

NY Times Opinion

How Can Something Be Racist but Not Racist at the Same Time?

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There's something about how we talk about race in America that strikes me as novel, which I get the feeling more and more Americans are coming to think of as ordinary: These days we're told that race issues are not only urgent — racist ideology became "[ascendant](#)" during Donald Trump's presidency, but also complex — race isn't rocket science, "[it's so much more complicated.](#)"

And in ways, the complexity entails what seems to be a self-contradictory quality.

For example, it's considered a given that diversity on college campuses enhances the educational experience for all students. A 2019 [entry](#) on American University's website says, "A more diverse university community opens all students up to a broader range of perspectives, helping them become better problem solvers and introducing them to new ways of thinking." A 2015 [report](#) by Harvard University's College Working Group on Diversity and Inclusion reads:

Harvard's heterogeneous campus environment and pedagogical emphasis on intellectual cross-pollination is intended to inform the choices and habits Harvard graduates will carry into their respective spheres of influence. Therefore, Harvard embraces, and must constantly reaffirm, the notion that a richly diverse student body is essential to its pedagogical objectives and institutional mission.

But we're also reminded, at intervals, that students of color sometimes consider it offensive when they're expected to represent the "diverse" point of view in classes or interactions with their classmates. In 2007, one Harvard Crimson columnist [chafed](#) at "Being the token black person," writing, "I am expected to be an authority on the lives of all black people." Earlier this year, a PopSugar [article](#) surveyed the challenges faced by Black students at predominantly white institutions, or PWIs (the terminological analog to historically Black colleges and universities, or HBCUs), including "a myriad of microaggressions that are exhausting to deal with" and carrying "the burden of representation when it comes to speaking about things from a historical context," which is "exacerbated when they are the only Black student in their class."

It can be hard to know where to go on that if diversity is a key component of a well-rounded education but an indefensible burden on the very people representing the diversity.

Another example: Sometimes Black television writers object — justifiably — to being ignored when white writers have Black characters doing and saying things that would be unrealistic coming from actual Black people living in a racist America. On a 1994 episode of the Black sitcom "Family Matters," when the family's teenage son comes home after being harassed by a white police officer, his father, a cop himself, asks him if he did anything to provoke the officer's harassment. "Are you absolutely sure?" Sgt. Winslow (Reginald VelJohnson) asks his son, Edward (Darius McCrary). As The Atlantic's Hannah Giorgis [reported](#) in September, Felicia Henderson, a Black woman who was then a writer on the show, recounted telling her white colleagues that no Black father, and especially not one who was a police

officer, would have had that as a first response to his son's version of events. Despite her skepticism, that line stayed in.

But then, Black writers object when white writers in similar situations ask them whether something a Black character is written as saying or doing is correct. Henderson told Giorgis that when she worked on "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air":

Much of her job amounted to answering a single question: "Is that what Black people do?" She remembers white colleagues on another show looking her way and asking, "Does that sound right to you?," as though there were a single specific way to be, or to sound, Black. Henderson would reply, "I was at a meeting of the All Black Writers Who Know What All Other Black People Think just last night ..."

The idea, again, is that there's something offensive about a Black person being asked to arbitrate the Black view on a given issue — but what if white writers don't ask? Isn't their asking what we were hoping for?

There is a contradiction here, and it isn't resolved simply by pointing out the obvious truth that there is a wide range of experience and perspective within Black America — that Blackness is complex. Because if Blackness is so complex that no individual should be asked to represent it, then on what grounds did Black writers object back in the day? If we concur with the earlier grievance, how do we make sense of the new one? And what is a presumably well-meaning white colleague supposed to do? Use their own judgment or ask for their Black colleague's input and run the risk of pigeonholing them or, if you prefer, essentializing them?

These paradoxes make contemporary discussions about race that much harder to sort. Certainly, there have always been different schools of thought on how to address issues of race. Think of the ideological rivalry between W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. Washington stressed education — academic and vocational — and entrepreneurship as keys to Black uplift. Du Bois emphasized political mobilization and a broader condemnation of societal racism. But Washington wasn't opposed to condemning racism, and Du Bois was hardly opposed to education and entrepreneurship. In any case, in their time, America wasn't being asked to adopt the notion that the prescriptions of one of these men canceled out those of the other.

There's something counterproductive about the way contemporary race matters are caveated and couched in questions that so often lead to more questions, rather than to consensus. Often, today's conversations seem motivated by identifying the element of racism in as many situations as possible. And too many times, this results in Möbius-strip discussions that go nowhere and help no one.

I prefer objections that aren't canceled out by other ones: If you ask me, there is a definable Blackness, a Black culture, which, porous though its boundaries may be, is amenable to representation by the opinions of a single Black writer in a writers' pool. That writer may quite well be able to elucidate more than one Black perspective rather than just their own and assess which of those perspectives is best observed in a particular context.

I'm guessing that some will think I'm oversimplifying. But my response is to ask: Are race issues so tangled that we can't straightforwardly point ourselves toward some measure of general agreement — or even just peace? Are we dealing with complexity or just a kind of synthetic confusion? Confusion in race politics that — whatever it yields — is a new rather than classic version of The Struggle.