

Transcription

Exploring how we can master ourselves by looking at how experts say it is possible with your host Suswati Basu.

Intro music

Welcome to season 2 episode 55 of How To Be...with me Suswati as your timid presenter, guiding you through life's tricky topics and skills by reading through the best books out there. Sometimes it can be exhausting to think about the differences we share, being a constant guard of our identities, and defending our viewpoints to the death.

And emotional exhaustion is the core component of burnout says academic Giorgio Grossi and colleagues. On top of that there is plenty of research that affirms that stress isn't created equal which brings us to representation burnout. Representation burnout refers to the feeling of exhaustion and isolation that comes from being the only person of a particular identity in an environment. But also to the fact that many have to constantly talk about identity being the only one in that environment.

So what exhausts you about talking about identity and diversity?

Here is Stella Sutcliffe, Founder of Go Title Free and the mother of two daughters on her views.

Stella Sutcliffe: I'm the founder of, a, gender identity equality campaign called go title free, which I set up three years ago because I was becoming increasingly frustrated with organizations, attaching a marital status title to my name when they're not part of our legal identity at all.

I felt that they just didn't represent me. I didn't wanna be a miss saw a misses or a miss. And I just thought, why can't I not just be first name and surname? Um, and I think this is. Uh, the same for lots of women. I don't think that they're fair when men get Mister throughout their whole lives. Um, and I also don't think they're fair for non-binary people who don't get an option, uh, to be truly authentic when it comes to marital status titles.

So I don't like them. I don't like them being used by companies. I don't like them being put on birthday cards. Um, I don't feel that they represent my identity at all.

(Back to host)

Our first book is edited by award-winning and bestselling author Nikesh Shukla, who wrote a host of novels such as the critically acclaimed Meatspace, the Costa Shortlisted novel Coconut Unlimited and the Award-winning novella The Time Machine. His most recent works are Brown Baby: A Memoir of Race, Family and Your Story Matters: Find Your Voice, Sharpen Your Skills, Tell Your Story

which was published on March 17. He also wrote the Channel 4 sitcom *Kabadassess*.

We bring to the table the incredible book *The Good Immigrant*, which collects 21 universal experiences: feelings of anger, displacement, defensiveness, curiosity, absurdity – they look at death, class, microaggression, popular culture, access, free movement, stake in society, lingual fracas, masculinity, and more. Shukla was kind enough to speak to me about this book six years after it was first published. Here is a snippet but watch the whole interview on www.howtobe247.com or on the YouTube channel.

Nikesh Shukla: I would argue that, uh, when we put the book out, the title was a sarcastic one anyway, and we were, you interrogating the need for such, such fickle binary, comparative scales that actually make no sense. And you know, they're always about use. What use are you to society? What are you contributing rather than are you a human being and how can we treat you like a human being?

I don't think that's changed. If anything, I think a bunch of things have happened in the last five years that have, you know, taken us backwards. You know, you just have to look at everything from, um, *The Windrush* scandal to who was most affected by COVID 19, on the front lines, through to some really, really important interventions on class that have happened in the publishing industry from Sabrina Mahfouz's anthology, working out to *kit de Waal's Common People to Dead Ink's Know Your Place*.

You know, there's been, you know, there's nationality in borders, bill. You've had, um, our current home secretary build on Theresa May's hostile environment at such unimaginable depth and lengths. Um, you know, to the point where, you know, they are debating whether underwater sonic booms is an appropriate way of stopping people crossing the channel.

And you just think that was even a consideration that had to, there had people arguing for and against that, rather than think that is a dystopian idea. Like, and then, and inhumane one and one that I think constitutes a war crime. So all of these things have happened and we're still stuck on trying to define what racism is, you know, Stormzy, he says, Britain is a racist country and people go, how can you say that? We are the least racist country. And, you know, as Dave, the rapper, Dave said the least racist is still racist, you know? So we're still stuck having these conversations. And I think, I think for me, I've just realized that I don't. I don't personally feel like the best use of my voice and my time is having these conversations on Twitter. Um, I think, you know, whatever other people want to do to help the cause or to push forward a progressive agenda is amazing. Um, but for me, I just think, you know, I've realized. Over the years that when I first set out to be a writer, I just wanted to be a comedy writer.

I didn't want to be a, a race expert or I, you know, I had no designs on doing a book like *The Good Immigrant* and actually to do a, a game changing book, like *The Good Immigrant*, and then try and continue to be a race commentator in a world where you have amazing people like Emma Dabiri and Reni Eddo Lodge and Akala and Kehinde Andrews and all of these amazing

people, much smarter than me doing all this amazing research and academic work and brilliant stuff.

Like I should just go back to writing comedy. So, but that's what, that's what I set out to do. You know, they are much, much smarter than I could ever dream of being. And I'd much rather do what I'm good at.

I think, well, Brown Baby came about because I'd spent a couple of, I'd spent 2015 to 2018 thinking about race and racism. And I was in a really bad place mentally because I'd sort of been given this platform to talk about these issues and it wasn't necessarily a platform that I wanted. You know, my feeling was people always wanted the editor to come along to these events. And I, I sort of felt like if I said yes to all of these events, then I could bring the smarter contributors along with me for the ride and they would get to talk about the smart stuff and we'd get to do the gigs and the thing was, I had young children at the time. And so I would go and do these events. And then I would sit on trains all the way home at like one, two or three in the morning while all the other contributors would stay wherever the gigs were and sort of hang out and have a drink and a laugh and decompress and go, oh my God, that Q&A was a bit was insane once and all that kinda stuff.

And I didn't get to do any of that. I just spend a lot of time by myself, just processing the fact that my entire evening had been spent talking about racism and already messed with my head. If I'm being honest, like I was in a really low place. I, I was in a, you know, for all of the good that book did me and like, you know, I could, I could, everything I've done.

The only thing people ever want to talk to me about is The Good Immigrant. You know, I could write like an award-winning sitcom next year and people will still go. So tell miss, tell me what, uh, led you to do The Good Immigrant, you know, and that's all great in everything. Like I understand the importance of that book.

And I don't wish to undermine what it means for people, but like there was just a time in my life where I was like, I can't do this. I'm not reacting to this very well. And I wanted to start writing about joy. I didn't want to just write about all of the horrific stuff that was going on. I wanted to write towards joy. So Brown Baby basically became a way of me writing about joy. Now, in order to write towards joy, you have to write through the pain, right? Because that's what makes the joy even more transcendent. And so, like the central question I wanted to ask myself with that book was how do we raise our kids to be joyful in a world that seeks to make us miserable?

You know, I know that's a central question that people have disagreed with, um, uh, even some people on, on the podcast that I've hosted of the same name and, you know, that's great. Like I love listening to people's different perspectives on how they do answer this question with their kids or whether they even think the world is that bleak to begin with or whether it, you know, it's, you, you are the bleak one.

The world is what it is. And for me, the world felt bleak. Because of the work I was doing and so I wanted to write towards joy for my kids. I wanted to. Give them something, give them a way of being, or just tell them something about myself, something honest about myself. And that's where that book became.

(Back to the host)

Shukla says *The Good Immigrant* is “a document of what it means to be a person of colour” in Britain today. In 21 essays by black, Asian and minority ethnic writers working across literature and the media, the book highlights the standards by which immigrants – first or second generation, refugees and asylum seekers – are either accepted into, or judged to be apart from, a dominant culture determined by whiteness.

The essays interrogate a British national culture trapped in a post-imperial state of nostalgia. Several essays speak to the myths of the Asian “model minority” or a “monolithic blackness”. For Wei Ming Kam, “being a model minority is code for being on perpetual probation” as well as denying an individual’s complexity. According to Reni Eddo-Lodge: “It is up to you to make your own version of blackness in any way you can – trying on all the different versions, altering them until they fit.”

Actor Daniel York Loh has a tender, ruefully comic piece about growing up a “lonely half-Chinese schoolboy in the West Country”, and finding a hero in the wrestler Kendo Nagasaki and his villainous, orientalist theatrics on *World of Sport*. Whilst Kieran Yates has a beautifully textured account of visiting her family’s Punjabi village. Poet Salena Godden reflects on how, “As you grow older, as a mixed-race person, you become a chameleon, you are born with natural camouflage.”

Actor Riz Ahmed is witty on how the post-9/11 airport has become an ethnic performance space; so often is he searched at Heathrow – by the same middle-aged Sikh guy – that “I instinctively started calling him Uncle, as is the custom for Asian elders. He started calling me ‘beta’, or son, as he went through my luggage apologetically. It was heartwarming, but veered dangerously close to incest every time he had to frisk my crotch.”

“You see,” he writes, “the pitfalls of the audition room and the airport interrogation room are the same. They are places where the threat of rejection is real. They’re also places where you’re reduced to your marketability or threat-level, where the length of your facial hair can be a deal breaker, where you are seen, and hence see yourself, in reductive labels.”

Perhaps what these pieces have in common are the questions they ask, and an urgent awareness of the need to ask them. There’s humour, and insight here, there’s sometimes optimism - though if good things are happening, ‘it is just taking way too long’, says Salena Godden for example. There's quite contagious anger, but there’s also a pervasive weariness.

Bim Adewunmi ends her excellent essay on tokenism and her experience of representation in popular culture with the simple, 'It's so tiring.' And: 'Here's the truth of the matter,' says Musa Okwonga. 'I find racism boring.' And that definitely appears to thread through the stories here.

Our final book comes from Mary-Frances Winters, who is the founder and president of the Winters Group Inc. She has been helping clients create inclusive environments for over three decades. Her book *Black Fatigue: How Racism Erodes the Mind, Body, and Spirit* addresses the intergenerational impact of systemic racism on the physical and psychological health of Black people. Here she is on the podcast *The Inclusion Solution*.

Mary-Frances Winters: The idea and the impetus for the book actually started, um, quite a bit before the black lives matter, um, protests that we are, you know, recently seeing in doing the work of diversity, equity and inclusion in many organizations, I kept hearing, um, we're exhausted.

I was hearing this from people much younger than me, you know? And I would say you're 30 years old. How you, how can you be exhausted already? Give me the side eye? You know, you know? Yes, I'm exhausted. And so I, I started to think about this and, um, This was hearing so much about how difficult the work is and how this generation, you know, continues to fight for equity as so many generations before them and this generation not being afraid to say it's exhausting, I'm tired. And I am going to, to concentrate on and focus on, um, and prioritize my wellbeing.

(Back to host)

Black Fatigue highlights the history of white supremacist, racist systems that have led to Black intergenerational fatigue. It focuses on the impact of Black fatigue not only on Blacks but also on society. Winters' book is a fact-based exploration of very real health problems caused by systemic racism. She frames racism as a public health issue.

Winters defines Black fatigue as repeated variations of stress that result in extreme exhaustion and cause mental, physical, and spiritual maladies that are passed down from generation to generation. The death of George Floyd in 2020 only helped take off as Winters describes it, the proverbial muzzle, to allow people to tell the world about their pain and rage without the fear of the usual backlash. To stop suppressing the emotional toll.

Black people experience "place-based stress" when acts of racism occur in spaces they must traverse in their everyday lives. For example, people working in department stores. Black high school students are also more than 60% more likely to attempt suicide than their white classmates.

People who experience racism pass down their trauma – which an individual can process as depression, anxiety, rage, shame, insecurity, diseases and fatigue – to the next generation, which leads to the community experience of multigenerational, or historical, trauma. Black

people suffer disproportionately from diseases such as high blood pressure, heart disease, cancer, and obesity. Many of these health issues are uncorrelated to socioeconomic status. Black fatigue increases vastly when people have intersecting marginalized identities.

The systemic level of this is seen in chapter three. Winters reveals that Black Americans experience a lower quality of life in comparison to their white counterparts even when you control education level and socioeconomic status.

At the institutional and structural levels, as a start, she says the United States needs to atone for slavery publicly and offer reparations to descendants of slaves. She says we also need those in power to abolish racist legislation, policies, and practices. It can be done quickly, as we witnessed during the 2020 racial protests. Winters says an intergenerational cycle of financial inequality prevents Black people from succeeding.

For example, Black people were significantly less likely to own homes than white people in 1976, and the same disparity exists today. On average, Black people's net assets are ten times smaller than those of white people. Nearly one-fifth of Black families today have a negative net worth or own nothing.

Many leaders fail to create diverse teams, and few people of color occupy leadership roles today. Black people also face educational obstacles. Schools today are more racially segregated than they were in 1954. Black schools tend to have more lower-income students, and public schools with few white students tend to lack resources and funding.

Intra- and interpersonal solutions for Black people to address racism-induced fatigue, such as resistance, healing, restoration, faith, rest, and resilience, are important but not end-game remedies because they do not solve the root cause; they only treat the symptoms and dull the pain. In this way, white people can help mitigate Black fatigue by acknowledging their whiteness and thus privilege, doing their own education on the history of racism, and becoming antiracist allies who challenge white supremacy.

Winters also illustrates the many ways that "sublime ignorance" props up white supremacist attitudes that impact Black Americans' access to educational, economic, workplace, leadership and other opportunities. Sublime ignorance refers to when white people respond with the same ignorance or lack of interest in the topic or by not acknowledging the profound impact of their racial identity on the society around them. Therefore White people should stop denying their privilege and act as agents of social change.

She adds the corporate world needs to embrace more of a social justice rather than a merely capitalistic approach to what has become known as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). We need diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ). This means understanding the lexicon in the field.

The next term she defines is race. Race is a social construct developed by dominant groups to categorize people by physical characteristics, mainly skin color. While there is no biological basis for these distinctions, those who identify or were identified by whites as Black have been considered inferior to those labeled as white. Practices help carry this out, so we can't be colour blind.

"Equity" can be defined as the treatment of people according to what they need and deserve. This is contrasted with the more familiar term "equality," which connotes that we treat everybody the same. Liberation is removing all barriers so that we don't need special measures.

Racism involves one group having the power to carry out systematic discrimination through institutional policies and practices. Whilst being a racist happens on the individual level. She differentiates between an anti-racist and non-racist, where an antiracist will be an advocate whilst a non-racist may not be a racist themselves but a bystander.

Being an anti-racist means support anti-racism for the right reasons and not just for work purposes, don't try to sanitize others' stories of marginalization, deprioritise white comfort at work and personal spaces - after all it is about helping to alleviate Black fatigue, embrace and support allyship as well as act an agent of social change by understanding your power such as by spending your money ethically.

She says unless we are willing to acknowledge that we internalise racist messages from a racist society as brain science reveals, and begin to use the term, we cannot address the racist systems that undergird our organizational practices.

She advises Black people to say no sometimes, it is not your job to teach white people about their history, and remember self-care - work to build a positive identity for yourself.

Winters leverages her deep background in advising top leaders to focus on solutions as she gifts the reader with actionable ways for white people and non-Black people of color to acknowledge and understand their privilege in order to interrogate and change racist systems. Communities must work together, jointly, to overcome Black fatigue.

So to sum up:

The Good Immigrant is a mirror for those who rarely see their experiences voiced so candidly on the printed page, but it is also a valuable window for anyone who wants to better understand a situation radically different from their own. If the last six years has left you feeling helpless, desperately wondering what you can do to repair the damage of anti-immigration rhetoric, then reading it would be a good place to start: It leaves you feeling armed with empathy.

In Black Fatigue, Winters says systemic racism passes trauma and stress down through the generations, causing "Black fatigue." Therefore, white people should stop denying their privilege and act as agents of social change. Don't just be a nonracist; be an antiracist. An

intergenerational cycle of financial inequality prevents Black people from succeeding. Racism also leads to chronic stress among Black people, which also affects their physical health which is then exacerbated through receiving poorer medical care due to implicit biases.

Black fatigue increases for people who have intersecting marginalized identities and affects men, women and children in varying ways. Hence in the end, communities must work together, jointly, to overcome Black fatigue.

There's obviously a lot to unpack there. We all have a responsibility to help one another dismantle these fences that get in each others ways. How about you, how will you help stop representation burnout for someone else? Please join in on the conversation by following @howtobe247 on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, and subscribe on the podcast, which can be found via www.howtobe247.com.

Please do leave a review if you found this helpful! Thank you to Head of Brand for Hema Vyas Tina El-Hage for your lovely comments calling it: "courageous and kind".

I'll leave you with Jessica John of speakitjess ministry and Helen Pugh, mother to 2 mixed-race sons and author of Intrepid Dudettes of the Inca Empire on their views on identity. See you in two week's time!

Jessica John: What frustrates me about talking about identity is that often our identity is based off of our activity. What we do, consequently becomes who we are, therefore, when, what we do changes our identity changes too. My frustration that if our identity is not rooted in truth, it will be confused by opinion.

In my personal belief identity isn't about what we make, but in who created us, my identity can't rest in earnings, status, titles, or culture. It has to be rooted in the truth while change is good. A changing identity is exhausting. I can't be everything to everyone all the time. So we must choose from who we are, irrespective of others and their opinions. If I could change one thing, it would be that people see their value attached to deep internal belief. I choose to believe in my faith as a Christian. So I know who I am regardless of where I am.

Helen Pugh: What frustrates me about identity and diversity is how some people react when they hear my sons' names. For the first time we've had comments like, oh, those are difficult names, or I'll never be able to pronounce that. Their names are non-white non-European so, yes, they're unusual, but I didn't go out of my way to inconvenience white people. My sons are half indigenous, half British, so they have indigenous first names and English, middle names. It's part of their identity. All you have to do is ask us to repeat the names. If you're unsure, I'm always happy to write down the pronunciation, tell people what they rhyme with and so on. I often do it without even being prompted.

So I feel there are definitely polite ways and kind ways to deal with unusual names. The comments seem to reveal that certain people are uncomfortable with non-white names. And it's easy to ignore the comments and they don't really upset me, but I do feel they're part of a wider

culture where some people are afraid to give their children foreign sounding names. And where studies have shown that when people anglicize their names, they're more likely to get job interviews. So world less do better.