**Richard Sherman and Racialized Code Words**

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http://www.sociologyinfocus.com/2014/02/10/richard-sherman-racialized-code-words/

*Wow, the Seattle Seahawks blew out the Denver Broncos in this year’s Super Bowl! How many of you saw that coming? If you believe in the saying, “Defense wins championships,” you might have predicted a Seattle victory. Speaking of defense, one member of Seattle’s “Legion of Boom” received mounds of media attention in the weeks leading up to Super Bowl Sunday – cornerback Richard Sherman. An athletic play by Sherman two weeks earlier thwarted a San Francisco 49ers drive and sealed Seattle’s trip to Super Bowl 48. However, it was Sherman’s postgame interview and the attention it generated that caused all kinds of controversy. In this post, David Mayeda uses this case to illustrate the concept of racialized code words.*

Like other sectors of society, sports serve as a site where constructions of race are developed and contested on a regular basis. Throughout history, sports have always responded to broader race politics, while simultaneously firing back at the racialized patterns seen off the field.

We see it less now than in decades past. Today’s celebrity athletes are more constricted by corporate-driven politics and a less active push for social justice. Now in the twenty-first century, much of society likes to feel we have reached a place where perceptions of race and behavioral racism no longer matter, or only emerge among fringe, extremist groups outside the mainstream. The thing is, racism is still quite pervasive throughout society. It’s simply changed.

As described above, following Seattle’s win over San Francisco about three weeks ago, Richard Sherman was interviewed by side-line reporter Erin Andrews. In the interview, an animated Sherman asserted his status as the League’s top cornerback, while verbally deriding 49er wide-receiver Michael Crabtree, and doing so by staring angrily into the camera. Sherman and Crabtree had developed a mild rivalry; both are African American.

No doubt Sherman provided a feisty and different kind of interview, but considering some of the outrageous, discriminatory things athletes and sports managers have said very publicly over the years, Sherman’s words and method of expressing them were perhaps atypical, definitely emotional, but hardly threatening.

Still, the interview generated extensive media attention and a significant backlash from individuals through social media where Sherman was repeatedly labeled in harmful ways. It is here where we see how racism has shifted in contemporary society and where we can reflect upon Sherman’s experience as an athlete beyond sport.

The bulk of Americans like to think that racism is no longer a significant social problem and would like to present themselves as supportive of a color-blind, post-racial culture that no longer needs to consider race in in everyday interactions, let alone in public policy.

Unfortunately a significant portion of society is still resistant to talented, confident, intelligent, outspoken, and multidimensional black men. In turn those societal members who harbor racist attitudes must find ways to express their discriminatory thoughts in a manner that protects them from being called racist.

Enter the code word, “thug.” Code words are words that at their base have nothing to do with perceptions of race, but within a particular social context hold strong racial undertones and reify racist stereotypes.

In describing African Americans, code words that too often enter the lexicon of mainstream media include, “inner city,” “welfare queen,” and especially for males, “thug.” It is hardly surprising then, that the day after Sherman’s rant people said “thug” on TV more often than on any other day in the past three years, and that Sherman was an overt target across social media, repeatedly called a thug, along with overt racial epithets.

This is a far too common way that racism operates in contemporary society – hidden within seemingly objective vernacular that in reality carries distinct racial bias. A highly intellectual individual who graduated from Stanford University and is pursuing a postgraduate degree, Sherman asserts, thug “is the accepted way of calling somebody the N-word nowadays.” More from Sherman:

“The backlash surprised me…we’re talking about football here. A lot of people took it further than football. And I guess some people showed how far we’ve really come in this day and age. And it was kind of profound, what happened. Because I was on a football field showing passion. Maybe it was misdirected, maybe it was immature, maybe things could have been worded better. But this was on a football field — I wasn’t committing any crimes or doing anything illegal; I was showing passion after a football game.”

Worldwide, ethnic minorities are keenly aware of the code words and nuanced ways that everyday racism keep us pushed to the periphery. It should not take the unfair treatment of a celebrity athlete of color to uncover the cloaked nature of contemporary racism.

# What Richard Sherman Taught Us About America

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"I'm the best corner in the game. When you try me with a sorry receiver like Crabtree, that's the result you going to get."
-- Richard Sherman

That's the quote that got America talking.

The man behind it was Seattle Seahawks all-pro defensive back Richard Sherman, a guy whose mouth is about the only thing louder than his game.

In the moments after Sherman's [post-game interview](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/20/richard-sherman-rant-erin-andrews_n_4629510.html), Twitter exploded. People called him everything from a "thug" to a "disgrace," and even Justin Verlander -- a professional pitcher for the Detroit Tigers -- suggested that Sherman would [get "high and tight" fastballs](http://www.cbssports.com/nfl/eye-on-football/24414554/twitter-users-react-to-richard-shermans-postgame-rant) if he were in the MLB. On top of that, tweets and memes spread like wildfire.

But from my perspective, the heat Sherman is getting is not just misguided but ludicrous. This is a guy who represents one of the best kinds of sports stories there is in the world: the rise from the bottom, the profound destruction of obstacles, the honest success story built by a foundation of hard work and loving parents. If anyone with a brain [took the time to learn about Richard Sherman](http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1208083/1/index.htm), and then put him in the context of the rest of the National Football League, he'd be a pretty hard guy to bash.

Firstly, we're talking about a 25-year-old who came out of the streets of Compton, California. Sherman graduated from one of the worst school districts in the United States, one that boasts a [high-school graduation rate of 57 percent](http://www.scpr.org/blogs/education/2013/04/09/13234/california-high-school-graduation-rate-creeps-up-t/). In a country where [68 percent of all federal and state inmates](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/tavissmiley/tsr/education-under-arrest/school-to-prison-pipeline-fact-sheet/) are lacking a high school diploma, you could say Sherman avoided a horrifying fate. But to say he "got lucky" or "escaped" would be foolhardy. He didn't "just graduate," either. He finished with a 4.2 GPA, second in his class, and went on to Stanford University, one of the most prestigious places to get an education in the entire world. He busted out in a rocket ship. He went from a world of gang violence and drugs to everything that Palo Alto and Stanford University represent.

And where did Mr. Sherman get the work ethic to put up those grades and make it to a school that offers that kind of education? Probably from his father, Kevin, who has worked in the sanitation department for Los Angeles for more than thirty years. But you won't see that on Sherman's stat sheet, and you definitely won't hear about it when ESPN analysts comment on his post-game interview today. Most interesting, though, is that Sherman's story isn't a big secret. NFL Films has even done a short documentary on "[the trash-talking cornerback](http://www.nfl.com/videos/nfl-films-presents/0ap2000000254372/NFL-Films-Presents-The-trash-talking-cornerback)."

So now, America, let's talk about Richard Sherman in the NFL. Let's talk about the Stanford graduate from Compton who has never been arrested, never cursed in a post-game interview, never been accused of being a dirty player, and [started his own charitable non-profit](https://www.nflplayers.com/Articles/Community-News/Richard-Sherman-Gives-Back-via-Nonprofit-Blanket-Coverage/).

This past off-season, 31 NFL players were arrested for everything from [gun charges and driving under the influence to murder.](http://keepingscore.blogs.time.com/2013/07/03/nfl-arrests-are-rising-why-thats-a-surprise/)

Last year, Kansas City Chiefs player Javon Belcher killed Kasandra Perkins, his girlfriend and the mother of his own child, [before taking his own life](http://www.pittnews.com/sports/article_61c7cdb9-7910-555c-af81-ecd38e73e090.html).

Week in and week out, we sit down in front of our televisions and cheer for these freak athletes to destroy each other's bodies in one of the most brutal games known to man. Most of us probably do it with a beer in our hand, screaming and cursing at our TVs in a desperate hope to change the outcome of the game. We ignore how the[NFL's owners use our tax money so freely](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/10/how-the-nfl-fleeces-taxpayers/309448/), and we don't seem to care much about the brain damage retired players suffer from every year.

Yet, when one kid who has overcome everything, one kid who was doubted by the very player he overcame on Sunday, decides to emphatically claim he is the best (by the way: he is), this is what upsets us? Man, could you imagine if [this generation had to deal with Muhammad Ali](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WsAC4lhbE0g)?

Last night, when Richard Sherman went on his rant to Erin Andrews, most of America thought they were learning about the arrogance of another NFL player. But in reality, what Richard Sherman did was teach us about ourselves. He taught us that we're still a country that isn't ready for lower-class Americans from neighborhoods like Compton to succeed. We're still a country that can't decipher a person's character. But most of all, he taught us that no matter what you overcome in your life, we're still a country that can't accept someone if they're a little louder, a little prouder, or a little different from the people we surround ourselves with.

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| More than thugs: The case of Richard Sherman and other men of colour |
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| Discussions on gender in the US have ignored issues that men of colour face.**Last updated: 29 Jan 2014 10:11** |
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|  | [**Khaled A Beydoun**](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/profile/khaled-a-beydoun.html) |

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Black and boisterous, dread-locked and deviant. This is how much of America saw Richard Sherman. The standout Seattle Seahawk defender was [**branded**](http://mmqb.si.com/2014/01/20/richard-sherman-interview-michael-crabtree/) a "hood", a "hooligan", and a "thug" after his post-game [**interview**](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjOkTib5eVQ) with Erin Andrews. It was as if Sherman trespassed into every American's living room on Sunday, January 19, and threatened the safety of the millions that tuned in to watch the NFC Championship game.

Sherman was [**lucky**](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/isaac-saul/what-richard-sherman-taught-us_b_4631980.html) to be on the football field instead of the streets of his native Compton minutes after making the game-clinching play that secured his team's place in Super Bowl XLVIII. Indeed, the racially-charged slurs aimed at Sherman through social and conventional media were those routinely used to profile, stop-and-frisk, and prosecute black and brown men in Los Angeles, New York City and every city and town in between.

Black and brown men, like Sherman and the millions of anonymous men linked to violence, criminal activity and subversion, occupy an intersection that combines racialised threat with masculine menace. Being called a "thug" or a "terrorist", a "gangster" or a "criminal", are commonly identified as racist stereotypes, but are seldom understood as gendered racist stereotypes almost exclusively assigned to men of colour.

**At the intersection of sexism and racism**

Gender discrimination is overwhelmingly discussed and examined within a vacuum, divorced from the racial realities that broaden its practical relevance. As a result, gender discrimination - in both lay and academic circles - is largely understood as animus endured by women, and most frequently, white women. This one-dimensional denotation has cultivated prevailing understandings of gender bias and hostility, which in turn, have eclipsed and marginalised the most pressing forms of gendered discriminations taking place in the US today.

Discrimination endured by men of colour is framed within liberal circles as racial or ethnic animus, but seldom - if ever - examined from a conjoined gender lens. The distinct tropes associated with black and brown masculinity, however, attract a distinct brand of *gendered racism* reserved for men of colour. Indeed, being both minority and male in the US today invites a brand of gendered stigma that is under-discussed in media and academic circles, and marginalised by a narrow conception of gender discrimination.

In her landmark piece, [**"Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Colour"**](http://socialdifference.columbia.edu/files/socialdiff/projects/Article__Mapping_the_Margins_by_Kimblere_Crenshaw.pdf), Kimberle Crenshaw highlights how racism and sexism converge to stigmatise women of colour. The article, published in the *Stanford Law Review* in 1993, highlighted how, "contemporary feminist and antiracist discourses have failed to consider intersectional identities such as women of colour".

In short, Crenshaw exposed how discussions about gender overlooked the salience of race, while intellectual and practical interventions grappling with racism neglected the impact of gender.

"Intersectionality" not only sought to integrate these isolated conversations about race or gender, but in the process, retrench the underlying narrative constructed by white feminists that gender discrimination was largely a white, female phenomenon. For Crenshaw, and the cadre of race scholars that preceded her and followed in her footsteps, race was far more than merely an under-examined metric.

**Male, minority and at the margins**

A Google search of news articles related to "gender discrimination" will collect a range of stories linked to sexism faced by women. Although "gender" encompasses both sexes, the functional application of the term when related to bias or discrimination is overwhelmingly linked to women.

The prevalence of patriarchy, violence toward women, and the feminisation of poverty, among other structural obstacles uniquely faced by women in the US and elsewhere, cannot be overstated. However, the pervasive forms of gendered bias and violence that are specifically reserved for men of colour, in the streets of the US, within its halls of power, and its public and private institutions, must be figured into prevailing conceptions of gender discrimination.

The gendered violence targeting black and brown men in the US is deeply rooted in the nation's history. The fear of black male slaves led to the enactment of slave codes that made "insurrections, and the conspiracy to stage one… punishable by death (Virginia Slave Laws, 1726)". The Virginia law, which was adopted by every state in the Antebellum South, was driven by fear of black masculinity.

The anti-insurrection slave codes not only punished rebellious activity, but also more frequently prosecuted casual congregations involving a handful of black male slaves. Stereotypes attached to black slave masculinity - uncivilised and insubordinate, savage and violent - engendered a paranoia that brought forth over-prosecution, and the mass murder of black male slaves that did not partake in rebellious activity.

Over-prosecution today is also fuelled by stereotypes branded upon the bodies of black and brown men. Systems of policing, such as the NYPD's stop-and-frisk have not only disproportionately targeted [**men of colour**](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/01/link%20-%20http%3A/ccrjustice.org/floyd), but more importantly, were created to police the bodies of black and brown men. Stop-and-frisk equips NYPD police with near carte blanche to stop and search African, Latino and Middle Eastern American men, who by virtue of nothing more than their race and phenotype, are associated with criminal activity, imminent violence, and national security threat.

Before stop-and-frisk, the [**US Patriot Act**](http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-107publ56/pdf/PLAW-107publ56.pdf) ushered in a set of laws that violated the civil liberties of both men and women racially or religiously linked to "suspected terrorism". After 9/11 Arab, Muslim, South Asian, Latino and African-American men, who fit within the brown-skinned, beard-cladded caricature of the terrorist, were branded subversive and violent, irreducibly foreign and bent on harming Americans.

These tropes shaped a brand of gendered discrimination targeting men of colour that includes: singling out by airport authorities, [**removal from airplanes**](http://www.politico.com/story/2013/04/boston-marathon-logan-airport-90146.html), phone-tapping, increased rates of incarceration, and [**mass murder**](http://edition.cnn.com/2012/08/05/us/wisconsin-temple-shooting/). Outside of the national security context, men of colour are vulnerable to being linked to gang activity and drug dealing, theft and sexual deviance. Indeed, the [**incarceration rates**](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/09/06/incarceration-gap-between-whites-and-blacks-widens/) of Black and Latino men, which are far higher than the those of Black women and Latinas, highlight the distinctly menacing threat posed by being male and minority in America today.

**Demystifying the feminine mystique**

For far too long, white feminist academics advanced narratives that e-raced the stories of women of colour from the gender discrimination discourse. However, the work of academic, advocates and activists of colour demystified the mystique that sexism was a struggle limited to white women.

This article does not seek to compare the victimisation of women and men of colour. Nor does it aim to question the sexism faced by women at large. But rather, it offers a wider and more inclusive understanding of gender discrimination that unravels today's one-dimensional and mono-racial conception, and integrates the common biases and violence faced by men of colour as a marginalised brand of gender discrimination wholly neglected from the existing discourse.

The black and brown bodies of men of colour incite an overwhelming fear for onlookers, whether politicians, policemen, or television viewers, who interpret their *minority masculinity* as threatening and deviant. Terrorists instead of American citizens, gang-members not undergraduates, and dreadlocked thugs instead of Stanford graduates - is the confined view of black and brown men that still prevails today. This in part, must be attributed to the confined discourse and definition of gender discrimination.