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Race, Ethnicity, and Popular Culture

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Shut Up and Dribble

In February of 2018, Fox News host Laura Ingraham told Lebron James to, “Shut up and dribble” after his criticism of Donald Trump. Since a lot of black role models tend to be prominent through their showings in sports, music, or other forms of entertainment, comments like the ones from Ingraham promote the idea of a binary between entertainment and education, not allowing someone to be truly appreciated for their ability in both. One will always take precedent rather than celebrating the person as an educated athlete. Ingraham said she was not interested in the political advice from “someone who gets paid $100 million a year to bounce a ball” (Sullivan). Ingraham responded to Lebron’s comments, calling them "barely intelligible,” “Ignorant,” and "ungrammatical" on her Fox News program The Ingraham Angle (Sullivan). However, after these events transpired, she went on to defend Drew Brees who took an equally politically charged stance regarding the NFL National Anthem protests. Statements like the ones Ingraham made inevitably serve to silence the voices of black people in America and furthers the systems of oppression that typically keep minorities out of politics, while simultaneously uplifting the perception of white people by dignifying the opinions of white athletes, and vilifying those of Black athletes. Barbara Field’s theories on her ideology of race and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s theories of colorblindness all serve to support this idea, but the most advantageous frame of reference for analyzing Ingraham’s comments is Robin DiAngelo’s theory of White Fragility. White fragility serves to depict the ways in which Ingraham uses racial stereotypes as a basis for her criticism and how her response falls within the bounds of a color blind and fragile approach.

Ingraham’s comments were in reply to heartfelt comments by LeBron James regarding the current political climate for athletes and the state of the country under President Trump in 2018. His comments were the response to questions by Cari Champion in which she asks, “How do you describe the climate for an athlete with a platform nowadays that wants to talk about what is happening in our world? (Kevin Durant)” He responds with criticisms of President Trump and speaks up about what he himself believes in. Nowhere in the interview did he mention Laura Ingraham or Fox News, yet she felt inclined to voice her opinion regardless. The political climate at the time involved protests over police brutality and egregious acts committed against people of color in the United States. Separately, Drew Brees, former starting quarterback for the New Orleans Saints, chimed in on the political movements going on in the country, specifically the kneeling during the National Anthem that was taking place across the country which were to show displeasure with the ways African Americans and other people of color are being treated. “"I will never agree with anybody disrespecting the flag of the United States of America or our country," he said. "…when I look at the flag of the United States, I envision my two grandfathers, who fought for this country during World War II, both risking their lives to protect our country and to try to make our country and this world a better place (Sullivan). Ingraham came to his defense and provided hypocritical discourse, showing support for Drew Brees over a political stance, unlike her degradation of LeBron and Kevin Durant. She says to Lebron, “Shut up and dribble,” while saying, “He’s allowed to have an opinion” in regard to Brees.

 While Laura Ingraham does not say anything that is explicitly racist, she uses a lot of racially charged language and a demeaning tone. In doing so, she can simultaneously deny her own racist views, while reaffirming athletes’ positions as below her. She juxtaposes herself in this way to establish her own legitimacy and discredit the people whose voices can be used to reach millions. Robin DiAngelo would label Ingraham’s words as a type of new racism, more specifically a type of Aversive Racism supported by Color-Blind ideology. New Racism refers to the ways in which racism has adapted over time so that modern norms, policies, and practices result in similar racial outcomes as those in the past, while not appearing to be explicitly racist (Barker). Contrary to the days of explicit racism, such as in the Jim Crow era, new forms take on an aversive nature. This type of racism is one typically used by well-intentioned people who view themselves as educated and more progressive (DiAngelo). This is portrayed through what Ingraham is doing. She posits herself as an educated commentator and assumes LeBron as uneducated and uninformed through baseless claims. She calls his politics “R-Rated” presuming that the stuff he says should not be heard by children, which is the primary group that LeBron is trying to create change for, which can be seen in his efforts through the I Promise School.

As DiAngelo says, “White people will perceive danger simply by the presence of black people” which is what she is alluding to by reclassifying his tranquil comments. Whether she was well-intentioned or not, Ingraham can get away with what she said because of these adaptions over time, with her language alluding to much deeper disdain for members of non-white races, while maintaining a positive image as a media personality. Toni Morrison uses the term race talk to capture “The explicit insertion into everyday life of racial signs and symbols that have no meaning other than positioning African Americans into the lowest level of the racial hierarchy (Morrison).” If Ingraham genuinely did not care about Lebron’s opinions and thought they did not matter, then she would not have spent any time on her segment addressing them and giving him a platform. Her ulterior motive was to position him as lower than the people who regularly speak on Fox News and to discredit his platform.

The contradiction of her views is depicted well in Ingraham’s defense of Drew Brees over his opinion on national anthem protests. As previously mentioned, his comments ignore the harsh reality of the people who do not live in the better place that something as horrific as war is trying to create, yet they come at a time of extreme political polarization and civil unrest. In places like Chicago, Detroit, New York, and other major cities, black youth are being born into warzones, having to fight every day for their survival. Americans are blind to these battlefields as most live in comfort, unaffected by the ailments of extreme poverty, such as people like Brees and Ingraham who make millions every year and are detached from the intersections of social class and race. Brees faced immense backlash from a plethora of people, including his own teammates. Ingraham says, “We are all children of God, regardless of our racial or political differences, and therefore must be treated equally… every American has the God-given right to speak his or her own mind on any issue” and “in order to heal and shed light on gross injustices, our country needs more dialogue, not less… And we need more respect, not retribution.” (Morse). She has layered color-blind ideology into her everyday vernacular and has a clear disregard for oppressed peoples, which becomes apparent when she says we all deserve equality but does not afford LeBron that same sentiment.

She did not tell Drew Brees to shut up and throw a ball, rather, she came to his defense and reinforced the statement he made. Her words mimic the color-blind ideology that so many theorists claim is problematic. As EBS states in his work, “These may be a proto-typical example of the way new racism operates as microaggressions can be crimes of… commission, as when one implies that a minority is unqualified… the content of these messages is devoid of overt racial appeals, allowing the perpetrator to maintain that they are neutral” (Bonilla-Silva). Ingraham is maintaining her neutrality by generalizing experiences to make them a part of a “global human experience” while also giving more power to her previous, racially charged statements about Lebron and Kevin Durant. By concomitantly asserting that everyone deserves the ability to speak, but also saying Lebron does not have that right, she is naturalizing the notion that black people are less than others from a humanity stance, and also making it hard for people of color to argue against her first assertion of shut up and dribble. This can be seen in Lebron’s response to Ingraham’s hypocritical comments in which he tweets, “If you still haven’t figured out why the protesting is going on. Why we’re acting as we are is because we are simply F-N tired of this treatment right here! Can we break it down for you any simpler than this right here???? And to my people don’t worry I won’t stop until I see.” Luckily Lebron has the platform to be able to push back, unlike the millions of POC who have to bottle up their anger over statements like these and push forward through their everyday lives.

Ingraham’s position is furthered through the ideas of white tears and her status as an upper class, white woman. While she did not cry on screen, she had defended both of her statements by saying, “There was no racial intent in my remarks; false, defamatory charges of racism are a transparent attempt to immunize entertainment and sports elites from scrutiny and criticism.” Her statements hold the same weight as the tears, with her muse being her past self, whose statements in reply to Lebron can be seen as tears in of themselves, a display of the fragility that comes along being called out for her abhorrent remarks. DiAngelo says, “Whether intended or not, when a white woman cries over some aspect of racism, all the attention immediately goes to her, demanding time, energy, and attention from everyone in the room when they should be focused on ameliorating racism.” This can be seen in the response to Ingraham’s comments, on both sides of the racial spectrum. White people rushed to her defense, while black athletes had to speak up in opposition to her comments. Even Lebron himself acknowledged that her reply, “lets me know that everything I’ve been saying is correct, for her to have that type of reaction.” (Bieler).

So, while the “tears” may have varying effects depending on the viewer, the power to influence and control the conversation cannot be ignored. The black athletes had to ignore the actual problems at hand in order to speak out against her comments, which is what Lebron was trying to use his platform for in the first place. White tears serve as a way to distract and detract from the hardships that plague minorities in everyday life. White men are the ones who are the most susceptible to acting on the white tears of white women, and they also have the power to implement structural changes based on their reactions. This is part of the reason NFL players like Colin Kaepernick are blackballed from the industry because of their political stances, or that players receive sanctions for their opinions about topics that are not related to sports. All of this to say, white women hold a unique position as the most privileged, oppressed group, and they can mobilize their opinions through the emotional pressure they place on white men through their reactions to outside stimuli. They enforce the patriarchy by having white men come to their defense, while also reinforcing racist ideals through their position in race relations.

The stereotypes that are being used by Ingraham are not new. They are historically present and sociologically contingent, rooted in the systems that govern the US, and the world at large. Some people may say Ingraham was acting irrationally, however, she is acting in accordance with the worldview that has supported her throughout her life. For her, it is rational to believe that what she is saying is true, however, with an acceptance of multitudes of perspective, one can see how she may be blind to the harm of her words. Since white people inhabit most of the positions of power in the United States, and even the dominant cultures of the world’s most powerful media economies, they maintain a unique position to be able to shape worldviews, change them, and destroy or suppress them. Traditional stereotypes are no longer explicitly said through racial terms, but rather they are shown through depictions of characters, or descriptions of real-life people, on the screen. This leads people to believe things like athletes are unintelligent and that minorities are lazy. These representations assist in naturalizing racial stereotypes as facts and as traits of the people impacted, rather than the social constructions they truly are. While dialogue changes over time, products pushed into the media environment remain static, even if opinions on them change.

Barbara Fields offers helpful commentary on the creation and sustainability of the racial stereotypes that Ingraham is enacting. She is using her position of status to fortify the one-sided nature of racism, and her position as a white woman to draw on the emotions of her viewers. Fields says, “The targets of racism do not “make” racism, nor are they free to “negotiate” it, though they may challenge it or its perpetrators and try to navigate the obstacles it places in their way (Fields).” This highlights the one-way street that Lebron is trying to navigate. Even as a billionaire who has achieved the highest awards in his respective field, he still has to deal with racism and the harm it causes. His wealth and status cannot separate him from the hundreds of years of racism that has preceded him. There is nothing he can do to escape the nature of the world that he inhabits as a person of color. He, like any other African American can become the subject of racist attacks and oppression. Similarly, to Walter Benn Michaels mentions of Oprah, Lebron can still be denied help or services regardless of any wealth or prestige he has accumulated. “An ideology must be constantly created and verified in social life; if it is not, it dies, even though it may seem to be safely embodied in a form that can be handed down.” Ingraham is taking advantage of this cycle and perpetuating stereotypes that serve to make her life better and allows her privileges that she would not have otherwise. The use of aversive language makes it appear as if she is not pushing an agenda with an ulterior motive, however that is disproven through simple logic and analyzing the way she handles both Brees and Lebron.

In Conclusion, Laura Ingraham’s remarks can be seen as a continuation and a clear example of the aversive cycles of oppression that have plagued the United States for centuries. One can change a few of her words without impacting the meaning and end up with statements that are eerily similar to past representations and formations of race. The amalgamation of underlying issues leads people like this into the mainstream, not only from the outcry of people impacted by her words, but also through the streams of support that back up her position. Comments like hers are predicated on outdated beliefs upheld through systems of white supremacy and the subsequent white fragility associated with the response from the oppressed communities the words impact. As Stephen Fry says, “…mental wounds can grind and ooze for decades and be re-opened by the quietest whisper.” Ingraham’s words in an isolated instance would be easy to brush off as harmless and irrational, but in the socio-historic landscape that they reside, they hold hundreds of years of weight that cannot be overlooked by oppressed people. Ingraham can wake up each day, get ready for work, and continue to spout her oppressive views, unaffected by the weight they carry and the impact they have on the very people she is talking about.

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Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will always hurt me. Bones mend and become actually stronger in the very place they were broken and where they have knitted up; mental wounds can grind and ooze for decades and be re-opened by the quietest whisper.”

― Stephen Fry, Moab Is My Washpot