



What's in a Name?¹

by Paul Kivel

THE WORDS WE USE TO DESCRIBE groups of people have developed within the system of racism as it has changed historically. These words have changed and continue to change, partly in response to the struggle to end racism, and partly in the resistance to and backlash against that struggle. All of our vocabulary is inadequate and frustrating. However, there is much to learn from attempts to use accurate and respectful language. It is important that we pay attention to the words we use because language itself is used to maintain racism.

The phrase “people of color,” which I used in my book *Uprooting Racism*, is one such problematic term. Every human being is a person of color. The word “white,” which has been used to describe people in the U.S. of European descent, does not reflect anyone’s skin color so much as a concept of racial purity that has never existed. I use the phrases “people of color” and “communities of color” to suggest the multitude of peoples and cultures that have been exploited by European/U.S. ruling classes for the last 500 years. However, if we are not careful, this term will also allow whiteness to stay neutral, unmarked, and at the center of power, while all other groups are “colorful” and marked as different. (Even the phrases “European” and “American”² as substitutes for “white” are a problem because there have been communities of different skin colors, origins, and cultures in Europe and the U.S. for centuries. Used as a racial descriptor, the phrases deny non-white Europeans and people in the U.S. their history and presence.)

Other troublesome words used to refer to people of color include “minority” (people of color are a majority of the world’s population and a majority in some of our states and communities); “third world” (it implies they come from somewhere else and don’t belong in our communities; third also implies less worth than first or second); and “non-white” (this term equates white as the norm

¹ Adapted from *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*. (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society, 1996 rev. 2002.

² “American” is also problematic because peoples in all of the Americas, North, South, Central, and the Caribbean, are Americans, but people in the U.S. have staked a claim to exclusive use of the term—another example of racism.



or standard and everything else as different or “non,” i.e., negative).

The phrase “people of color” itself covers over so much complexity and diversity that it’s sometimes more useful to state explicitly the group of people being referred to, whether African American, Asian American, Arab American, Native American, or Latino/a. However, these terms are also abstractions, engulfing the specific lives of tens of millions of people.

More specific referents like Japanese American, Hopi, or Lebanese are still generalizations that hide significant differences while giving a false appearance of inclusiveness. The male bias of our society gives most racial terms a male identification. I keep the masculine/feminine form of Latino/a³ precisely to remind us that women and men are included in each of these categories.

Who else is excluded from these categories? Does the word “African American” connote “poor” to white people? Does “Latino” mean “heterosexual”? Does “Asian American” assume “able-bodied”? Racial referents are coded for specific meanings relating to class, sexual orientation, and physical ability, reflecting broad patterns of inequality within our society.

Language is important not because it should or can be “correct,” but because it should convey respect for and dignity to the people referred to. Everyone should have the choice to name themselves. Many Native Americans, African Americans, and immigrants from around the world had their names taken from them and were renamed by ignorant and insensitive missionaries, immigration officials, slave owners, military officers, teachers, and representatives of government agencies. Reclaiming lost names, rejecting demeaning names, or renaming oneself is a powerful step for an individual or group to take because it challenges the presumed subordination when others have dictated your name.

Sometimes there is not agreement within a community about what people want to be called, often because there is really no coherent community in the first place. Nonetheless, there is always a clear difference between respectful terms and disrespectful ones.

Within the African American community there are differences over whether to retain use of the word “black”, or to use “African American”. Neither term is without problems, although both terms are respectful. Similarly, in the Native American community there

³ Sometimes the spelling Latin@ is used to connote gender inclusiveness.



is disagreement over whether “Native American” or “American Indian” is the better term. These discussions reflect concerns about cultural pride, historical roots, the meaning of multiculturalism, and strategies for resisting racism. We can learn a lot about the concerns of people of color by listening to their discussions of the issues raised by different terms of self-identity. It is more important that we support those concerns than that we use the most correct words.

How have different communities of color renamed or redefined themselves during your lifetime?

It can be hard for white people to accept new terms because they represent challenges to long-standing social and political relationships. Different words call forth different behavior. We may feel less secure that we know the racial rules—what to say and how to act. This alone can cause anxiety for many middle-class Americans, for whom knowing and following the rules is important.

Some of our resistance to new words reflects our desire to control racial boundaries and maintain power. We may take advantage of changing terminology to try to discredit people of color with comments such as “Why can’t they make up their minds about what they want to be called?” Focusing on the terminology is a way to divert attention away from the underlying challenge to white power and control that the changing vocabulary represents.

In the United States we have always been concerned about politeness and good breeding. Upper-class and successful middle-class people have long prided themselves on using correct language and being well behaved and respectful. The use of correct racial terminology has been a signifier of class or breeding and has been used to disparage poor and working-class people. In the South, respectable whites, deriving great advantage from segregation, referred to African Americans as “Negroes” and looked down on people who used the “N word.” Being overtly polite or respectful in language or personal encounters made these whites no less complicit in white racism.

When we criticize other white people today for not using the right language, we may be showing our good breeding, masking our complicity with racism, and using our own educational or class advantages to put down those with less opportunity. Language that is obviously derogatory or abusive should be challenged. But we need to be concerned with much more than language in fighting racism.



Some of us wonder why people of color want to be called African American, Chinese American, or Mexican American. Why can't they just be "Americans"? Are they holding something back? Do they owe allegiance to another country or continent?

Sometimes people of color use these names as a response to the lack of acceptance and inclusion that they have experienced from white people in this country. At other times, people use them to indicate cultural and social connections that they feel to the countries or continents from which their foreparents emigrated. These names can indicate feelings of connection to distinct cultural communities, especially in response to the strong pressure in this country to give up one's culture in order to be accepted. Such naming can also be a call to a collective political identity. None of these practices has anything to do with one's loyalty to the United States.

We have adopted the word American for people who are citizens of the United States. (Literally, anyone born in North, Central, or South America is an American.) It is not an ethnicity or culture. There are many different kinds of Americans, and our country encompasses thousands of distinct cultures and communities. Being an American doesn't mean denying one's culture, ethnicity, or community. There is no single, national culture that defines what it means to be an American, however much some of us wish there were.

Being able to acknowledge and value one's cultural background is vital to personal and community health. This is even more necessary in a society that devalues most forms of popular cultural expression and minimizes historical roots and cultural development as ours does.

Part of the U.S. myth, the frontier myth, was that we could create ourselves anew here. We portrayed the United States as a virgin territory where people could come and discover or create new selves. We conveniently "forget" that we had to kill off Native Americans to make that frontier empty. We had to chop down the vegetation to make it tillable. We had to deny our own cultural histories, practices, and customs to fit in. Some of our families did deny or cover up their cultural practices. The traditions of others were lost over time. Today many of us can hardly identify with any specific ethnic identity or culture.

Many of our foreparents resisted assimilation and carried on strong and proud Italian, Greek, Irish, Swedish, German, Russian, or Portuguese traditions. But most of us grew to believe that this was



a land of newness, separated from the old tired traditions of other, primarily European, countries. This mythology makes it difficult to acknowledge the strengths and contributions of people from various cultures, particularly non-European ones, to our U.S. mix.

Culture in the United States has come to mean white European-American norms, values, beliefs, and traditions. Patriotism has become overlaid with a national chauvinism that reinforces white racism. We have used our national borders, immigration policies, literary canons, and patriotic homilies to maintain the dominance of white norms. It is ironic that in this time of a global economy, international trade, world sports competitions, and global cultural communication, our appeals to nationalism and protectionism have increased.

We face a challenge that is even larger than incorporating all people in the U.S. into our national identity. We must fundamentally question why we give so much credence and importance to our national identity. Whose interests does it serve? Nationalism in many countries has led to protectionism, aggression, xenophobia, internal repression, and war. Who has benefited from these patterns?

There is no reason we can't be proud of being part of the United States and of the positive achievements of our fellow citizens. And we can be proud of being New Yorkers or Texans or from the Northwest. We can take pride in our cultural, religious, ethnic, and other identities. However, when that pride fosters feelings of superiority, arrogance, competition, or the denigration of others who are not part of our group, we are breeding intolerance and violence. Further, when we use "American" as a code for who we, white people, consider good or rich or smart or successful enough to be part of "our" country, we are maintaining racism in disguise. When we blame our problems on non-Americans, whether they are immigrants without papers, Japanese capitalists, Arab oil producers or South American drug cartels, we are again refusing to look at our own complicity in these situations and are failing to take responsibility for our own problems. It then becomes easy for our economic and political leaders to stir up fear and anger against "foreigners," which fuels more militarism and racial violence.

Nationalism can be used to reinforce racism in the opposite direction as well. If we try to pretend that we have all assimilated into one large melting pot and that differences of culture, tradition, and community no longer exist, we can maintain white norms and white racism by pretending to have transcended them. Saying "We're all just Americans and therefore nobody should claim to be



Asian American” can be a way to deny the inequality and injustice that still operate in this country. This false inclusion is just as strong a support to racism as exclusionism is. In both cases we are using nationalism to speak about and reinforce white dominance.

There is no natural or homogeneous national community in this country. Nation states are complex. Ours was created over centuries and includes diverse peoples and communities. Any attempt to define or create a single national culture will inevitably disenfranchise and oppress many of us. It can only be done with power, control, and violence, to the benefit of some and the detriment of others.

Discussion of racism inevitably focuses on boundaries and divisions. Who is on “our” side and who is not? Making our boundaries more inclusive doesn’t eliminate this competitive and exclusive kind of thinking. Our national borders are arbitrary constructions of historical circumstance influenced by wars, colonization patterns, trade, treaties, and resistance struggles. We have seen countries throughout the world break up, consolidate and change borders, and redefine “national” identity. These transitions have generally fueled nationalism, racism, and religious fanaticism.

Nationalism in the United States has been used not only to exclude some people from our national identity, but also to control all those who live within the national boundary, and to persecute for disloyalty those who are labeled traitors or “un-American.” Our challenge is to accept and embrace the full diversity of who we are and strive for inclusion without expecting people to think or act like we do.

People will always make choices about what traditions to keep or discard, and what to name themselves. They deserve respect for the choices they make. Many people in the U.S. have cultural or social ties to other countries—some Italians to Italy, some Irish to Ireland, some Jews to Israel, some Vietnamese to Vietnam, some Bolivians to Bolivia, some Palestinians to Palestine, some Filipinos to the Philippines, and some African Americans to Ghana, Benin, Egypt, or South Africa. We each live within complex webs of international culture and communication, and no U.S. border stops or limits these kinds of cultural connections. Connecting to traditions and cultures that reach beyond U.S. borders is a source of strength, inspiration, creativity, and support for many people in the United States. We need to encourage those connections, not use them to persecute people for having “divided” loyalties.



One of the purposes of maintaining whiteness is to construct a normative set of values that defines who is entitled to certain resources and privileges. In response, people of color come together to juxtapose their numbers and their social and political influence against that entitlement. They define themselves as people of color against the ultimate dividing line that white racism creates. In small groups in which white people are dominant, people of color may band together for similar reasons.

At a different level, because the binary discussion of race relations puts everything in a black-white framework, Asian Americans, Arab Americans, Latino/as, and Native Americans have formed broad coalitions to strengthen their political bargaining power for the distribution of resources, services, and political representation. In earlier historical periods, for example, there were no Asian Americans; there were only Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, and Korean Americans. Now these groups have come together, downplaying their differences for strategic reasons, to claim resources and representation against white or African-American claims.

At the same time as they work in coalition as Asian Americans, however, particular ethnic and national groups are reasserting the uniqueness of their experiences and the importance of their needs for resources, recognition, and political representation as Korean Americans, Filipino/as, or South Asians. This is a strategic response because white culture denies the importance of cultural identity on the one hand, and on the other hand tends to see all people of color as “other,” without recognizing their specificity.

Finally, many people from particular ethnic groups want simply to be “American.” The force of racism in this society makes it nearly impossible for a Latino/a or Asian American to be “just American.” White Americans regularly perceive them to be Latino/a or Asian, and therefore not completely 100-percent-loyal Americans.

Each of these levels of self-definition and coalition is an important and valid strategic response to the realities of racism in U.S. society. Each tells us something about whiteness as it is currently understood and perceived.

There is nothing “essential” about any of these forms of identity. They are each historical responses to the politics of white society. That doesn’t mean these identities are not real. They are real, important, serious, and significant in the struggle to end racism. They will not go away when racism is eliminated, although they



might look very different at that time. As white people, we need to respect the ability of people of color to name themselves. We also need to support the forms their struggles against racism take and learn about the resistance of white racism to change.

We cannot forget that communities of color are trying to survive in a white-controlled society. They have to constantly redefine their strategies for survival and resistance. Many of their words are bought out, co-opted, and commercialized or lose their meaning over time. The slogan “Black is beautiful,” originally coined to strengthen pride and self-esteem in the African-American community, is now being used by advertisers to market shampoo, skin cream, alcohol, and clothes. We can learn much about ourselves and about tactics of resistance to cultural domination by listening to the language of resistance of people of color.

Resistance to white racism might appear to white people to recreate clearly delineated, separable groups and thus be racist itself. The terms “people of color,” “African American,” “Korean American,” “Latino/a”—all self-chosen labels in reaction to white racism—reflect real, but not necessarily stable or long-term, cultural or political groupings. They demarcate broad currents within certain groups that are part of their *resistance* to white domination and racism.

Individual responses to the fluctuating dynamics of resistance are varied. Particular people of color may herald new forms of resistance, hold on to traditional patterns, or emphasize or de-emphasize racial identity at different points in their lives. There is much debate within communities of color about tactics of resistance, including naming practices. And these communities themselves are large and complex, without the clearly defined boundaries that we white people want to ascribe to them.

Finally, to add one last complicating but crucial factor: race/ethnicity is only one of the factors in the makeup of our identities. At times other factors, such as geographical origin, gender, sexual orientation, parental or work role, may supersede ethnicity as a primary focus. It is important to respect the choices individual people of color make about when and how much to identify with their “racial” identity, and how to understand it, knowing that our society gives a distorted and overemphasized meaning to racial identity.



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