

Audio Title: Sonali Fiske Sacred Listening, Sacred Rage, Speaking Up and
Audio Duration: 0:29:09
Number of Speakers: 3

Transcript

Rebekah Borucki: Hello, neighbor! Welcome to our third season of The Book Stoop...

And if you're new here, lemme help you get to where you're goin'.

So, you're gonna 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'll 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 people.

And I'm Rebekah Borucki, President of Row House Publishing.

Now, come on in and meet 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 Sonali Fiske. Sonali is a woman-identified, Sri Lankan born, California-grown leadership mentor, radio talk show host, spoken word artist, writer, international speaker, and mama to one teenage son.

Her everyday work is to fortify and amplify revolutionary BIPoC voices in a collapsing white-dominant, colonized landscape. Sonali specifically mentors trans and cis women and non-binary and gender nonconforming people who are open to being in femme-centered spaces.

Her other devotions are centering racial justice and social change on her show, writing to heal, ocean talk and soul survival and her mother's rice and curry.

Sonali is also part of the local International Council of Interfaith And Indigenous Women. She speaks three languages, has visited 32 countries so far and is living out her life story in Orange County, California. In the conversation today, we dive into the acronym BIWoC and how Sonali uses it in her work.

We hear about the background to BIWoC Revolutionaries Take the Mic and how sacred rage and sacred listening can be used to serve and for growth and healing. But before we jump in, I want to remind you to share The Book Stoop with your community.

If you're loving this episode, grab a screenshot and tag us on Instagram at @rowhousepub. 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?

Sonali Fiske: Yes. What a great question because there are so many good books to read, and I got to be real with you Amanda. I've been always just drawn to, you know, obviously social justice and self-help type, your self-growth type books which, you know, this is – I think I have a condition where I'm – this constant need to self-improve, self-improve.

So I'm looking forward to reading more fiction in the near future. But lately, I've been reading a lot of Adrienne Maree Brown who I love. She's such an incredible movement builder. She wrote this incredible little bite-sized book called "We Will Not Cancel Us" and for anybody in the movement spaces or pursuing social justice, that is a must, and the *Patriarchy Blues* by Frederick Joseph is just a phenomenal book.

My friend Andre Henry wrote an incredible book called "All The White Friends I Couldn't Keep". Also incredible book for those of us that are navigating hard times and trying to understand how to better be in community with one another and move our movements forward. So that's just a few of the books I'm reading. I have a whole pile next to my bed.

Amanda Lytle: Yes.

Sonali Fiske: It looks like a monument almost. It looks like a UNESCO world heritage site. It's going to come down. I just – I don't know why but I grow attached to these books, you know.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, I completely understand. I am an avid book collector.

Sonali Fiske: OK, good. I would imagine so, yeah.

Amanda Lytle: Yes. So actually I want to come back to something that you've just said that I wrote down. Number one, thank you so much for sharing that. I feel like there's a lot of really, really important and useful resources there.

But I wrote down movement spaces. I really liked that, and I know that that really – like movement, movement spaces, advocacy, activism. That really, really, really aligns with what you're doing, what you're up to and actually now I'm going to tie it right back to what I was talking to you about pre-recording. Black indigenous and women of color and I was asking, "Do you always fully say it, or do you use an acronym of some sort?" So can we just dive in there?

Sonali Fiske: Let's do it. I mean yes. There are a lot of these shortened acronyms that we use online to help us – not everybody is – not go along with it or know what those acronyms are.

Yeah, BIWoC. BIWoC is an acronym that I use Amanda as a social identifier because my work is centered around amplifying and advocating and supporting Black indigenous women and femmes of color. So because my work is about that and all about that, in order to market my work to the right audience, I need to use that acronym to help attract the folks that I'm here to serve.

So BIWoC, again Black Indigenous Women of Color, works as a way of identifying who those people are and allows them to understand that this space that I created and I've curated just for them, right? Where white supremacy is not allowed in the door, where they can come in and feel safe about unpacking some of the racialized stories and the racialized harm that we have to endure living in white-dominant spaces and in a white-dominant world, you know.

And again Amanda to be honest, not everybody vibes with that acronym, right? And quite honestly, I'm not the biggest fan of it because it tends to encapsulate everybody into this one monolithic personhood or experience.

The truth is Black women have a completely different lived experience than I do as a Brown woman. A Black woman in my view has it the hardest. You know, the most vilified and marginalized group in our country and in our world to be honest. So it's certainly not said or used as a monolithic term but as a social identifier.

Amanda Lytle: A social identifier. I also wrote that down because I really want to bring that to the work that you're doing, and this is kind of open-ended but it kind of goes hand in hand. When you look at your work in radio and being a talk show host and an advocate for BIWoC but then you also have the idea of taking the mic, so Revolutionaries Take the Mic. So interchangeable and so aligned with the idea of giving voice. So again that's not even a question. I would just love to open the floor for you to just elaborate and share.

Sonali Fiske: Oh, thank you. I appreciate that because, you know, I'm not sure if you know this but I also produce my own TEDx event Amanda and last year we produced the most racially and culturally diverse TEDx event in the entire State of California and I'm super proud of that.

Amanda Lytle: As you should be, yeah.

Sonali Fiske: I'm proud of that because the truth is our event spaces and our art and our – what we're producing is not always representative of all of us, right? And I really wanted to create spaces where Black and Brown women and indigenous women could shine and also Amanda, how to embody activism and seek justice, like these revolutionaries that I serve are very justice-oriented, are very justice-minded, very – embody activism.

But how to do that and build outside of this hypervigilance and reprimand and being inflammatory online. You know, honestly Amanda, our online spaces I believe have become rather toxic sadly and, you know, these rhetorical online strategies have led us astray. It hasn't actually moved us closer to one another.

So I really wanted to create a container where as BIWoC, we can trust our sacred rage as an added value to our creation process and our storytelling process and not leave that out of the equation, right? How to write from ease and ancestral intelligence instead of putting out fires or reacting to the latest crises online, you know, and how to do so without following the colonial blueprint, right?

I believe it's our birthright especially as BIWoC to reclaim our time now, to trust our creative agency and like widen our inner ecology, which means we got to slow it way down.

Things are moving very rapidly online, and I don't think that's always the best way. I really believe slow is the new way forward, to really be intentional and slow about it and trust our inner GPS system instead of whatever is happening out here. Does that make any sense?

Amanda Lytle: Of course it does and with the work that you're doing, I mean – and moving forward, having conversations, creating, producing, being the curator of this space like you've said online and the toxicity that does exist. It's just constantly a seeming uphill battle.

I'm curious about how in these spaces when things feel extra heavy or when you feel like you're maybe up against another hurdle or a wall, what are some personal practices that you have in the creative space to stay regulated?

Sonali Fiske: Yeah. I love this question. That is also something I'm very intentional and focused and passionate about when I built the curriculum just for BIWoC Revolutionaries Take the Mic. How to be spacious about this, right? How to trust your inner self and also be slow about it like I said. You know, we're not going to – I don't believe justice is going to come from Instagram.

We're not going to get justice online. It's going to happen in these communal spaces. Where we are activating are sacred listening. That is one thing I'm deeply passionate about, Amanda. It's how to be better listeners.

I understand the work that I do is about giving the mic and grabbing the mic and speaking up and speaking out and we're in this speak-up culture right now, which is great. But then who's doing the listening, right? If we want to speak up effectively, then we've got to be also effective listeners, meaning listening until the end, right?

Listening while you're squirming in your seat and listening without making it about you. How do we do that and still hold space for one another in an active, responsible way? And then also Amanda, rest is resistance as the Nap Ministry says.

The Nap Ministry is an incredible movement that I gain so much value and beauty from. If you all are not following Nap Ministry online on Instagram, I highly recommend it. But they're all about that we can attain – we can resist through rest, that we have to completely slow down the creation process, slow down our thinking minds in order to receive the wisdom that we need to receive. That is inherent and not something we're going to gain from out here. So yeah, those are

a couple of ways that I try to incorporate more ease and grace into our movement-building and our justice-seeking and our space-taking.

Amanda Lytle: Space-taking, yes. I am so here for this. I have a question. When you start thinking about the historic aspect of BIWoC being hypervigilant, suppressing rage and we're going to talk a little bit here about sacred rage. This is kind of something that when you think of the shapeshifting and trying to please, I want you to tell me what sacred rage means to you.

Sonali Fiske: Yeah. Whoo. And we got a lot of it. Unfortunately it's misinterpreted as vindictive anger or irresponsible behavior. But for me sacred rage is truly listening deeper to the ancestral voice. I recognize that if my ancestors, spirit and living, had the kind of extensive choice and the access that I do, my god, what could they have said and done.

I believe you and I Amanda, we're in an era, we have limitless choices at our disposal to literally start a YouTube channel whenever we want to or get online and go live or start our own event or our own show or our own podcast.

So that comes with great responsibility, right? So I utilize my sacred rage in ways that have helped me move my movement forward. It has helped me better understand why that issue is the way it is in my own body.

Sacred rage is listening also to where this anger resides in my own body, right? I believe our – especially for us who held female body parts, we hold our rage within our bodies and our wisdom also is in our bodies, right?

So they're like small ticking timebombs. If we don't really listen to it, it's going to be illness and incubation in our bodies. So it's listening deeper Amanda to the anger that resides in our bodies. That is also how sacred rage can be best utilized in service of the greatest good.

I don't believe suppressing it and ignoring it is the way. I believe our rage is precious and it can truly be in service of the greatest good. You know, whether that comes through art, whether that comes through our writing, whether that comes through an open mic or sharing our talk on a world stage. You know, what is that? What is that part of the rage that you are hiding or suppressing? I want to explore that, you know, and break the silence around that because I believe we have a lot to say right now, especially as womenkind. We got a lot to say. Well, let's be about that instead of trying to make it look pretty. Let's be about examining what our sacred rage can look like.

Amanda Lytle: I have a lot to – a lot of feels for this one and I'm thinking specifically about a conversation that I've had with one of my Black women identifying friends about – and I recognize here, and I honor the fact that your experience is not that of a Black woman. But in specifics when it comes to harboring the rage, again the shapeshifting, the biting of one's tongue to avoid the label of the angry Black woman, the angry woman. You know, they're a bitch, they're this or that.

So this is kind of where I want to – we’re going to kind of segue into leadership because when you talk about speaking up and speaking out, there are ways that we can communicate effectively so that we are harnessing – not dismissing but kind of harnessing that rage, moving it forward into sacred rage and stepping up into leadership roles and like you are working with is taking the mic, Revolutionaries Taking the Mic.

So I’m curious about in work and in practice, when it comes to leadership, how you’re encouraging that effective communication when it comes to communicating things or maybe even staying emotionally regulated in the process.

Sonali Fiske: Yeah. Yes. I love that question for greater self-inquiry, and I want to breathe through it. Silence is OK even in a radio interview or a podcast interview such as this. Silence is good, you know, to consider and think through the answers that we want to bring forth.

Honestly Amanda, to make this work possible, it requires that all parties – and I’m speaking to the white-dominant communities and folks as well. We have to consciously consider personal patterns as we step into community.

You know, in Buddhism – I’m actually from Sri Lanka, so Buddhism runs courses through my veins. But in Buddhism it’s called “prashna” which is to examine our natural responses to uncomfortable conversations. It’s asking questions like – slowing down the process and asking questions like, “OK. How am I feeling right now? Before I react and respond to that, how am I feeling? Am I offended? Am I feeling bruised? Am I feeling ignited? Am I sensing the rage come up? Like will my actions create room for others or is it going to shut them down?” Right?

Also what are my motivations for speaking right now or what are my motivations for withholding? I believe as leaders, we have to be careful. We have to carefully consider how content might be received and how we must make these on-the-spot adjustments when necessary and oftentimes online Amanda, we’re on the spot. We’re on the – you know, it’s very, very kneejerk, right?

So we have to pause, man. We’ve got to trust that pause and ask, “OK. Who is not participating in this conversation?” Right? What is the feel of the room? And then also we have to consistently tune into – Amanda, I share this in my group a lot. It’s with whatever podcast you’re listening to, whatever book you’re reading, whatever documentary you’re watching, you always want to consistently tune into the following when you’re activating your sacred listening, which is who wrote the story, who benefits from the story and who is missing from the story.

You know, that is vitally important before we dive in with our two cents or before we dive in with our hot take. OK. Who’s missing from this conversation? I also – you know, I got this little marker that I use for life. I heard this from of all people, this comedian called Craig Ferguson, who’s actually a British comedian.

Several years ago, he said something that I’ve never forgotten and obviously these are three things I feel I must always ask myself before I share anything online, before I share anything in

conversation and that is, “Does this need to be said? Does this need to be said by me and does this need to be said by me now?”

I think these are ways that I can truly activate my sacred listening and also how best to regulate and measure the barometer around my sacred rage. So I hope that helps answer the question you are asking me.

Amanda Lytle: No, it does thoroughly. I think that level of self-awareness is a constant practice and it’s just a constant go-back, you know.

Sonali Fiske: It is a practice.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, yeah.

Sonali Fiske: I love that you said that because – boy, because online, it’s – you know ...

Amanda Lytle: We’ve all screwed up online.

Sonali Fiske: Oh! It’s a bit much. So I had to personally take a step way back Amanda from coming online and then heal that part of my story that felt that needed to show up in this moment. OK. So latest crisis. Sonali needs to give her – you know, needs to add to this conversation. Oh, does she though? Does Sonali really – is her voice really needed in this moment? Is it in service of the greatest good? Does this need to be said right now or can I take a breath or two and come back to it?

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. That’s also like being so aware of whether or not you are listening or is like a reaction or a response. Are you listening to understand or are you just simply responding or reacting? It’s like a – it ends up being a somatic, like a full-on deep dive into how you’re feeling top to bottom, all the time.

Sonali Fiske: That’s it. That’s it. Yes.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, I am loving this. I feel really lit up by this conversation and I want to take that opportunity to segue into leadership. I would love for you to share your leadership journey and how you’ve come into that work as a consultant.

Sonali Fiske: Whoa. Oh man, that part, which is so interesting Amanda because it started from a place of anger. It started from a place of this wild, angry place of seeing a certain kind of woman constantly being celebrated and centered and valued and getting all of the gigs online or in the real world and I’m speaking of Amanda the White.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, I see her.

Sonali Fiske: You know what I’m saying? Did you conjure up that image? That’s right. She is cis. She is heteronormative and cute and has her hair done and it’s just – come on now, you

know. We've got such a wide range of those representing womankind and I really wanted to do something about that. I knew that they were incredibly powerful revolutionary Black women and indigenous women who are speaking up but are not being hurt, you know, Amanda and like just recently, just the recent statistics from the Women's Media Center, the most recent statistic is from '21.

Not a single indigenous woman appeared on the Sunday morning talk shows. Most of the faces and names of those appearing online or rather in the major network shows talk about the murder of George Floyd or what it meant, which is unbelievable to me and, you know, they're out here. They're out here making noise. They're out here speaking up. I'm speaking of Black indigenous folks of color but they're not always being heard, right? Or their sacred rage as what I like to call it, their sacred rage is being suppressed or sidelined in lieu of the nice, packaged, prim and proper rhetoric.

We need to make more space for our anger. We need to make more space for our voices to be heard. So that is why I knew – you know, there's that old adage, right? Like if you are wondering why this doesn't exist, well, that means it's up to you to create it. Well, I'm paraphrasing. It's not quite how that goes.

So I knew I had to do something about it and so I started BIWoC Revolutionaries Take the Mic, and it started off with "Pick Your Platform and Raise Your Voice" and then it evolved into BIWoC Revolutionaries Take the Mic when I understood that I'm here to serve and center and advocate for Black indigenous women of color solely and to create spaces just for us, right? Where we can unpack our racialized harm, where we don't have to worry about tiptoeing around White-dominant tactics and behavior and that side eye.

Amanda Lytle: And the fragility.

Sonali Fiske: The fragility too, right, and then also Amanda, to be honest with you, I still get some pushback around having spaces just for us for BIWoC. But here's the thing. We have a lot of work to do in mixed spaces.

I've wanted us to understand how conversational architecture works. There's this brilliant article that was written by Kelsey Blackwell called "How Patterns of Interaction Support White Supremacy" and I wanted us as BIWoC to come in and unpack that, to understand the hidden architecture that creates any group discourse, right? How to pay attention to and recognize the hidden architecture in gathered groups. Meaning who's leading this conversation? Whose opinions and head nods and agreement? Who's speaking first? Who's speaking last, right?

That's important Amanda and to know how to dismantle that is important. There's this – you know, Chris Rock famous standup comedian. He was just saying that standup, if it's all White, it's all right. It's so true. White values and white opinions truly get the most airtime and the most head nods and applause.

So even the so-called allies, the individuals conscious of the oppression of marginalized populations inadvertently reinforce their own privilege. You know, indicates the power of societally patterned interactions.

So I really wanted us to come in – I wanted to create a space where we could unpack all of that, Amanda. Sorry. I know that’s a mouthful. I probably went too far with that.

Amanda Lytle: No, there’s no too far here.

Sonali Fiske: OK, good.

Amanda Lytle: I have appreciated everything that you’ve said so deeply, and I think it makes a lot of sense and I think it’s a beautiful thing that you have created and are continuing to create and elaborate on. It’s super important.

Sonali Fiske: Thank you and I recognize that listen, we’re all on a learning curve. We’re all at different parts of this journey, right? These patterns are the result of our conditioning by a system created by and built to center prosperity of White people.

Without paying specific attention to these patterns, we are destined to recreate these oppressive societal structures of power and hierarchy on the micro level, in these community settings online, in our groups and our conversation. Those dynamics need to be disrupted and changed.

Amanda Lytle: Sonali, thank you so much and just to honor your time – I mean you and I by the sounds of it could just keep going and going about this. But I want to honor your time.

Sonali Fiske: For real.

Amanda Lytle: I know and so I have one more question for this recording with you which is if you had the opportunity to give a shoutout to an account, a person, an organization, disruptor, activist or change agent, who would that be?

Sonali Fiske: Oh my god. That would be like picking like your favorite child. I have like a Sophie’s Choice situation Amanda. I mean there are so many incredible women I love and adored or BIPOC folks. I mentioned the Nap Ministry. Incredible work that they’re doing.

Gosh, Adrienne Maree Brown like I said who’s doing incredible work in helping to disrupt and create more peaceful movement spaces. Andrea Renee Johnson, a beautiful person who is helping towards our collective liberation. So yeah, those are just a few of the names that are kind of on the forefront of my mind.

Amanda Lytle: Fantastic. Thank you so much for your time, for your energy, for your heart and for being a guest on The Book Stoop.

Sonali Fiske: It is my joy and my pleasure, and I thank you Amanda for the space and the time.

Amanda Lytle: Of course.

Thank you so much for being with us. Please be sure to check out rowhousepublishing.com/podcast for full episode transcriptions and guest image descriptions and the show notes for all the links. Talk soon.

[End of transcript]