



Communication and Marketing Department  
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso  
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa  
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town  
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

[www.uct.ac.za](http://www.uct.ac.za)

**14 August 2025**

## **Compassionate communication builds stronger, inclusive communities – UCT lecture**



Associate Professor Loretta J Ross

Photo: Supplied

In a world where outrage travels faster than reflection, leading human rights and social justice scholar, Associate Professor Loretta J Ross, believes in applying the engagement concept of “calling in” – which encourages dialogue, empathy and mutual accountability – as opposed to “calling out”, which she describes as counterproductive and thwarts its own goal.

Ross, the 2022 recipient of the MacArthur Foundation “Genius” award and an associate professor at Smith College, delivered the 59th TB Davie Memorial Lecture at the University of Cape Town (UCT) on Wednesday, 6 August 2025.

Her lecture, titled “Calling In: Navigating Challenging Conversations and Cultivating Compassionate Connections,” demonstrated how compassionate communication could build stronger and more inclusive communities. Organised by the Academic Freedom Committee

(AFC), chaired by Professor Rudzani Muloiwa, the lecture provides a platform for distinguished speakers to engage with themes relating to academic and human freedom.

Ross explained that while calling out is an accountability process, it is often counterproductive.

"Once you publicly shame someone, you've invited them into a fight instead of a conversation. And once they're in that fight, they're not going to keep talking with you."

To her, "calling out thwarts its own goal".

Best known for her work on reproductive justice, her latest passion is helping build a new human-rights-based movement that centres love.

"I helped found the concept of reproductive justice, but now I want us to start thinking about accountability with love and grace rather than anger, violence and shame." Justice, she argued, must be "a vision where everybody benefits, and everybody is allowed room to grow".

Ross said: "There's a tendency to deal with power inappropriately by just flipping the roles, putting those who had none in charge, but without changing the structure. You'll likely replicate the same practices of abuse if you get power. We should seek to share power. And yes, that means some people have to give up their right to oppress others. But they don't lose anything by doing that. A lit candle loses nothing by lighting another, the Buddhists say."

Unpacking the divisive call-out culture, Ross said: "We think people need to be held accountable, and they do. But we've chosen anger, blaming and humiliation as the means of doing it. And that doesn't work the way we think it does."

"I understand why people are devoted to calling out because it's been our favourite tool. But even as a tactic, it should be the last resort, not the first one out of the toolbox."

That last resort, she explained, is cancelling. "It's when you decide that what someone did is so egregious that they deserve to lose everything, their job, their platform, their reputation. But here's the contradiction: when we cancel people, we're replicating the very logic of the prison industrial complex we claim to oppose. Exiling people, discarding them like used tissue, refusing to listen to them again. This is not liberation. This is punishment."

She argued that cancelling should be reserved only for those offered the chance to do better and repeatedly refused.

"Calling in is about choosing conversation over confrontation. It's about building a container big enough to hold all the experiential diversity in the room and still move forward towards justice. It's saying: I see you. I don't agree with you, but I believe you're capable of growth, and I'm inviting you into that process."

What about when we don't have the time or energy to engage? "That's where calling on comes in," she explained. "That's when you want someone to do better, but you're not going to do the emotional labour of helping them get there."

She said when even that feels like too much, “we call it off.” Ross emphasised that learning to disengage is not a weakness; it’s boundary setting. She likened it to parenting.

“If you’ve ever had a difficult child, you already know you don’t say the first thing that comes to your mind. Otherwise, that child’s going to be in therapy for life, or you’ll be fired if it’s your boss,” she said.

She said what underpins attention-seeking and punitive cancelling is something deeper: the legacy of white supremacy, patriarchy and capitalism. “It’s no accident that we act like this. These systems have trained us to deal with mistakes through punishment and exile. But if we want to dismantle those systems, we can’t use their tools.”

“White supremacy, as I use it, is not just about white people. Whiteness is just an identity. White supremacy is an ideology, a belief system built on hierarchy, domination and control. And not all white people are white supremacists. But sadly, not all white supremacists are white.”

She pointed out that universities in the US are under “full-throated assault” from forces seeking to ban all conversations around race, gender, struggle and oppression. “They don’t want us to teach an honest version of history because they’ve learned how powerful it is to repeat it. They want to preserve the immunity they’ve enjoyed for far too long.”

“This is not the time to give up. Human rights, like those embedded in the South African Constitution, are the best antidote to fascism humanity has ever created. We have truth. We have evidence. As young people say: we’ve got the receipts. The paper trails. The history books. And most importantly, we’ve got time on our side.”

Ross urged the audience to remain steadfast. “All we can do is maintain our determination, our hope, our commitment to justice. And eventually we win.”

*Story by: Myolisi Gophe, UCT News*

***Ends***

**Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department**

**Thami Nkwanyane**

**Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer**

Communication and Marketing Department

University of Cape Town

Rondebosch

Tel: (021) 650 5672

Cell: (072) 563 9500

Email: [thami.nkwanyane@uct.ac.za](mailto:thami.nkwanyane@uct.ac.za)

Website: [www.uct.ac.za](http://www.uct.ac.za)