

**GENTRIFICATION**

**WHEN DID YOU BECOME GAY?**

**APPROPRIATION VS. APPRECIATION**

**WELFARE**

**WHITE PRIDE**

**WHAT ARE YOU?**

**MODEL MINORITY**

**RACE CARD**

**CODE WORDS**

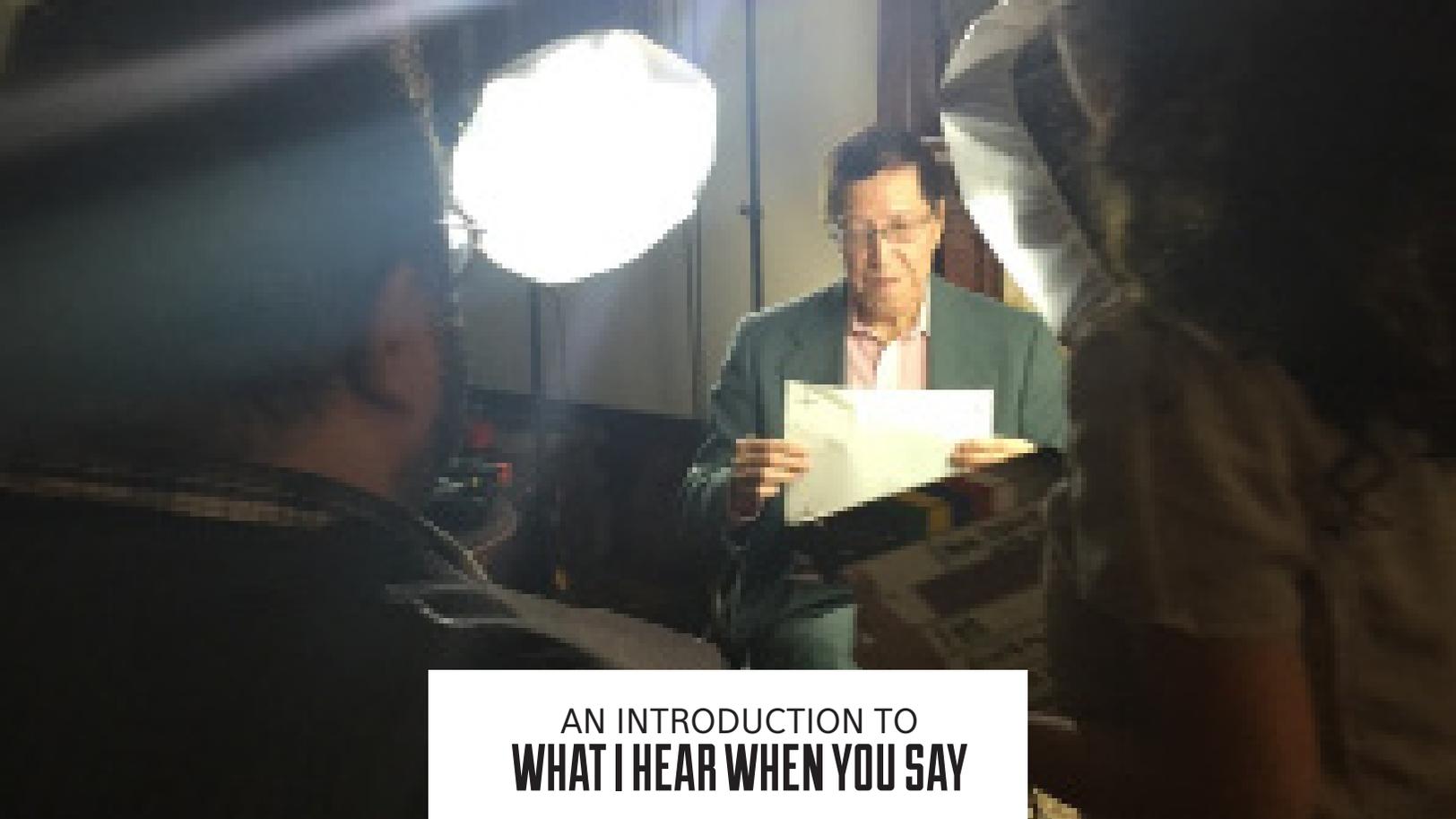
**FEMINISM**

**WHAT I HEAR  
WHEN YOU SAY**

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**VIEWING GUIDE**

**RACE CARD**



## 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.

# RACE CARD

“ When the subject looks directly into the camera it’s really personal... it’s hard to talk about or think about [racial microaggressions] especially when you have perpetuated it, so it’s really good to confront the audience.

Kiyun Kim, Visual Artist



def·i·ni·tion  
**RACE CARD**  
noun

the issue of a person’s race as it relates to a particular contest (such as a political campaign or a court trial)—often used in the phrase play the race card

What exactly does it mean to play a “race card?” Join Comedian and Writer, Hadiyah Robinson; Psychologist, Derald Wing Sue; and Visual Artist, Kiyun Kim as they explore the implications of the “race card”, the concept of microaggressions, and the many small ways that racism is passively enabled.



**View the full episode about the Race Card**

<http://pbs.org/what-i-hear/web-series/race-card/>

## A QUICK LOOK AT THE HISTORY OF THE “RACE CARD”

- The origins of the phrase “playing the race card” are unconfirmed, but it is believed to have its roots in the phrase “a sure card”, which dates back to the 16th century and means “a person who was sure to succeed”.<sup>1 2</sup>
- A popular theory about the origin of “the race card” is that it relates back to an 1863 cartoon called Abe Lincoln’s Last Card; Or, Rouge-et-Noir in the British magazine, Punch. The cartoon, derides President Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation and casts the

abolition of slavery as a reckless gamble. Lincoln is depicted as a devil forcefully throwing down the Ace of Spades with the “spade” on the card in the shape of a Black man’s head. <sup>3 4</sup>

- (View the original image published in Punch magazine: <http://punch.photoshelter.com/image/I0000PXBR3n7PreU>)
- According to Merriam-Webster, the first documented use of the phrase “play the race card” appeared in a 1974 article in the British newspaper, The Observer. <sup>5</sup>
- The phrase entered the common lexicon in the United States by the 1980s and became especially contentious during the criminal trial of O.J. Simpson in the mid-1990s when the prosecution and media accused Simpson’s lawyers of “using the race card” as part of their defense strategy. <sup>6</sup>
- During the 2008 and 2012 campaigns of President Barack Obama, the phrase “the race card” was widely used on all sides and became a regular topic of discussion and debate in the media. <sup>7</sup>
- The first recorded use of “the gender card” appeared in an article in The Boston Globe in August 1990 and was later joined by the phrase “the woman card”. The phrase was used regularly during Hillary Clinton’s 2008 and 2016 Presidential campaigns by her political opponents, her own campaigns, and the media. <sup>8</sup>

## **DIG DEEPER | WHY MICRO-AGGRESSIONS MATTER**

“Our research indicates that race based and gender based micro aggressions are very harmful.”

- Derald Wing Sue, Professor, Columbia

In 1947, the University of Virginia hosted a football game against Harvard University. That game, which took place in front of a crowd of 22,000 people, was historic, not because of the play on the field, but because it was the first time a team with a Black player competed in a college game below the Mason–Dixon line.<sup>9</sup>

Chester M. Pierce was the African-American starting tackle on the otherwise all-White Harvard team, and during the trip, he was subjected to a variety of racial abuses.<sup>10</sup> The University of Virginia and local political leaders tried to prevent him from attending the game, he was told he was prohibited from entering through the front door of the UV dining room, he was barred from staying at the all-White hotel with his teammates, and he was subjected to crowds of protestors before and during the game waving Confederate flags and shouting racial slurs.<sup>11</sup> Despite this, he was applauded at the end of the game by many in the crowd for his skill and performance.

Dr. Chester M. Pierce went on to earn his A.B. degree from Harvard College and his M.D. degree from Harvard Medical School, after which he trained as a psychiatrist. Pierce returned to Harvard as professor of Education and Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, and among other distinctions, became the first African-American full professor at the Massachusetts General Hospital.<sup>12</sup>

In 1970, Dr. Pierce coined the term “microaggression” to describe the regular insults and dismissals he witnessed non-Black Americans inflict on African-Americans. He also theorized that these experiences could impact psychological and physical health over time.<sup>13</sup>

## **WHAT ARE MICROAGGRESSIONS?**

Dr. Derald Wing Sue at Columbia University is following Dr. Pierce’s line of study in his analysis of racial microaggressions. Sue describes microaggressions as:

“[...] the brief and everyday slights, insults, indignities, and denigrating messages sent to people of color by well-intentioned White people who are unaware of the hidden messages being communicated.”<sup>14</sup>

Sue proposes a classification of three types of racial microaggressions:

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*Microassaults:* Conscious and intentional actions or slurs, such as using racial epithets, such as displaying swastikas or deliberately serving a White person before a person of color in a restaurant.

*Microinsults:* Verbal and nonverbal communications that subtly convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity, such as a person of color being asked how he was able to get accepted into college.

*Microinvalidations:* Communications that subtly exclude, negate, or nullify the thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color. For example, a White American asking a Latinx American, "Where were you born?"

Because microinsults and micro-invalidiations are less obvious, Sue explains that they put people of color in a psychological bind:

"The person of color is caught in a Catch-22: If she confronts the perpetrator, the perpetrator will deny it. While the person may feel insulted, she is not sure exactly why, and the perpetrator doesn't acknowledge that anything has happened, because he is not aware he has been offensive.... that leaves the person of color to question what actually happened. The result is confusion, anger and an overall sapping of energy." 16

## **MICROAGGRESSIONS BEYOND RACE**

Research into microaggressions has expanded to include how a variety of marginalized groups experience multiple, subtle insults based on entrenched and hidden biases. Researchers are also examining if and how these everyday interactions can lead to higher levels of anxiety and anger or contribute to depression and other mental illnesses. 17

### **Sexual or Gender Microaggression:**

Subtle, negative interactions that suggest that a person's sexual

or gender identity is insignificant, less valued, or not deserving of respect.<sup>18 19 20</sup>

For example:

- “Mansplaining”: assuming a woman or non-male presenting person requires a man’s help understanding something that they already know
- Mis-assigning a gendered pronoun to a person based on an assumption or stereotypes about gender identity

### **Ableist Microaggressions:**

Demeaning or dismissive interactions and attitudes based on stereotypes and assumptions about the competency and needs of people with disabilities.<sup>21 22</sup>

For example:

- Using a disability as a euphemism or insult, “You’re so OCD about your record collection!”
- Assuming a that a person’s disability means they are incapable in all areas of their life

### **Classist Microaggressions:**

Subtle and persistent forms of bias on assumptions about wealth, poverty, and social class.<sup>23 24 25</sup>

For example:

- Describing people or objects as “trashy” and “ghetto”
- Correcting a person’s regional or cultural pronunciations because they are perceived as “lower class” or “incorrect”

## **IT’S NOT A BIG DEAL: THE DEBATE ABOUT MICROAGGRESSIONS**

Critics of microaggressions argue that it is generally founded in oversensitivity to or misunderstanding of a speaker’s motives, and like trigger warnings, is another way that overreaching “political correctness” is infringing on free speech.

Sociologist Amitai Etzioni argues in a 2014 article in *The Atlantic*, “Don’t

Sweat the Microaggressions”:

“We may wish for a world in which people say only kind things about each other, but until we get there, we should not take umbrage at every negative note or adjective that is employed.” He goes on to say, “...when you cannot tell if you are aggressive before the other person responds, and anybody can declare he or she has been abused by anything we say, communion between members of different groups becomes even more difficult.”<sup>26</sup>

What Dr. Derald Wing Sue and others counter is that microaggressions are not merely subtle, uncomfortable insults--we all experience those--but that these subtle, uncomfortable insults are tied directly to pervasive, institutionalized biases against people in marginalized communities, and that they occur regularly and accumulate over time in a way that does measurable harm.

In response to criticism of microaggressions that imply, “It’s not a big deal”, The Microaggression Project responds:

“[...] it’ is a big deal. ‘It’ is in the everyday. [...] ‘it’ can silence people. ‘it’ reminds us of the ways in which we and people like us continue to be excluded and oppressed. ‘it’ matters because these relate to a bigger ‘it’: a society where social difference has systematic consequences for the ‘others.’”<sup>27</sup>

## QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

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- When you hear the phrase “playing the race card”, what does that mean to you? When have you encountered that phrase and how did the people involved respond?
- How would you describe a “micro-aggression” to someone who is unfamiliar with the term?
- When people discuss microaggressions, a common response is that they are “innocent acts” and that the person who experiences them should “let it go” and “not make a big deal out of it.” How do you feel about microaggressions?
- Have you ever used phrases like “I cried like a girl”, “You’re so OCD”, or “That is so ghetto..”? What were you trying to express? How common are expressions like this among your friends and family? How could normalizing these comments be harmful?
- What strategies can we use to constructively call attention to micro-aggressions? What are some ways that we can take responsibility for our own biased language?



Hear different perspectives on the Topic of the Race Card

<http://pbs.org/what-i-hear/topics/race-card/>

## LEARN MORE

### THE RACE CARD PROJECT

[www.theracecardproject.com](http://www.theracecardproject.com)

Michele Norris started The Race Card Project in 2010 to help foster a candid dialogue about race. Since then, the project has received tens of thousands of stories from around the world.

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### AMERICA AFTER FERGUSON

<http://www.pbs.org/specials/town-hall/america-after-ferguson/home/>

Through conversations and special reports, AMERICA AFTER FERGUSON explores the complex questions raised by the events in Ferguson.

## VOICES FROM THE EPISODE | RACE CARD



**Hadiyah Robinson**  
Comedian & Writer

Has appeared on Nightly Show, Gotham Comedy Live, Comic View, One Mic Stand and Celebrities Undercover  
Featured in NYT, O Magazine, Black Enterprise, Time Out NY and Brooklyn Magazine  
Involved with the New York Comedy Festival, Brooklyn Comedy Festival, Hoboken Comedy Festival, SoCal Comedy Festival and American Black Film Festival Comedy Contest



**Derald Wing Sue**  
Psychologist

Professor of Psychology and Education at Columbia University  
Published microaggressions scholar, including such works as Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation  
Co-founder of AAPA (Asian American Psychological Association)  
Served on Clinton's Advisory Board on Race



**Kiyun Kim**  
Visual Artist

Creator of photo project Racial Microaggressions  
Featured in Daily Mail, Huffington Post, BuzzFeed

Visit [pbs.org/whatihear](https://www.pbs.org/whatihear) for a detailed Viewing Guide on every topic.

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