

“HIPSTER RACISM”

Is Lena Dunham's 'hipster racism' just old-fashioned prejudice?

By Arwa Mahdawi / November 25, 2017

SOURCE: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/25/hipster-racism-lena-dunham-prejudice>

Last week, the *Girls* co-creator was accused by a former colleague of 'hipster racism'. Arwa Mahdawi reports on an unwitting racism deeply embedded in popular culture

It is, by now, a familiar cycle. First [Lena Dunham](#), the writer-actor-director best known for creating and starring in HBO's *Girls*, does or says something incredibly tone-deaf and offensive. Outrage ensues and people explain to Dunham why her actions were offensive. She apologizes.

But she doesn't seem to listen, because a few months pass and Dunham does something else offensive. And then the cycle repeats itself.

The latest Dunham drama began last week when the actor Aurora Perrineau accused Murray Miller, a writer on *Girls*, of raping her when she was 17. Dunham has built her brand on being an outspoken feminist, and has publicly said you should always believe women; that women don't lie about rape. But to some, it seems what she meant was that *white* women don't lie about rape.

Because Dunham's first reaction to Perrineau's allegations was to get together with her *Girls* co-creator Jenni Konner and publicly accuse Perrineau, who is mixed race, of lying.

Lena Dunham apologizes for defending "Girls" writer accused of sexual assault. [Read more](#)

This was particularly galling to many, since the recent #MeToo movement that has risen in response to a flood of sexual misconduct accusations against powerful men has focused on wealthy white women and largely ignored victims of colour.

Dunham's defence of Miller (for which she has now apologized) caused an immediate backlash and sparked calls for women of colour to "divest" from Dunham. [In a statement](#) which went viral, the writer Zinzi Clemmons talked about how, as a student at Brown University, she'd known a lot of people who'd moved in the same circles as friends of Dunham. Wealthy, well-educated liberals, with parents who were influential in the art world.

"Back in college, I avoided these people like the plague because of their well-known racism," Clemmons wrote. "I'd call their strain 'hipster racism'."

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You may have heard the term before. It's been around for over a decade and seems to have been [popularized by an article](#) by [Carmen Van Kerckhove](#) in *Racialicious*. The article noted that hipster racism is "a trend we noticed back in 2005, at the height of the Kill Whitey parties". In case they mercifully passed you by, they were [ironic dance parties](#)

in Williamsburg, a then rapidly gentrifying part of Brooklyn, at which white hipsters parodied black hip-hop culture in order to “kill the whiteness inside”.

The Kill Whitey parties are no longer a thing. The same can not be said of hipster racism – it is deeply embedded in popular culture.

‘You think you have a right to everything’

But what is this hipsterised racism, and how would we recognise it? Rachel Dubrofsky, a communications expert at the University of South Florida, told the Guardian that hipster racism is the “domain of white, often progressive people who think they are hip to racism, which they mistakenly believe gives them permission to say and do racist things without actually being racist”.

Another key tenet of hipster racism, Dubrofsky notes, is that it is veiled in irony. “I think hipster racism emerged as we saw an increase in ironic, self-reflexive humor in popular forms of media.”

Examples of hipster racism are everywhere: as Dubrofsky notes, “the sheer ubiquity of [it] is remarkable.” And because hipster racism is often characterized by “humour” it tends to be pervasive in comedy.

“Some of the most popular white women comedians are terrible hipster racists,” Dubrofsky says. In August, for example, [Tina Fey appeared on Saturday Night Live](#) to talk about white nationalists marching on Charlottesville – which she did while making a joke about Thomas Jefferson raping his 14-year-old slave, Sally Hemings, calling her “that hot, light-skinned girl over by the butter churn”. Amy Schumer is known for [making jokes like](#): “I used to date Hispanic guys, but now I prefer consensual.” Sarah Silverman has [worn blackface](#) on a number of occasions; she has since said publicly she deeply regrets it.

Hipster racism doesn’t just present itself in off-colour humour; you can see it in the way certain on-trend types fetishize other races. A mixed-race employee at Vice Media told me, for example, about a white executive in her office who routinely uses people of colour as props to make him seem “cool”. He often tries to banter with her about hip-hop, for example, assuming that she is obviously into hip-hop because she is half-black.

“There was one time,” she recalls, “when he wanted to have a business dinner for cool creative people and the invite list was all brown people. It made us feel like pets.”

Hipster racism is thinking that you can use someone else’s culture as a prop.

Another pervasive example of hipster racism is the staggering number of white people who don’t seem to understand that there is no ironic way to say the N-word if you are not black. Earlier this month, the [author Ta-Nehisi Coates](#) was asked at a panel about whether it was OK for white hip-hop fans to rap along when they hear black rappers use the N-word in songs. As he eloquently explained: no, it’s not.

“When you’re white in this country you’re taught that everything belongs to you,” he said. “You think you have a right to everything.”

Hipster racism is thinking that you have a right to the N-word, that if you – a liberal with black friends! – use it, somehow it isn’t offensive.

“Some of the most popular white women comedians are terrible hipster racists”

*Professor Rachel Dubrofsky,
University of South Florida*

‘Racism is not only the domain of the ignorant’

Hipster racism is a racism that is in denial about its racism. However, that is also true of racism in general. As [Ibram X Kendi](#), a professor at American University in Washington DC, told the Guardian: “The expression of racism is to fundamentally deny its expression.”

Kendi, the author of *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, says that “in studying the history of racist ideas, I found that every group or articulator of racist ideas denied that their ideas are racist.”

Hipster racists protest: but it’s not racism, it’s a joke! Meanwhile, non-hipster racists find justifications for their beliefs in science or scripture or sociology.

If hipster racism is basically just racism, why bother with the “hipster” bit? Why qualify it? As Dubrofsky explains, the phrase is “important because it forces us to look at the many different ways racism functions. It also pushes us to look beyond the question of intent.”

She says: “Hipster racism helps us understand that even though someone might not have intended to be racist, they were. Hipster racism also makes apparent that racism is not a result of a lack of formal education. Racism is not only the domain of the supposedly ignorant.”

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*Professor Ibram X Kendi,
American University*

Hipster racism may be a 21st-century term, but progressives inadvertently perpetuating racism while supposedly challenging it has been happening for centuries. In his book, Kendi chronicles the history of “assimilationist ideas – these are ideas that consider themselves to be well-meaning – they reject a biological hierarchy but believe in a cultural or behavioral hierarchy.” Abolitionists, for example, thought slavery was wrong but also believed it had turned black people into brutes and therefore advocated the civilizing of black people.

In the 20th century, the 1965 Moynihan report famously pathologized black families, arguing that the problems many African Americans were facing were down to the instability of their family structures. This idea persists, that broken black families are to blame for racial inequality in America. You can see it, for example, in a [2015 New York Times op-ed](#) about the Baltimore riots in which David Brooks wrote: “The real barriers to mobility are matters of social psychology, the quality of relationships in a home and a neighborhood.”

With white supremacists marching on the streets, one might be tempted to dismiss hipster racism as not as serious as racism-racism. Hipster racists are not Richard Spencer. But increasingly light is being shed on a type of unwitting racism that, at best, trivializes people’s experience. And that is no laughing matter.