

Document 4A : The need to change mentalities

A former Apple employee who noted that he was “not Black or Hispanic” described his experience on a team that was developing speech recognition for Siri, the virtual assistant program. As they worked on different English dialects – Australian, Singaporean, and Indian English – he asked his boss: “What about African American English?” To this his boss responded: “Well, Apple products are for the premium market.” And this happened in 2015, “one year after [the rapper] Dr. Dre sold Beats by Dr. Dre to Apple for a billion dollars.” The irony, the former employee seemed to imply, was that the company could somehow devalue *and* value Blackness at the same time.⁶⁰ It is one thing to capitalize on the coolness of a Black artist to sell (overpriced) products and quite another to engage the cultural specificity of Black people enough to enhance the underlying design of a widely used technology. This is why the notion that tech bias is “unintentional” or “unconscious” obscures the reality – that there is no way to create something without some intention and intended user in mind (a point I will return to in the next chapter).

For now, the Siri example helps to highlight how just having a more diverse team is an inadequate solution to discriminatory design practices that grow out of the interplay of racism and capitalism. Jason Mars, a Black computer scientist, expressed his frustration saying, “There’s a kind of pressure to conform to the prejudices of the world ... It would be interesting to have a black guy talk [as the voice for his app], but we don’t want to create friction, either. First we need to sell products.”⁶¹ How does the fist-pumping empowerment of Microsoft’s campaign figure in a world in which the voices of Black programmers like Mars are treated as conflict-inducing? Who gets muted in this brave new world? The view that “technology is a neutral tool” ignores how race also functions like a tool, structuring whose literal voice gets embodied in AI. In celebrating diversity, tokenistic approaches to tech development fail to acknowledge how the White aesthetic colors AI. The “blandness” of Whiteness that some of my students brought up when discussing their names is treated by programmers as normal, universal, and appealing. The invisible power of Whiteness means that even a Black computer scientist running his own company who earnestly wants to encode a different voice into his app is still hemmed in by the desire of many people for White-sounding voices.

Race After Technology : *Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Crow Code*, Ruha Benjamin, 2019