

# Cancel Cancel Culture: WaterFire Eye-to-Eye speaker encouraged her audience to consider a different route to change

WaterFire recently hosted the latest in their Eye-to-Eye series of public lectures intended to inspire thoughtful conversations around timely social topics. The event was co-sponsored by Leadership Rhode Island and the Rhode Island Foundation and featured **Loretta Ross**, a professor from Smith College who came to discuss the topic of cancel culture. Her premise is that cancel culture within liberal circles actually hobbles liberal causes by directing dissent inward, alienating potential allies over distinctions of relatively little consequence and distracting from the larger, real issues that require cooperation and understanding to address. She discussed her own learning curve, from a full career spent in activism around issues of social justice and gender and race equity.

“For close to 20 years, my motivation for doing this work was anger, because I was angry, I was angry at the world and I wanted to make a difference by grabbing the world by the throat and choking it. I was not a turn the other cheek person — if you hit me, I’d lay you out on the ground.”

In the course of her activism, she became involved in a lot of outreach. “For years, I taught Black feminist theory to Black men incarcerated for raping women. I taught race history to incarcerated white supremacists. So I had to learn to find love for the people who only know hate.”

The only way, she found, to make progress and change minds was to embrace those who disagreed with her and show them a different way. Not exclude them. Not pile on them. What she sees happening now, especially online, forces people in the opposite direction. She mentioned the “Caste” podcast by journalist Isabel Wilkerson and one of its consistent themes: that you can’t change society, unless you are willing to take responsibility for it. That highlights a huge difference between blame and responsibility, which has guided her through the latter part of her career inciting change.

Essentially, she encouraged the audience not to worry about what they were fighting against in society. “Focus on what you are fighting FOR.” Despite the heavy subject matter, Ross had the audience laughing throughout her delightfully anecdotal and engaging talk, which was followed by a community conversation moderated by Sterling Clinton-Spellman.

This lecture was held at the WaterFire Arts Center amid their current “Eye to Eye” and “Witness” exhibitions of photographic art by Mary Beth Meehan and Jonathan Pitts-Wiley, which created a perfect backdrop. It is an exhibition that could truly only take place in a space with the scale of the Art Center’s stories-high main hall, a virtual airplane hanger of art. Meehan’s poignant portraits of diverse Rhode Island everymen and everywomen are well worth dropping by to see, and they complemented the large, engaged audience nicely, bearing silent witness to the discussion.

*The series is ongoing; watch [waterfire.org](http://waterfire.org) for updates and coming attractions.*