Racist Language and Origins I Didn’t Always Know

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By Gina Rubel

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Ibram X. Kendi, in his book, How To Be An Antiracist, defines antiracist as “one who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea.” He says, “A racist idea is any idea that suggests one racial group is inferior or superior to another racial group in any way. Racist ideas argue that the inferiorities and superiorities of racial groups explain racial inequities in society.”

In the alternative, “An antiracist idea is any idea that suggests the racial groups are equals in all their apparent differences—that there is nothing right or wrong with any racial group. Antiracist ideas argue that racist policies are the cause of racial inequities.”

To be an antiracist, thus means that we all have an obligation to understand how language shapes racist beliefs. While I already knew that some of the terms listed herein are inherently racist, such as “the pot calling the kettle black” and “cotton picking,” there are others whose origins are new to me.
such as “low hanging fruit” and “urban.”

**Master Bedroom, Blacklist, Whitelist and Sold Down the River**

A July 2020 story by Scottie Andrew and Harmeet Kaur for CNN, Everyday words and phrases that have racist connotations, sheds light on everyday language that has its origin in racist history. They call attention to “master bedroom,” “blacklist,” “whitelist,” and “sold down the river.” While I have never used the latter in my lexicon, I certainly have called our largest bedroom and adjoining bathroom the “master bed and bath;” the preferred language today is “primary bedroom.” I have asked our IT partner to blacklist hundreds of emails that pose as cyberthreats, and on the flipside, I have requested that they whitelist every client and partners’ domain.

**Blackball / Black Mark / Black Market / Blacklist / Black Sheep**

In July 2020, Twitter announced that it would drop the terms “master,” “slave” and “blacklist” from its code. The words "master" and "slave" have become "leader" and "follower" or "primary" and "replica," while "blacklist" has become "denylist." I like “denylist,” and would go so far as to call it a “blocklist.”

An article by Brittany Wong for Huffington Post says it best:

The symbolism of white as positive and black as negative is pervasive in our culture. Watts-Jones has highlighted many terms with negative meanings that reference blackness. In the English language, she wrote in 2004, color is “related to extortion (blackmail), disrepute (black mark), rejection (blackball), banishment (blacklist), impurity (‘not the driven snow’) and illicitness (black market).”

“The Black power movement brought front and center the way the term ‘black’ is used with rare exception to convey a derogatory, devalued meaning,” she told HuffPost. “The meaning of these phrases is always something undesirable — evil, depression, gloomy, immoral.”

Recently, while having a socially distanced conversation about religion with two Black friends, I referred to someone as the “black sheep of the family” because she defected from the preferred religion of her parents. I immediately caught myself and apologized, vowing to try never to use the term again. While they both said that they had not taken offense, I offended myself. I am grateful, at least, that I have become aware of racist language and am trying to do better.

**Cakewalk**

Rooted in enslavement in the antebellum South, some Black slaves spent Sundays dressing up and dancing in a way of ridiculing enslavers and the white upper classes. They competed for a cake, hence the name. Regarded as a fun and leisurely weekend activity, “cakewalk” became associated with easy tasks. Cakewalks didn’t end with slavery. For decades, they remained (with cake prizes) a part of African American life, but at the same time white actors in blackface incorporated the act into minstrel shows, turning what began as a satire of white elites into a racist caricature of Black people.

**Cotton Picking**

In 2018 Fox News commentator, David Bossie, had to apologize for using the racist remark, "you're
out of your cotton-picking mind." A native of Philadelphia, I must admit that before I married my husband, I had no idea that “cotton picking” was racist. In fact, 20+ years ago, I had never seen cotton growing on farms. I used the phrase, like so many others, because I had heard it while growing up. I remember the day that I said “cotton picking” in front of my husband and his Texas-born mother, both of whom shot me a look and then simultaneously asked me if I knew the phrase was racist. Since then, I never have used it again.

The phrase “cotton picking” has racial overtones, particularly against southern Black slaves who were the pickers of cotton for much of American history. According to JR Thorpe’s article, 5 English Phrases with Serious Racist History, “Cotton-picking is usually used as a stand-in for 'damn,' to make it more socially acceptable than swearing (ironically enough).” He notes, “If you're not from the South, you may have heard the adjective "cotton-picking" for the first time from a Bugs Bunny cartoon from 1952.”

Crack the Whip / Whip-Cracker

According to the Boston Globe, “Crack the Whip is an expression for using one’s authority to urge subordinates to work harder or behave better. The article notes that the phrase has origins in 17th-century horse-drawn wagon drivers. The belief that “crack the whip” is not racist was upheld by a British employment tribunal in May 2020, in a case where a Black nurse claimed that she had been discriminated against when the expression was used by her London-based boss.

While the origin of the saying remains in dispute, it is safe to say that the phrase also has ugly associations with chattel slavery.

Another similar phrase is “whip-cracker” which is suspected to be the longer form of “cracker” which also has negative connotations. Jelani Cobb, a historian at the University of Connecticut told NPR that "cracker," a word used for Anglo insults, was first noted in the mid-18th century. It was used to refer to poor whites, particularly those inhabiting the frontier regions of Maryland, Virginia, and Georgia. It is suspected that it was a shortened version of "whip-cracker," since their manual labor involved driving livestock with a whip (not to mention the other brutal arenas where those skills were employed.) Over the course of time it came to represent a person of lower caste or criminal disposition.

Freeholder

A term commonly used in the New Jersey government, Governor Philip D. Murphy, recently renamed the office of “freeholder” to “commissioner.” The term “freeholder” dates to the state’s 1776 Constitution when only white men could own land. Murphy Tweeted, “As our nation tears down symbols of injustice, let us tear down words born from racism.”
Grandfathered In / Grandfather Clause

While the meaning is to be exempt from a law that has recently been adopted, the terms “grandfathered in” and “grandfather clause” have their origin in America’s racial history. While the 15th Amendment, ratified in 1870, prohibited racial discrimination in voting, Blacks were kept from exercising their constitutional right due to states’ literacy tests, poll taxes and constitution quizzes. These “tests” were designed to disenfranchise Blacks. If they did not pass or pay the tax, they could not register to vote. These laws also hindered poor American whites. As a result, several states passed laws that made men (yes, I said men) eligible to vote if they were descendants of men who were eligible to vote before 1876 (a.k.a. white men). This was called the grandfather clause. In Aug. 2020, a Massachusetts Appeals Court decided to stop using the term “grandfathering” which was detailed in the footnote of a zoning dispute opinion.

Gypped / Gyp / Jipped / Jip

The term, gypped, comes from the word Gypsy which is a derogatory name for the Romani people (also known as Roma) who originated in northern India and migrated around the world for more than a millennium. This culture has been stereotyped as thieves and child abductors which led to the use of the word “gypped.” Alternatives include ripped off or cheated – neither of which has its origins in racism.

Jimmies

There has long been a debate in the Northeast as to whether we call those sugary ice cream toppings “jimmies” or “sprinkles.” In Philadelphia, where I grew up, and in Southern New Jersey, were we vacationed every summer, I always asked for my chocolate custard with “jimmies.” While scholars don’t agree on the origin of the word, I once again had no idea that “jimmies” could have a negative origin. Some believe that the brown sprinkles “looked like little Black people” while others believe “this comes from the Jim Crow laws used to segregate the South, with jimmies representing those Black people bound by these laws.” No matter the origin, I have started to refer to those sugary treats as “chocolate sprinkles” – my preferred choice over rainbow sprinkles.

Long Time, No See / No Can Do
This one is another eye opener for me. It is traced back to a Boston Sunday Globe article in the late 1800s. The phrase applied to a Native American speaker with broken English and was meant to stereotype natives as unintelligent. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “this type of isolating construction would have been unusual for the indigenous languages of North America.” Rather, it originated as a way for white writers to mock Native American speech, and that of non-native English speakers from other places like China. By the 1920s, it had become an ordinary part of the American vernacular.

“No can do” has similar origins in making fun of non-native English speakers.

**Low Hanging Fruit**

I never knew that the phrase "low hanging fruit" could be considered racist. I have always equated it with picking fruit from an orchard - literally. Recently, after using the phrase, a lawyer brought it to my attention. I am grateful.

According to Mary-Frances Winters of The Inclusion Solution:

“Low hanging fruit has a very different meaning. Some synonyms for the phrase from a business perspective include quick wins, no-brainers, easy rewards, easily accomplished work, and high return, low risk item. However, perhaps we can understand for someone who witnessed lynching or who knew of loved ones who were lynched, the term might remind them of these dreadful practices.

Winters also notes that while there is “no direct connection to lynching,” she recommends “that we begin to be more sensitive to what we say because seemingly innocuous phrases can conjure up very different meanings for some.”

**Off the Reservation**

The Wall Street Journal refers to “Off the Reservation” as a Phrase with a Dark Past. Journalist, Ben Zimmer, noted in 2016 that “Hillary Clinton made a regrettable choice of words in a CNN interview last week, when she was asked about Donald Trump’s attacks on her. ‘I have a lot of experience dealing with men who sometimes get off the reservation in the way they behave and how they speak,’ she told Jake Tapper.”

Suzan Shown Harjo of Indian Country Today used Clinton’s faux pas as a teachable moment. She notes that the term is “hurtful or offensive to many Native Peoples today.”

The context of its original meaning comes from Native American peoples being restricted to reservations created by the U.S. government, and their freedom being severely limited by the terms of the treaties they were often forced to sign.

**Paddy Wagon**

Racism comes in many forms and includes negative language against immigrants as well as Black, brown and indigenous populations. Police van and patrol wagons were nicknamed “Paddy Wagons” in the 1930’s when prejudice against Irish immigrants was common. “Paddy” is a slang word for a
person of Irish decent. The phrase refers to Irish people being arrested.

**Peanut Gallery**

Used to describe hecklers, individuals sharing unwanted criticism, or younger people with contrary opinions, “peanut gallery” has roots in the era of vaudeville. The vaudeville theaters of the late 19th and early 20th centuries referred to the cheapest seats, which often were occupied by Black and poor people, as the peanut gallery.

**Pot Calling the Kettle Black**

As a youngster, I heard this idiom time and time again. It was used when people wanted to draw attention to hypocrisy. In researching the origin of the phrase, most scholars agree it dates to the early 1600s. At that time, most pots and kettles were made with cast iron, a material that acquires streaks of black smoke when heated over a flame.

There is, however, a valid argument that the use of the word “black” in the phrase casts the color as a negative attribute, connoting that blackness is undesirable. Many thus believe that this negative connotation creates a stigma attached to blackness.

**Slave**

There is no question that the term “slave” refers to people who have been taken against their will and forced into servitude. While the word “slave” is not racist per se, instead of referring to someone as having been a slave, the language choice that gives power back to a given person is to say “enslaved person.”

While people have been enslaved for millenniums, the history of slavery in the Americas dates to the 1600s when the Portuguese took human cargo from Africa to Mexico. For centuries thereafter, Black and brown people were subject to forced labor, being bought and sold like livestock. If you are not familiar with the history of slavery in America, The New York Times Magazine goes into great detail in A Brief History of Slavery That You Didn’t Learn in School.

**Tipping Point**

The title of a book, this phrase is used often when describing the point of no return – that critical moment in time when change becomes inevitable. According to Merriam-Webster, it was applied to one phenomenon in particular: white flight. “In the 1950s, as white people abandoned urban areas for the suburbs in huge numbers, journalists began using the phrase tipping point in relation to the percentage of minority neighbors it took to trigger this reaction in white city residents.”

**Uppity**
According to a 2011 article in The Atlantic, "uppity" is a “term that racist southerners used for Black people who didn't know their place.” A pejorative term, uppity conveys racism much like “hysterical” is used to connote an overly reactive woman. This term also was used by whites as an epithet during the Jim Crow era to describe newly freed Blacks who were not differential enough.

Urban

The term “urban” was one that I used to use to describe the inner-city where I grew up. I would say that I grew up in an “urban environment.” Today, I choose to say that I grew up in a “metropolitan area,” “city,” or “metropolitan environment.”

In recent months, major record labels such as Warner Music Group, the Grammys and radio stations are distancing themselves from the category of “urban music” amid demands for racial equality in the music industry. In June 2020, they announced that they would both stop using “urban” to categorize music made by Black artists and will use “hip-hop” or R&B instead.

NPR’s Cate Young noted, “On June 5, in response to the rapidly increasing momentum behind the fight for Black lives in the U.S. and around the world, Republic Records announced that it would remove ‘urban’ from the label’s verbiage in describing departments, employee titles and music genres, citing their belief that ‘over time the meaning and connotations of ‘urban' have shifted and developed into a generalization of Black people in many sectors of the music industry, including employees and music by Black artists.'

In his chapter on “Space,” Ibram X. Kendi describes space racism as a powerful collection of racist policies that lead to resource inequity between racialized spaces or the elimination of certain racialized spaces, which are substantiated by racist ideas about racialized spaces. One of those racialized spaces is referred to as “urban” areas.

Kendi received his PhD from Temple University’s African American studies department. A transplant to Philadelphia, he chose to live in the “poor Black neighborhoods of North Philadelphia” where Temple is located. He wanted to live among people who looked like him. He wanted to understand the plight of the Black urban resident. In so doing, he admits that his thinking was flawed and inherently racist.

Wetback | Mojado
The slur, wetback or "mojado" as it is known in Spanish, is one I never heard growing up in Philadelphia. I heard it for the first time during a visit to Texas in the late 1990’s. I had no idea what it meant and literally thought the person was talking about alligators. Much to my surprise, the slur does not refer to large reptiles. The word "wetback" refers to immigrants who illegally crossed into the U.S. According to the Los Angeles Times, “The term, originally coined after Mexicans illegally entered the U.S. by swimming or wading across the Rio Grande, evolved to include a broader group of immigrants who snuck into the country on foot or in cars. The Spanish translation espaldas mojadas, is typically shortened to just mojado or mojada, depending on the person’s gender.” This particular slur has a long history in politics in the United States and is one that I hope to never hear spoken again.

**Striving to be an antiracist**

To be an antiracist means taking action to change inherit bias, implicit bias, systemic racism, covert bias, and micro-aggressions. While we may say things without malice or racist intent, we can do better by learning how to recognize and stop using language with racist origins, meanings, or connotations.

I, for one, never appreciated the stereotypes and slurs used against Italians and Italian Americans. As the grandchild of immigrants who were persecuted because of where they were born, words like “dego,” “wop,” “Guido” as it relates to a person as opposed to my grandfather, “gangster,” “greaseball,” and others do nothing to perpetuate the positive influences our heritage has contributed to the world. The same holds true for covert language that does nothing to elevate or even equalize members of minority communities. It is up to each of us to do better and to be better. I believe we have an obligation to choose our words in a way that equalizes all of humanity no matter their gender identity, race, color, sexual orientation, language, national origin, religion, disability, or age.

The way we use language influences the way we see people and the way people feel. Let us all make a commitment to doing better with our language and using inclusive language that provides everyone with a sense of belonging.

*For more DE&I resources, please visit our Diversity, Inclusion, Equity & Anti-Racism Resource Center.*