

Audio Title: Leesa Renee Hall
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Transcript

Rebekah Borucki: Hey, friend! I heard you were looking for our spot and I'm here to help you.

So, you're going to go past the corner bodega and down the block from the fresh cuts barbershop, and there you'll find a brick row house at the intersection of Literature Place and Social Justice Blvd. That's where you will find the stoop.

Our host Amanda Lytle will be there to welcome you to the conversation. *The Book Stoop* is the place for the hottest takes on book culture, nerd culture, current events, with best-selling authors, change-makers, and risk-takers, our favorite kinds of people.

I'm Rebekah Borucki, President of Row House Publishing, and this is season two of our podcast. Thank you for listening.

Now, I'm going to let you get to Amanda.

Amanda Lytle: Thanks Bex. Hey friend. Let me be the second to welcome you to our spot, *The Book Stoop*. I feel incredibly honored to be the host of this podcast and I'm so grateful to have you here.

Today on *The Book Stoop*, I'm speaking with Leesa Renee Hall. Leesa is a mental wellness advocate with a deep interest in humanity and psychology. She helps highly sensitive people and deep feelers explore unconscious biases so they can become better ancestors while protecting their own energy.

Leesa shares about her journey, decolonizing herself and her bookshelf, exploring social, biological, and ethnic identities. Her work dives into meeting and understanding our inner oppressor, venturing into inner field trips, and exploring oneself with love and compassion. Lisa also shares perspectives on how mislabeling leads to unfair expectations and the differences between withdrawing to hide and withdrawing to recharge.

Before we jump in, I want to invite you to share *The Book Stoop* with your community. If you're loving this episode, grab a screenshot and tag us on Instagram at Row House Pub. Every share, five-star rating and written review helps us find more listeners and climb the charts. So we're super grateful for your help.

We start our chats on *The Book Stoop* with a rather fitting question, "So what are you reading these days?"

Leesa Renee Hall: So I have to admit I have become more of a book collector than a book reader.

Amanda Lytle: I can relate to this.

Leesa Renee Hall: And because I don't take in information – like I don't retain information if it's given to me in an audio format, audio books and even audio podcast tend to be frustrating for me. But what I will say because I know this is a podcast about the celebration of books, produced by a book publisher, what I will say is that one of the things I've done over the last several years is I've been very deliberate about decolonizing my bookshelf.

Amanda Lytle: Yes.

Leesa Renee Hall: Yes.

Amanda Lytle: Tell me more about that.

Leesa Renee Hall: So when I went through my yearlong process where I woke before 5:00 AM to – I mean it was January 3rd, 2017. I woke up at some ungodly hour to start writing a book of fiction. I had written all these nonfiction books and I had this work of fiction stuck in my head.

But after 59 straight mornings of writing the characters and the chapters, I had a professional setback and started writing about that and then every day after that for the next 300 – well, for the next year, I started decolonizing and deconstructing me and because I was using journaling to deconstruct and decolonize, as I started to heal the narratives, the false narratives I've been led to believe around my social, ethnic and biological identities, I started looking around my space and then I started to declutter that.

So it's like decolonizing and decluttering go hand in hand. Then I started looking at my bookshelf and I was just like, "Eew!" My bookshelf reflects the viewpoint of authors that share the same skin color, the same gender. In most cases, they're all credentials with a lot of letters after their name.

So I remember the day – I remember the day clearly. It was some moment in summer. It was hot outside. I called my local library and I said, "Do you take donated books?" and they're like, "Yeah, bring everything you have." So I took everything off my bookshelf, everything. I think I may have kept one or two books and I donated what I had to the library.

Amanda Lytle: What a step.

Leesa Renee Hall: Yeah. And since then I've been more deliberate again about the authors. Now it's not to say – see, the decolonizing process isn't taking the oppressor's playbook and doing the opposite. So it's not to say, oh, because everyone on my bookshelf prior to decolonizing and deconstructing were of this gender and of this skin color. Now I'm going to do the opposite.

Instead it becomes a bookshelf that reflects BIPOC authors, black, indigenous and people of color, who are writing about oppression and racism. But it's also BIPOC who are writing about things that are marketing, finance and it also means taking a look at white men who are authors and asking myself, "Do they have a different viewpoint?"

So someone like Steven Pressfield is on my bookshelf. James Clear is on my bookshelf because they bring a different perspective on habits, productivity and so on. So that's what decolonizing my bookshelf means. It doesn't just mean, oh, anyone who's BIPOC makes it to my shelf. It means taking an intersectional look. I love that word by Kimberlé Crenshaw. An intersectional look at who the author is and asking myself, "What is something that they bring that helps to challenge our viewpoints around race, gender, productivity, our relationship to capitalism?" and so on.

Amanda Lytle: This is incredible. I had just written down intersectionality and intention because there's such an intention behind everything that you're doing right now.

Leesa Renee Hall: Exactly, exactly and that's the beauty.

Amanda Lytle: Yes.

Leesa Renee Hall: That's the beauty of this. I mean it was hard, right? It's always hard whenever you're trying to change any habit and the habit I was trying to change, just the habit of my commitment and my – yeah, my commitment to upholding systems of oppression. My marriage to the dominant culture in hopes that if I lose pieces of myself – of course I didn't see that – like that at the time. But if I operate a certain way, then I should get power, prestige, profits, platform, blah, blah, blah. You know, on and on and on. But instead, I was making myself tense, tired and feeling very trapped.

Amanda Lytle: Of course.

Leesa Renee Hall: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: Leesa, oh my goodness. I am fired up with this conversation already. You just said something that made me interested now, like a whole lot interested to be honest.

Leesa Renee Hall: Yes.

Amanda Lytle: About what inner oppressor means to you.

Leesa Renee Hall: Yes, yes, yes. Oh, I love this, I love this because this is something that my patrons and I do in my community is we need our inner oppressor using guided prompts, which I author, and reflective journaling or some call it expressive writing and the inner oppressor is that part of ourselves that bullies us, coerces us, and forces us to be obedient to the dominant culture.

The dominant culture is going to look different depending on what country you're raised in and what country you reside in.

But the dominant culture that exists in North America, Canada and the United States, two cultures I know very well is that the dominant culture has certain traits and personality that you should follow and if you do, again, as I said before, you should get power, prestige, profits and so that part of ourselves is who we meet with through journaling, through expressive writing and now my work has expanded to include play and movement and expressive arts that we use those modalities to meet with our inner oppressor and we capture what it says.

We do so because – and this is the thing that people will say like – I've seen people call their inner oppressor the inner asshole. That's Jen Pastiloff with her book *On Being Human*. I've seen someone call it inner colonizer, inner critic, you know, what – there are all these names that people call it.

What I think people are saying is like learn how to defeat your inner oppressor. Learn how to fight your inner colonizer. Learn how to – you know, and so we bring this battle. Like we're going to – like our armor and we're here to like defeat and tear down and whatever, diminish our inner oppressor.

But what I share with my patrons and what I'm going to share with your listeners is that our inner oppressor can never be defeated because as long as systems of oppression exist, so too does that part of us that wants to remain safe and secure and be supported by aligning with the dominant culture.

So we're not here to fight our inner oppressor. We're not here to defeat it. What we're here to do is understand it. Meet with it using as I said expressive journaling, expressive arts, and capture what it says so that you can be more aware of the things that trigger your inner oppressor to operate it the way it does.

So it's like it's a new relationship that you form with that inner part of yourself rather than trying to defeat it. It's not an enemy.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah, that's right and I think that just being wholeheartedly aware of the inner oppressor as they show up in a moment. Like the self-awareness I think even in that moment would help you understand your own patterning and we're going to come back to patterning because you and I could just go off about psychology.

Leesa Renee Hall: Oh, we can keep [0:10:03] [Inaudible] yeah.

Amanda Lytle: But I love that you've just talked about how it's not about the fight or the defeat of. It's more just the understanding and that slow deconstruction with intention that you have.

Leesa Renee Hall: Yes, yeah and I know someone listening might be saying, "But Leesa, do we not want to defeat a system that oppresses individuals?" Yes, of course, of course, of course. But

when we come in with this battle fatigue, then we end up exiting the fight or the battle because we enter it filled with these emotions and so an example I can give is during – in May of 2020 when the world had nothing else to do because everyone was locked into the – well, I shouldn't say locked in.

But everyone was sheltering in place due to the pandemic. So everyone's attention was undivided. So when the video that – and I've never watched it and I never will because I don't need to see it. But when the video came out of George Floyd and the world saw it, now the world is taking action and on the one hand it was beautiful because now you see people of all shapes, colors, sizes standing up for black lives. But on the flipside, because so many people were driven by emotion, that here we have a year later at the time of this recording and a lot of those individuals that wanted to stand up for black lives have abandoned the effort.

Emotions are important. I don't want to – feel the feels, yes. But we have to derive our purpose in defeating systems of oppression using something beyond just the emotions because when it wears out, where will you be?

Amanda Lytle: Yeah, absolutely.

Leesa Renee Hall: When the anger subsides, when the sadness disappears, are you now going to be distracted that your favorite department store is going out of sale and having a 50 percent off run on items, you know? So we need to have a purpose in meeting our inner oppressor and in taking down systems of oppression that has a larger purpose. Because it took generations for these systems of oppression to take root, it's going to take generations to unravel it and if you don't have that future focus and that long-term goal, then the emotions are going to take you out and that's not good for everyone, for anyone.

Amanda Lytle: It's also where self-care comes in too because doing this big work, big super necessary important work requires the self-care. Like as you're saying too because the emotion fatigue is real.

Leesa Renee Hall: It's so real.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Leesa Renee Hall: It's so real and especially if someone is highly sensitive, highly perceptive, deep feeling. Then we don't need to see videos to know that humanity is hurting because we feel it deeply in our nervous system, our bones. We feel it so – and it's so acute and so for someone who's highly sensitive, highly perceptive, deep feeling, neurodivergent, we have to take extra care to ensure that we are not super overwhelmed by our emotions and by our compassion because if we are, then we will disengage. We will withdraw to hide instead of withdrawing to recharge and that's where self-care comes in.

[Music]

Amanda Lytle: Hey friend. We are coming straight back to *The Book Stoop* after a quick break.

Amanda Lytle: OK. I'm going to come back to the highly sensitive part. You've just said something about how in May of 2020 after this horrific video has come out and it shed a lot of reality on a lot of different people.

Leesa Renee Hall: Yes.

Amanda Lytle: So something that I really wanted to highlight in this particular thing, we just mentioned it briefly prerecording, was a post that you had put out a while ago about follow Leesa, she's an educator, where you've never called yourself an educator. So can you speak to that and the fact that just because you're a black woman doesn't mean that you're an antiracist educator?

Leesa Renee Hall: Yeah. So that's – oh boy, oh. So in May of 2020 to June of 2020, my Instagram followers pretty much doubled in two or three weeks and then my community on Patreon jumped from 450 patrons up to just over 2100.

Amanda Lytle: Wow.

Leesa Renee Hall: And so it was overwhelming. It was overwhelming and I know that a lot of my colleagues who do call themselves antiracism educators, they were turning down requests for training because we've all been through this before. You know, whether it's tens of thousands of people or just one company, we've all been through this where something has happened. They're in the state where all we need to cover our basis, they come in with all this urgency which is a trait of the dominant culture and then they fizzle out, disappear. Now they suddenly don't have the money for the training, or they changed people and the staff, whatever.

So I've seen this and then in the rush, people mislabel and the danger with mislabeling is that it harkens to a time in the past. I'm a historian. It harkens to the time in the past when people of African descent were renamed as a function of control.

So if I don't call myself a thing, then why are you putting me on an antiracism educator list? Why? I never use that terminology ever. Look back on all my content. I may talk about skin color privilege, but my work is more than critiquing issues around skin color privilege. It's also critiquing issues around our productivity. It's also critiquing intergenerational trauma and what's passed on. It's also critiquing our relationship to nature and the environment.

So my work is way beyond that and so in the quest to rush, which is again a trait of the dominant culture, people will start mislabeling and it's deeply hurtful especially with the connection to what has happened in the past.

Amanda Lytle: Uh-huh, and I wanted to bring that back to the highly sensitive being as well is that when you're already feeling everything so deeply, is that that just feels like another thing to carry.

Leesa Renee Hall: That's right.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Leesa Renee Hall: Absolutely.

Amanda Lytle: Because there's expectation too, right? If someone is now labeling you or renaming you or giving you a label or a title or a credential that you've never wanted or even used yourself, that now it – that also carries expectation.

Leesa Renee Hall: Yes, it does, it does and expectations that I – you see, I went through a yearlong process, and I continue to go through this process of interrogating and meeting with my inner oppressor and in that process, I've shed some of the labels that have been associated or assigned to me that I didn't ask for.

Labels associated with my race, labels associated with my gender, my nationality, language spoken, religious practice, religion practice and so on and so on and so on. Like I didn't ask for those labels and yet you've given it to me.

So now that I've done the hard work and I continue to do the hard work of deconstructing and decolonizing, for me to allow someone to now name me and put expectations on how I should show up means that I am violating me. I'm violating the me that I have uncovered and discovered.

So it's a violation for me to allow someone to define – and at the end of the day, I can't prevent what someone is going to call me, whether it's a term of endearment in their eyes, antiracism educator or something far more sinister.

But ultimately what I can control is how I name me. I'm a grown woman. I'm an adult. I'm not a child and even then we need to – we need to interrogate our relationship with our children and how we treat them. But ultimately, I am an adult. I know what I call myself. Slow down and see and get to know who I am as an individual.

Ultimately it's what we would – that's one way that we circumvent systems of oppression, that instead of using the shortcuts in our head, which is how unconscious biases are formed, in order to assign titles to people and labels and expectations, slow down and get to know each individual as an individual. That's one way we circumvent the dominant culture.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, you've said so many things there that my brain is just like pew-pew-pew ...

Leesa Renee Hall: So many things.

Amanda Lytle: ... all over. Oh, I love it. I love it. But a lot of it is bringing me back into the inner field trip, right? That you talked about just – so yeah, take me there because a lot of this is literally an inner field trip.

Leesa Renee Hall: Yes, yes, it's the – oh, the inner field trip. It's such a beautiful name, such a beautiful name and it was given to me just – because of the pandemic, it was actually – that's how the term came up because before then, I didn't really have a name for my process. So inner we go inward, and field trips harken back to a time when – for some of us, we went on field trips, and they were fun. It was a day out of school, and you get to go to some place fun and discover new things.

But also the field trip is an educational experience, and the field trip allows you to explore. So if that's something we did when we were younger, for those who are fortunate to go to schools where fields trips were part of the curriculum, imagine taking that energy and going inward instead because what you're trying to educate yourself is on you, on yourself.

So that's the beauty of the inner field trip. So we do that in community with each other. We show up as we are. Most people know what my work is before they join the community that I host on Patreon. So it ends up being a nourishing place. It's a soft space to land. I got that language from Sonya Renee Taylor.

Amanda Lytle: Yes.

Leesa Renee Hall: It's not a brave space. It's not a safe space because I can't control how others will show up but what I can say is that it's a soft place to land and it's so beautiful what we do and commune in together.

Amanda Lytle: It is so beautiful and yeah, OK, I really want to come back to the psychology of this because also being mindful of your time that you've got some pretty exciting news that I really want to highlight because I think that this is just going to be another incredibly beautiful, transformational unfolding.

Leesa Renee Hall: Yes.

Amanda Lytle: So tell me what's coming.

Leesa Renee Hall: So what's coming? So for many, many, many months, I've been calling myself a mental health and mental wellness advocate and because of the work we do in community together, I've been very clear. I'm not a therapist nor do I play one online and yet the work that we do is so beautiful and the transformation that happens is just – oh my gosh, it's just so yummy for lack of a better word.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Leesa Renee Hall: So I've been looking at the ways in which I can deepen my body of work and also deepen my understanding of how we operate because I come from a – I come through a historical lens and so history tells me about what our ancestors did that influence the way we operate and think and behave today.

But it doesn't inform me why for some they can break through their unconscious biases, making them conscious, while others cannot. History doesn't teach me that. So I finally decided to pursue studies so I can become a licensed therapist. So I can now call myself a counseling psychology grad student.

Amanda Lytle: I am so excited for you. Like ...

Leesa Renee Hall: Oh my gosh. I'm learning so much and it has given me language to the things that we're doing in – I'm like oh, oh, so that's what that is. Oh!

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Leesa Renee Hall: And so it's helping to deepen the work already. So I'm just – oh my gosh. I'm just so excited.

Amanda Lytle: I bet. What are you most excited to take on in the studies?

Leesa Renee Hall: You know, I'm really interested to come into research around unconscious biases and it most likely wouldn't be called that. It might be something else. But I'm just interested to find out why and I can't wait to see what are the – and I'm already learning that there's trauma associated with systems of oppression and that that trauma is going to help some operate at different ways. Some are going to have the flight-freeze, which is why some people exit and abandon the effort to become antiracist, antibias and anti-oppressive.

Then there's also trauma wrapped up in those who have to live in a system that constantly abuses them due to nothing more than one of their social, ethnic or a combination of all those identities. So it's just so – it's just interesting and I don't know what else I'm going to learn and I'm just excited. So ...

Amanda Lytle: Yeah, and it's interesting too. We just – again, another thing that we had mentioned just super briefly prerecording was that a lot of this is so deep. Like it is at an inherited cellular level, an intergenerational cellular level and so you've got me super intrigued, and I can't wait to follow along now. I'm even more excited because when you talk about how there are people that are able to change these narratives over time and other people who cannot or, you know, seemingly cannot, I'm also now so interested in understanding maybe more of the historical why and the psychological background as to why.

Leesa Renee Hall: Yes and yeah, and one of the things I try to do in the summer of 2021 is I try to do this challenge on Instagram, and I called it the "Ow Canada Challenge" and it was a look back at history to see why we are where we are when it comes to Canada's treatment of

indigenous people. So I've studied history. I know what has happened in history and release – it was supposed to be a 13-day challenge.

But I stopped after day seven and I told my followers I'm stopping and it's because systems of oppression exist not only due to the overt violence, the things that we can see and we know, OK, that's terrible. But it's also the covert forms, which is the language we use and throughout Canadian history, it has all been about the language and the words used. It's the manipulation. It's the coercion. It's the – oh my. It was so heavy doing that challenge.

I say this because we are so good at using our words to talk ourselves out of issues. What I'm happy to see when it comes to psychology is seeing now the – incorporating more ways in which we involve our bodies, that sometimes our words – and this is one of the reasons why a lot of the antiracism and antibias training doesn't work is because people can use their words to convince you that everything is OK or to convince you that I've learned. Yes, I've learned. Thank you very much.

But then they go back to their oppressive ways and so again I'm excited by seeing that the body is something that we need to involve, and I believe that one of the ways that we can get through systems of oppression and move beyond it is to do more body work, do way more of that. Play more.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah, like the full-on somatic healing, somatic experiences that you're digging deep.

Leesa Renee Hall: We need to do that.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Leesa Renee Hall: Yeah. We need to do that. So I'm excited to learn more about that and I've already taken a few courses. So I'm just – it's exciting, it's exciting.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, this has been such a pleasure. Thank you so much for your time. I have one more question for *The Book Stoop* that we wrap up with and that has to do with a shoutout to an account, a person, an organization, disruptor, activist or change agent. Who would it be?

Leesa Renee Hall: So one of the reasons why I went into psychology is because I'm very concerned about what the post-pandemic world is going to look like, especially for us as a species because this was a shared traumatic event. Whether you were traumatized because you got the virus itself or traumatized with the constant news about the virus, whether you've been traumatized because of sheltering in place and for some people, they were sheltering in place with their abusers.

We have to acknowledge that as a species, we have suffered through a shared traumatic event. Therefore it's my belief that we need a shared solution in order to heal from this trauma. So I want to be part of the solution.

So I say all this to say that it's not just one person, account, influencer, or anything. But I implore the listeners that if you're listening to me right now, I implore upon you to find a mental health charity or engage with a mental – or someone who's a mental health activist and if you can donate to them, donate.

I believe that here in Canada, the government has created a new department for mental health and has assigned a minister, who has a background in medicine, to manage that portfolio and I'm excited by that. It's the first time.

So for those listening, I really encourage you to seek out mental health agencies and especially those, the smaller ones, just ones who have a smaller footprint because they will be the ones that will need the funding the most. Mental health is so critical, and I can't stress that enough because that's – if we can heal our mental health issues and be honest about what's affecting our mental health, then that is one way that we can become better ancestors.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, yes, yes, yes to all of this. Leesa, thank you so much for being a guest on *The Book Stoop*. This has been incredible.

Leesa Renee Hall: Well, I've enjoyed imparting my knowledge, so thank you.

Amanda Lytle: Thank you so much for being with us. Please be sure to follow us on your podcast app and leave a rating where you're able. Written reviews help us reach more listeners too. Be sure to check out the show notes for all the links and share *The Book Stoop* with your community. Talk soon.

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