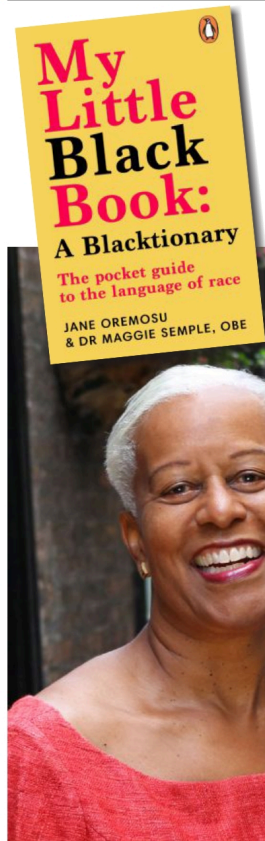


Creating a Blacktionary to help people talk about race



Maggie Semple and Jane Oremosu
Picture: Evie Perfect

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In the wake of George Floyd's murder in 2020, the world experienced a profound shift in its conversations around race, diversity, and inclusion, *writes Alex Spencer.*

Amid this backdrop, two women, Dr Maggie Semple, a thought-leader on cultural change and a strategic advisor to global organisations, and Jane Oremosu, a business consultant and executive coach, decided to create a unique tool that would help both individuals and corporations navigate the often fraught discussions around race. This tool came in the form of *My Little Black Book: A Blacktionary*, which offers a comprehensive guide to the language of race.

Ahead of their talk in Cambridge, they spoke about the inspiration behind the book, the challenges they faced, and the impact they hope it will have.

For both Maggie and Jane, the idea for the *Blacktionary* was born out of necessity. At the time, both women were running their own consulting businesses and frequently found themselves working with corporate clients. As the conversation around race intensified following George Floyd's death, many of these clients reached out with a similar concern: How can we support our black employees? How do we navigate this space without causing more harm?

Jane recalls the atmosphere of that period. "Maggie and I were talking, and this was during Covid when we could meet occasionally. Our clients were asking, 'What can we say? What shouldn't we say?'" she explains. The urgency of these questions led them to the idea of a glossary of terms – a book that could help companies navigate the complexities of race.

What began as a self-published glossary of definitions quickly evolved into a more in-depth resource.

As Maggie puts it: "The world was becoming more divisive, and people were nervous about saying anything because of cultural wars, cancel culture, and the climate we all live in."

The goal of the book became clear: to help people talk about race in a way that fosters understanding and inclusivity, rather than division.

The first edition of the *Blacktionary* was a straightforward glossary of terms, designed to give corporate clients a reference for understanding the language of race. But as the demand grew, so did the scope of the book. The project caught the attention of Penguin Books, who commissioned a second, more comprehensive edition.

"We wanted to include not just definitions, but also historical and societal context," Jane explains. "It's not just about what these words mean, but where they come from, and why they're important."

The second edition became a guide not just for understanding language but for understanding the broader cultural and societal dynamics that shape these terms.

The book also includes tips and techniques for navigating conversations about race, with the aim of making readers "comfortable being uncomfortable," as Jane describes it. Maggie and Jane wanted to help readers understand that meaningful conversations about race often require vulnerability and discomfort, but that this discomfort can lead to growth.

They explain that the book is for anyone who feels overwhelmed by ever-evolving definitions and phrases, for anyone who is afraid of saying the wrong thing and being judged.

Maggie and Jane would meet every weekend, even when they were in different parts of the

world, to discuss which words to include in *My Little Black Book* and how to define them.

As Maggie recalls with a laugh: "Jane very cleverly said, 'I'll take A to E, and you can do all the rest.' At first, I thought, 'What are you talking about?' But it made sense – there are so many terms related to race starting with those early letters!"

But the collaboration wasn't always easy. Both women had strong opinions about which words should be included, and they frequently challenged each other's choices.

"We had conversations about words that either Jane wanted in and I didn't, or vice versa," Maggie explains. "Our editor had her views, too. But we were clear that we didn't want any words that could be weaponised or used to shut down conversation."

One example of a phrase they chose not to include was "white fragility".

As Maggie puts it, "we wanted to take our readers with us on this journey, and some words, like 'white fragility', could be too triggering for some people. They might just close the book and not engage."

Instead, they focused on terms that would encourage dialogue, rather than shut it down.

Some of the most challenging words to define were those that were either new to the mainstream or carried deep cultural weight. Jane explained the term "global majority," was a phrase many in the corporate world were unfamiliar with.

"It was probably more known in the academic space, but we felt it was important to bring that term into the corporate space to help people understand it," she says.

Another significant term they included was "misogynoir," which gained wider attention in the context of Meghan Markle's treatment by the media. Jane explains that they used her experience as an example of how black women are often unfairly portrayed.

At its core, *My Little Black Book* is a tool for fostering braver conversations about race. As both Maggie and Jane point out, one of the biggest barriers to these conversations is fear – fear of saying the wrong thing, fear of causing offence. But they believe that avoiding the conversation altogether is even more harmful.

"Our book gives people the language to have these conversations," Maggie says. "It helps them find the words to express what they're feeling, even if they've never been able to articulate it before."

One of the key takeaways from the *Blacktionary* is the idea that everyone has a responsibility to engage in these conversations, regardless of their race.

"It's not just your black colleagues' issue to educate you," Jane emphasises. "This is everyone's issue."

At Maggie and Jane's upcoming event at Wolfson College in Cambridge, they plan to dive deeper into what it means to be black and British in today's society, and to encourage the audience to engage in a more conversation about race and racism, especially at work.

"We want to challenge people, but we also want them to challenge us," Maggie says.

The pair have promised to keep updating *My Little Black Book* as the language of and conversation around race is constantly evolving. They are already considering new terms for or the next edition of the book.

■ Dr Maggie Semple and Jane Oremosu will bring their *Blacktionary* Show to Wolfson College, Cambridge, from 1pm on Saturday, 19 October. It is free and open to all. Visit wolfson.cam.ac.uk/about/events.