

Readers Respond: Which Racial Terms Make You Cringe?

By The New York Times

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This is a version of the weekly Race/Related newsletter. To get it in your inbox, sign up here.

Last week we shared some of our cringeworthy racial terms, like “ethnic,” “exotic” and “urban.” We’re turning this edition over to you.

Please forward this to friends to keep this important conversation going. We’ll continue exploring some of these terms in the months ahead.

This sample of responses — lightly edited for space — was culled from the hundreds we received by email and on social media.

Here’s what you find cringeworthy:

The use of the word **“race”** as a noun or adjective. The human genome has been sequenced and it has been established as the scientific consensus that “race” as a biological category, a genetic typology or a scientific reality does not exist.

— *Woullard Lett*

I was damn tired of filling out **“other”** on tests and forms. It reminded me that I didn’t matter enough in the grand scheme. — *Makoto R.*

“Nationality,” which is used in ignorance far too often. Like this lovely encounter I had: “What nationality are you?” [Blank stare.] “American.” — *Michelle Steinhebel*

The phrase that absolutely drives me crazy is **“racial tolerance.”** We don’t wish to be tolerated like petulant children. Our goal has always been racial equality. — *Chuck Rowland*

“Ethnic cleansing.” It implies that the victim of genocide is inherently “dirty.” Why is it O.K. to linguistically side with the perpetrator? — *Lea Bult*

The new term **“Latinx.”** I don’t think the term Latino or Latina needs to be revised. I also cringe when **“Latino”** is labeled as a race. There are many races within the Latin ethnic designation. — *Carmen Erasmus*

“Spicy, exotic.” I’m not a food and I am Westernized. Just because I have hips and dark hair doesn’t give you that permission. — *Diana Saez*

“Caucasian.” I don’t get it. The Caucasus is a mountain range in Europe! — *Carol Urovsky*

I am white and my wife is Ethiopian and Indian. Well-meaning educated people still sometimes refer to our children as **“mulatto.”** Can’t stand that word. I view it as dated as “negro” or “colored.” — *David Nozick*

“Unconscious bias.” I feel that the term allows some to continue with their discriminatory behavior and micro aggressions without being held accountable for them. — *Carmen Martínez Novo*

Rumsey Taylor/The New York Times

As an African-American, the word that makes me cringe is the one that is probably used most frequently: “**minority.**” I never use it because its root is minor, which means unimportant, insignificant, inconsequential, and inferior. As a person of color I am not in the global minority, but in the vast majority. — *Barbara Smith*

The term I dislike more than any mentioned is “**Native,**” as in Native American. I spent some of my youth in Southern Africa and there, the term “native,” had a distinctly insulting tone. The “natives,” could have been a substitute word for the “barbarians.” There’s no doubt native has a place in a description of migration and settlement, driving people from their homes, etc., but for me the word borders on the word “primitive.” It sounds too colonial to me. And there is also nothing insulting about being called an Indian. It was never derogatory, just a mistake made by the idiot Columbus. — *Thomas Cook*

The one word that gets me every time is “**ghetto.**” Whenever someone I’m talking with says it, I ask them what they mean by that word. The fact that the conversation usually becomes awkward let’s me know that they may be using it to convey something about people of color, especially when it refers to neighborhood or dress. A lot of times, it means something nasty and/or undesirable. When this word is brought up by someone identified as white, it also becomes a racial thing for me. I’m an older black woman. I want the word to go away. — *Theresa Todd*

I think using “**them**” and “**those people**” to identify someone of African heritage can be insulting. I cringe every time Trump refers to African-Americans that way. — *Felicia Furman*

“**Model minority,**” usually referring to Asian-Americans with the purpose of bludgeoning other minorities with: “Why can’t you be like the Asians?” — *Jack Lumanog*

Personally I hate the words “**reverse discrimination.**” What is that supposed to mean: that discrimination against black and Hispanic people is normal, but discrimination against white people is abnormal? Just say “discrimination.” — *Anne Benolken*

“**Not really black.**” Imagine my reaction when I, someone of a darker complected tone is called not really black because of my experiences and activities. While seeming to be a backhanded compliment by whites, it’s really confirming that they believe stereotypes they hear and see. But what’s worse is hearing it from my black brethren. What does it mean when I’m not really black around black people? It means, unfortunately, they too believe and behave in stereotypes created for them. And that’s what the pervasive culture does to all those outside of them. — *Jenny Joseph*

“Well-spoken.” It’s code for “sounds white.” — *Lee Manus-McNutt*

In a casual conversation with an African-American client (I am white), we were discussing a fraught situation where she had several bosses and clients of her own each with conflicting and powerful directives to her. In an attempt to acknowledge her difficult plight I offered that she had become adept at **“serving many masters.”** As soon as the words were out of my mouth I regretted them. She ignored the blunder at least as far as I could tell. It made me really think about the “benign” comments we think nothing of saying without realizing their historical racist context. I’m trying to be much more intentional about such things. — *Julie Stolzer*

Umi Syam/The New York Times

“Oriental/Orient.” It is a very colonial word and it screams white supremacy. **“Yellow.”** Unless we have kidney disease, nobody is yellow. Just say Asia or Asian. — *Karen Chui*

The one I have recently begun to hate is **“African-American.”** I think it perpetuates the myth that all blacks come from Africa and so there are some who think they should go back to Africa. So I’ve begun to use the term “black” again. Calling someone black “African American” is like calling me an “Israeli-American” just because I’m Jewish. I was not born in Israel; I was born here in the U.S. I am no more Israeli than your average black person is African. — *Emily Brown*

One possible term to use in relation to persons of African heritage is one used in Brazil: **“Afro-descendant.”** It highlights a person’s family history and avoids the negative of the color black. The term has come into use in Brazil as their large population of persons of African descent have become politically mobilized. It is less demeaning than other terms such as mulatto or “persons of color.” — *Dale Krane*

I think “immigrant” is much more suitable than **“refugee.”** I work in southern Turkey among many Syrians. Although the term is politically correct, no refugee will ever use the word as a means of self-identification. It is offensive for them. It could be denial, but they would rather be deemed migrants or immigrants seeking opportunity than a perceived burden on society. For them, “refugee” carries with it the trauma of what leaving their home was like, and the state of which they left it. In Arabic, it translates broadly to “fugitive” or “runaway.” That is cringeworthy for the most part for someone looking to live their life in peace, far away from conflict. — *Diana Rayes*

“Foreigner.” To me, this term immediately creates a division with those who are accepted and not accepted; us vs. them. It would be wonderful to omit this term from describing people, as people are not harmful viruses or unrecognizable objects. — *Anna Lee-Fields*

“Inner city.” It suggests that anyone from the center of a city must be too poor to get to the suburban fringes, and by default is black or Hispanic. Many inner cities are as diverse as anyplace but the suburbs, yet the label persists as an arch way to say someone is black. — *Steve Wolgast*

Aaron Krolik/The New York Times

I'd add the adjective **“articulate,”** as in, “she’s very articulate!” I think this word is often code for “educated black person who talks like a white person.” — *Caroline Trost*

One thing I’ve always wondered about is why, when Americans choose to live in other countries, they call themselves **“expatriates,”** whereas they call people who move to the U.S. from other countries immigrants. — *Judith Gille*

When our daughter was in fourth grade she came home perplexed. Some other girls had asked her if she was **“mixed.”** She said it made her think of cake batter. We talked about it, and she was working out ways to handle the inquiry. She came home the next day saying she told them she was “stirred.” However, as she grew and changed, she often remarked that asking a person if they are mixed is not O.K. When she started filling out her own forms, she chose to write on race questions that she was tri-racial and not check bi-racial, so all her mixes were included: white, black, Cherokee. — *Martha Thompson*

“Jew.” I do not like the complex total of an individual shrunk down to that one little three-letter word that is so often used in a pejorative way. I prefer the adjective “Jewish” which often calls for at least one additional characteristic about the person being described - a Jewish American, a Jewish actress, a Jewish philosopher etc. Or simply saying “S/he is Jewish” sounds better to me than “S/he is a Jew.” — *Deborah Burstyn*

I dislike the term, **“white trash.”** First, no person is trash. Also, if “white trash” is a thing, it suggests that trashiness is not unexpected among people whose skin is of other colors. — *Phil Kalina*

Though this may seem like a really odd twist to the subject, I fume when I am blankety branded **“white.”** I am a brown-skinned Italian-American who was definitely not treated as white when I was growing up by the old white establishment. I was looked down upon discriminated against and denied opportunity. There is a vast difference between my experiences and those descended from different European ancestry. I really resent being put by default into some catch-all category which does not capture whom I am. — *Gino Gambale*

I would like to point out that **“ethnic”** is just as offensive in the supermarket, where matzoh, taco shells, and soy sauce are sold in the “ethnic” aisle. — *Daniel Lowen*

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A look at historically black colleges and universities as Howard turns 150.

Why inequality is an urgent business problem.

What it’s like being black in Germany.

In The Times

The Times publishes many stories that touch on race. Here are a few you shouldn’t miss, chosen by Race/Related editors.

Girls Go Missing, and Washington’s Racial Divide Yawns Wider

Nebraska May Stanch One Town’s Flow of Beer to Its Vulnerable Neighbors

Lacking E.M.T.s, an Aging Maine Turns to Immigrants

Bill Minor, Journalist Who Was Called Conscience of Mississippi, Dies at 94

Roger Wilkins, Champion of Civil Rights, Dies at 85

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