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There's a kind of racism embedded in DEI

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I grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood in southern New Jersey. My neighborhood was so white I could have been used as a landmark when giving directions.

Sadly, as one of the few Black kids in the neighborhood and one of the even fewer who spent any time with white peers, I was a daily target of racist bullying. In fact, one could say it was a pastime of sorts. In some neighborhoods, kids got together to play tag or a pickup football game; in my neighborhood, picking on me was the organized game. Who I saw as a friend or an enemy changed all the time. Someone being nice to me on Tuesday would be leading a racist horde on Wednesday, only to be friendly again on Thursday. (It's amazing I don't have trust issues.)

Some of the adults weren't much better. I remember one of my teachers standing with another teacher as I and other students walked into class. Out of nowhere, my teacher told me to "walk like Richard Pryor." When I told her I did not want to, she raised her voice: "Do it." Both teachers laughed as I did my best impression, not completely sure which Richard Pryor act I was expected to emulate. (At the very least, they could have narrowed it down to a scene or two.)

My only reprieve came when I did something considered "Black": like praise a rap song, dance, or do well in a basketball game. All my other attributes were ignored.

So I was excited about graduating from the eighth grade and going to a regional high school with a large Black population. I could finally leave my misfit status behind and enter a diverse environment where I would feel included. It's not that my white peers had succeeded in making me feel inferior, but not having to deal with their attempts would be a breath of fresh air. The energy I spent upholding mental and emotional armor against their attacks could be spent on more fulfilling things.

However, these hopes were quickly dashed. The Black peers I encountered the most did not accept me either. To them, having grown up in a predominantly white neighborhood had made *me* white — too white for their tastes. Politeness on my part was considered weakness. My general disposition was not "real" enough in their minds. In this school, too, I was usually left alone if I was behaving in ways coded Black, but there was more to me than that.

The most disheartening aspect was that both my previous white tormentors and my new Black ones were implying the same thing: You're not fulfilling our ideas of what a Black person is, and for that you must pay.

I do not tell this story to garner pity. (I'm not big on the whole "victim" thing.) I do not tell it to guilt my childhood antagonists. (There's no benefit in doing that.) I do not tell it to gain some kind of catharsis. (At this point, I'm over it.) I tell it because I am now a mid-career college professor, and these types of bullies have not gone away. They are now academics and administrators at prestigious universities; they are now running HR departments; they are chief editors of prestigious journals. They are prizewinners for their work in diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Once, I committed the sin of saying that knowledge of standard written English may be valuable to all students, regardless of skin color. For this, I endured vitriol. Because standard English came from England and was used by imperialists and slaveholders, I was told, it was inherently racist to teach it to nonwhites. On a now-defunct academic listserv, I was accused of white supremacy, of being unconcerned with how such thoughts, coming from my Black body, were doing harm to other Black people.

These academics would deride me to each other while ignoring my explanations and clarifications. Many who did not participate in these online degradation ceremonies cheered on those who did. For wanting to teach standard English, and for wanting to have a real conversation about its efficacy in American life, I was deemed a pariah.

It was remarkably reminiscent of the bullying I experienced while growing up.

To be clear, I was not being denigrated for simply having a particular outlook; my transgression was having that outlook *while Black*.

This story illustrates a distinct kind of racism that goes unacknowledged in its particularity. I am describing a kind of racism that more easily masquerades as magnanimity, empathy, and righteousness. I am describing a kind of racism that, often, is unwittingly embraced by its very targets. I am describing "prescriptive racism."

Unlike traditional racism — the belief that particular races are, in some way, inherently inferior to others — prescriptive racism dictates how a person should behave. That is, an identity type is prescribed to a group of people, and any individual who skirts that prescription is deemed inauthentic or even defective. President Biden displayed prescriptive racism when he said "If you have a problem figuring out whether you're for me or Trump, you ain't Black," a statement that implicitly prescribes how Black voters should think.

"Prescriptive racism" is probably a new term for most readers, but it's not exactly a novel concept. It has a historical analogue: the concept of the "uppity Negro," a Black person who dared to act like an equal to whites. One of this term's most famous usages is attributed to Lyndon B. Johnson, who apparently said: "These Negroes, they're getting pretty uppity these days and that's a problem for us since they've got something now they never had before, the political pull to back up their uppityness." Clearly, "uppity" was meant to describe people of color who exercised "agentic" power — that is, they were competent and did not need a white person's heroism. These "uppity" Black people were forgetting their scripted lines, as it were.

However, prescriptive racism casts a broader net, disadvantaging people for not abiding by a long list of things a Black person shouldn't do. A prescriptive racist may not mind that a Black

person has a master's degree, but he may scoff at the sight of a Black man watching the Masters — especially if Tiger isn't playing. A white prescriptive racist would look at a Black person speaking standard English the way a Black person would look at a white person wearing a dashiki. Lest you think that last statement is mere speculation, I have met several people who have voiced derision and irritation upon hearing standard English come out of my mouth. My use of language was an affront to their expectations and sensibilities.

Many prescriptive racists are often people of the same minority group. A Black person lambasting another Black person for acting in ways deemed racially inauthentic — for example, speaking in dialects coded “white” — is engaging in prescriptive racism.

And prescriptive racism is not just a social phenomenon; it is now being institutionalized. More and more, it is erroneously labeled diversity, equity, and inclusion, and it is winning out over initiatives more in line with the civil rights movement and classical liberal values like individuality, free speech, reason, and even equality. It is becoming policy in academia, corporate America, and even the military. To put it another way, contemporary DEI *is* prescriptive racism.

In academia, I've found, Blackness is a role, a “pre-script,” to which Black people are expected to conform if they want to be accepted or, sometimes, acknowledged at all. A Black scholar cannot simply study and write about Plato; she has to write about Plato *from a Black perspective*. Nobody shows much interest in a Black graduate student drafting a dissertation on American Transcendentalism that isn't focused on its relevance to the Black experience. In this sense, applying for graduate school or a professorship is akin to auditioning for “Black person” in some live-action role-playing event.

The term “politically Black” adds yet another layer to prescriptive racism. Often, Black scholars doing “Black scholarship” must do it in a politically Black way: a way that conforms to a particular political and decidedly countercultural position. This is what the journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones meant when she said, in a now-deleted tweet, “There is a difference between being politically Black and being racially Black. . . . We all know this and should stop pretending that we don't.” For many involved in social justice — be they academics, politicians, or activists — progressive ideology is the only authentic form of political Blackness.

Political Blackness made much more sense several decades ago. Both Malcolm X and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. could have been construed as politically Black. Why? Because, when these men lived, whether Black Americans were gay or straight, Islamic or Christian, working class or middle class, none of them could sit at the front of the bus in the Jim Crow South. However, in this third decade of the 21st century, the efficacy of political Blackness has waned significantly. Though things are not perfect and racist environments still exist, policy changes have afforded Black Americans opportunities and resources traditionally denied them. As a result, “the Black experience” has become so varied that the use of “the” is questionable.

The idea of an indefinite abject oppression that justifies essentialism and political Blackness does not reflect reality. The facts that roughly 80 percent of Black Americans are working class or higher and that the number of Black immigrants has skyrocketed (strongly suggesting that the United States isn't a fundamentally anti-Black country) are just two of many things that illustrate

this. But activists who still want power must fabricate an insidious specter of oppression, and an essential victimhood has to be prescribed, whether they are homeless or Oprah Winfrey. If you are a Black American who does not abide by this prescription, be you liberal or conservative, you are seen as weakening the political power of Black Americans.

The inherent paradox of contemporary social justice is the essentialism that says “you are bad if you stereotype other people, but you are also bad if you don’t.”

The concept of microaggressions illustrates this. In a definition made popular by clinical psychologists mainly from Columbia University, microaggressions are subtle insults, intentional or unintentional, “that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group.” Yet it is prescriptive racism to suggest that Black people, regardless of context, interpret every term or experience the same way.

For example, according an article in Harvard Business Review, “I believe the most qualified person should get the job” counts as a microaggression because, apparently, it means to racial and ethnic minorities “that someone is being given an unfair advantage because of their race.” But that idea itself is a stereotype that essentializes minorities as people who, as a whole, would be offended by that particular statement. The idea that a Black person could agree with that statement is unthinkable. If one were to point out this contradiction to a person who believes such a statement is an insult to minorities, one shouldn’t be surprised if the person — whether white or nonwhite — commits an act of prescriptive racism: “Well, they *should* be offended.”

When people refer to “the Black experience,” they are, in effect, telling you who *I* am, what *I’ve* been through, and how *I* interpret the world. But they have no right to do that.

What to do about prescriptive racism

None of this is to say racism does not exist. I know we do not live in a utopia of racial harmony. However, too many initiatives to improve race relations have done more harm than good, and they are winning out.

Instead, I think we can achieve true diversity without erasing individuality.

To accomplish this, I and a few others have cofounded Free Black Thought, a nonprofit newsletter and podcast representing “the rich diversity of Black thought beyond the narrow spectrum of views promoted by mainstream outlets as defining ‘the Black perspective.’” We come from a classical liberal standpoint, meaning we believe people should be treated as sovereign individuals and not deindividuated members of a group. In other words, we’re sticking it to the prescriptive racists.

The “free” in Free Black Thought is both an adjective and a verb. We want to promote thought free from the tyranny of prescription, which means we publish and promote a wide array of ideological points and artistic expression, highlighting Black artists and thinkers typically neglected in mainstream media. But we also seek “to free” Black thought by offering alternatives to K-12 curricula informed by critical social justice, like BLM in Schools and Woke Kindergarten, to let schools know that other ways to promote true DEI do exist.

Sadly, prescriptive racism is being lobbed at students throughout primary and secondary education, from math to ethnic studies. This is why Free Black Thought has partnered with the Institute for Liberal Values to create curricula and resources that promote “empowered education” over dogmatic “prescriptive” DEI agendas and are accessible to teachers and parents. We promote such classical liberal values as equality, free speech, and, of course, individual liberty, which are the keys to social justice when universally applied.

At the end of the day, the founders of Free Black Thought are exercising our freedom of association to combat an almost tyrannical conformity imposed from an annoyingly indignant moral high ground.

For me, DEI done right is DEI based on traditional liberal values. These values make for social justice if we can live up to them fairly and universally.

To come full circle, experiencing racism in my childhood may have been arduous, and perhaps I was victimized. But that didn't make me a victim. It opened my eyes to the nonsense of race and identity, and it forced me to embrace my individuality. For that, I am grateful. Prescriptive racism and other forms of prescriptive essentialism rob people, especially young people, of their ability to make their own paths and cultivate their own individuality. After all, we want our youth to think, not to have a group ideology think for them. They all, regardless of race, should be emboldened to let their thoughts be free.

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