GENTRIFICATION
WHEN DID YOU BECOME GAY?
APPROPRIATION VS. APPRECIATION
WELFARE   WHITE PRIDE
WHAT ARE YOU?
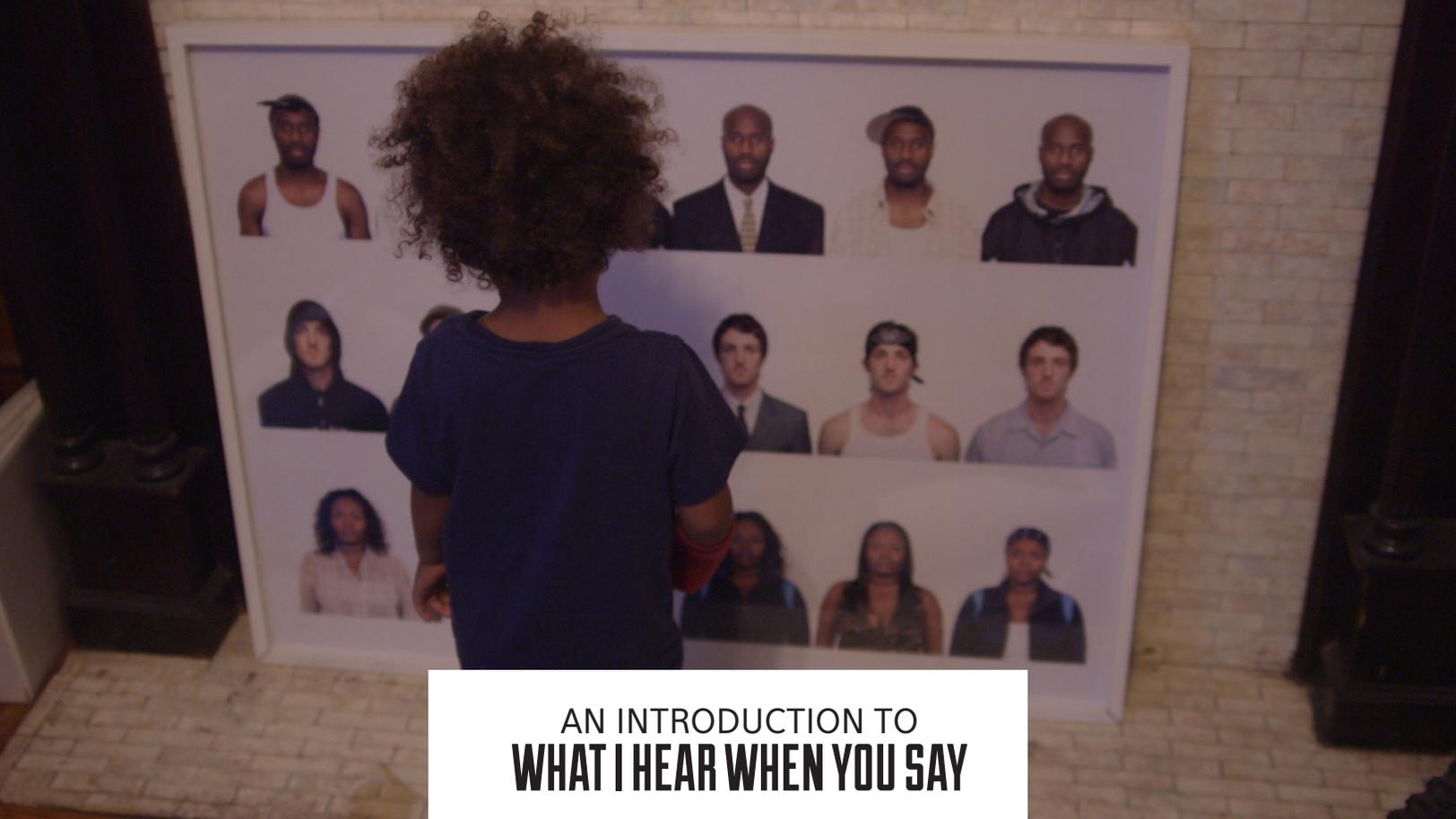MODEL MINORITY
RACE CARD
CODE WORDS
FEMINISM

WHAT I HEAR WHEN YOU SAY

VIEWING GUIDE

CODE WORDS

AN INTRODUCTION TO
WHAT I HEAR WHEN YOU SAY

Deeply ingrained in human nature is a tendency to organize, classify, and categorize our complex world. Often, this is a good thing. This ability helps us make sense of our environment and navigate unfamiliar landscapes while keeping us from being overwhelmed by the constant stream of new information and experiences.

When we apply this same impulse to social interactions, however, it can be, at best, reductive and, at worst, dangerous. Seeing each other through the lens of labels and stereotypes prevents us from making authentic connections and understanding each other's experiences.

Through the initiative, What I Hear When You Say (WIHWYS), we explore how words can both divide and unite us and learn more about the complex and everchanging ways that language shapes our expectations, opportunities, and social privilege. WIHWYS 's interactive multimedia resources challenge what we think we know about race, class, gender, and identity, and provide a dynamic digital space where we can raise difficult questions, discuss new ideas, and share fresh perspectives.

CODE WORDS

> " When you say the word thug… that's going to color people's perception of young black males.
>
> Hari Kondabolu, Comedian

Join comedian, Hari Kondabolu; professor & author, Pedro Noguera; and artist, Bayeté Ross Smith as they explore the current function and long history of American's use of "code words". Through storytelling, analysis, and humor, we explore the legacy of coded language and its impact on social and political discourse today.

▶ **Watch the full episode:** Code Words
http://pbs.org/what-i-hear/web-series/code-words/

A QUICK LOOK AT CODED LANGUAGE

- Dog Whistle Language uses code words for political purposes with the goal of covertly conveying an often controversial message to a target audience. The term refers to the high-frequency dog whistles that can be heard by dogs but not humans.[1]

- Gendered Code Words are terms and phrases that are used for individuals who are female/female-identifying than for individuals who are male. The use and prevalence of gendered code words in the workplace has been a focus of several recent studies, including an evaluation of 23 tech companies by linguist and tech

professional, Kieran Snyder in 2014, and hundreds of tech and professional-service performance reviews by Stanford University's Clayman Institute for Gender Research in 2015. Snyder's review found that negative language related to personality--such as "bossy", "abrasive", and "aggressive"--showed up in more than 75% of performance reviews of female employees and only twice in reviews for male employees. While Stanford's research has found that women received 2.5 times the amount of feedback about "aggressive communication styles" than men.[2][3]

- Law and Order first emerged as a coded phrase during the civil rights era and was used to stoke fear about civil unrest and discredit and signal opposition to protests and civil disobedience, especially those organized in urban communities by Black and Latinx activists.[4][5]

DIG DEEPER | DECODING "THUG"

" That's how awful racism is, a word with Indian origins is used to hurt Black people today.

Hari Kondabolu, Comedian

During a press conference in early 2014, Seattle Seahawks football player Richard Sherman was asked how he felt about regularly being referred to as a "thug" on social media. He responded, "The reason it bothers me is because it seems like it's an accepted way of calling somebody the N-word now. It's like everybody else said the N-word and then they say 'thug' and that's fine…So I'm really disappointed in being called a thug." [6]

John McWhorter, Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, shares a similar analysis of thug as a racialized code word.[7] In 2015, following the acquittal and release of the six Baltimore Police Department officers implicated in the death of Freddie Grey, small factions of the spontaneous public protest escalated into civil unrest. In the wake of the violence, President Barack Obama,

Governor Larry Hoga, Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, and others labeled the African-American youth who participated in the riots as "thugs". Mayor Rawlings-Blake later expressed her regret at using that word due to its racial implications.[8]

In an interview the following week, McWhorter explained, "the truth is that thug today is a nominally polite way of using the N-word. Many people suspect it, and they are correct. When somebody talks about thugs ruining a place, it is almost impossible today that they are referring to somebody with blond hair. It is a sly way of saying there go those black people ruining things again. And so anybody who wonders whether thug is becoming the new N-word doesn't need to. It most certainly is." [9]

THE HISTORY OF THUGS

Despite the contemporary, racial connotations of thug, resources like Merriam-Webster Dictionary formally define it as "a brutal ruffian or assassin". [10] This definition hints at the word's roots in India, where as far back as the 14th century, variations of the Hindi word "thug" or "thuggee" were recorded as meaning thief, swindler, or assassin. [11]

The "Thuggee Cult" or "Thugs"--gangs of professional assassins and highwaymen--were said to have operated throughout India for centuries. In the 19th century colonial British leaders reported that they rounded up 4,000 Thugs, convicted over 2,000, and in the process eradicated the Thuggee threat. Modern historians, however, have raised questions about the British version of events. They suggest that the existence and/or scope of the Thuggee Cult may actually have been an invention of the British colonizers and a convenient excuse for the violent suppression of local groups. [12]

Although the Thuggees were disbanded in India, their legend lived on in English-language literature and travel memoirs about South Asia, including Mark Twain's, Following the Equator: A Journey Around the World. The word, thug, soon migrated to the United States through these stories, retaining aspects of its criminal and dissident heritage.

At first, the word thug was adopted by both pro- and anti-union factions in the late 19th and early 20th century to smear each other as violent brutes and agitators. Later, in the 1930s, thug became a more generalized label for a career criminal or gangster. [13]

By the 1960s and 1970s, thug was being used as a slur against civil rights and anti-war protesters. Activists and community leaders were dismissed as "thugs" at the same time that code words like "law and order" were being used to to discredit social justice movements and acts of civil disobedience. [14]

In the 1980s, the film Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom revisited the Thuggee legend, portraying the Thugs as a sinister cult that abducted Indian children. The film's negative depictions of Indians through grotesque and exaggerated stereotypes was widely criticized by the South Asian community. [15]

By the early 1990s, the word thug had been adopted by emergent Hip Hop culture, particularly through artists like Tupac Shakur and Bone Thugs-n-Harmony, but its association with the African-American community was fraught from the start. In her book The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop and Why It Matters, Tricia Rose writes: "The thug both represents a product of discriminatory conditions and embodies behaviors that injure the very communities from which it comes." [16]

THUG IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Today, thug is a hyper-racialized word whose long history as an epithet for criminals, agitators, and gangsters reinforces its power to dehumanize the individuals and communities labeled with it. When organizers and activists are dismissed as "thugs", it undermines their civic power and the legitimacy of their grievance. As Megan Garber, reporter for The Atlantic, explained: "In some sense, the history of language is about people trying to wield power over other people," she says. "[Thug is] this very effective way of suggesting that the people who are doing the rioting and who are being called thugs don't actually have a right to their outrage." [17]

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Public discourse is riddled with code words like "thug" that often have histories that are deeply rooted in stereotypes related to race, culture, class, religion, and gender. The use of coded language allows a speaker to deny any responsibility for the bias content of their messages while reinforcing their relationship with like-minded audience members. When coded language is normalized in social interactions and political debates it can reinforce oppressive and often dangerous, social biases and in the process obscure the real issues.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

- Have you heard/seen the media use code words? Share an example. What are the implications for the community or person being labeled?
- How has "White" functioned as a code word throughout our history?
- Why do you think some people respond to "Black Lives Matter" by saying "All Lives Matter"? What are they conveying? What impact does that have on conversations about racial justice?
- In your experience, what motivates people to use coded language?
- How would you engage in a discussion about code words with your community?

▶ Hear different perspectives on the Topic of Code Words
http://whatihear.lunchbox.pbs.org/web-series/code-words/

LEARN MORE

WHO, ME? BIASED?

https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/pov-biased-lpclips/who-me-biased/#.WbgmqoWeyys

What is implicit bias? NYT/POV's Saleem Reshamwala unscrews the lid on the unfair effects of our subconscious.

DEMYSTIFYING THE LANGUAGE OF GENDER

http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/demystifying-the-language-of-gender/

A quick reference guide by PBS Independent Lens reference guide for language related to gender and identity

THE TALK

http://www.pbs.org/wnet/the-talk

A PBS documentary about the increasingly necessary conversation taking place in homes and communities across the country between parents of color and their children, especially sons, about how to behave if they are ever stopped by the police.

VOICES FROM THE EPISODE | CODE WORDS

Hari Kondabolu
Comedian

NYT has called him "one of the most exciting political comics in standup today"

Created standup album Waiting for 2042

NYU's APA Institute's "Artist in Residence" 2014-15

Standup on the Late Show with David Letterman, Conan, Jimmy Kimmel Live, Live at Gotham and John Oliver's New York Standup Show

Pedro Noguera
Professor & Author

Distinguished Professor of Education at the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA

Author of The Trouble With Black Boys: And Other Reflections on Race, Equity and the Future of Public Education

Commentor for CNN, MSNBC, NPR

Featured on CSPAN.org, This American Life

Has written for NYT,The Nation, Washington Post

Bayeté Ross Smith
Artist

Educator at NYU, Parson, and The New School

Exhibited with the San Francisco Arts Commision, the Brooklyn Museum,MoMA PS1

Showcased at Sundace Film Festival for Along The Way and Question Bridge

Visit **pbs.org/whatihear** for a detailed Viewing Guide on every topic.

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