-Gale, and hosted by me, Ndjodi Ndeunyema. Music for this series is by Rosemary Allmann. Show Notes for this episode have been written by Sarah Dobbie. Thanks to our production team members — Sandra Fredman, Meghan Campbell, Mónica Arango Olaya, and Gauri Pillai — for their valuable feedback in putting this episode together. Subscribe to this podcast wherever you like to listen to your favourite podcasts.

³ Further details regarding Savala Trepczynski's forthcoming book, "Don't Let It Get You Down: Essays on Race, Gender, and the Body", can be found here: <https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Dont-Let-It-Get-You-Down/Savala-Nolan-Trepczynski/9781982137267>