
ANNA HOLMES

Anna Holmes, who studied journalism at New York University, is a prolific writer and editor and the founder of Jezebel (jezebel.com), the popular blog geared toward women, which she ran until 2010. She is the editor of two books, *Hell Hath No Fury: Women's Letters from the End of the Affair* (2002) — an anthology of break-up letters ranging from Anne Boleyn's letter to Henry VIII to Monica Lewinsky's 1997 e-mail to President Bill Clinton — and *The Book of Jezebel: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Lady Things* (2013), with entries ranging from Abzug to Zits. Her writing has also appeared in the *Washington Post*, the *New Yorker* online, *Salon*, *Glamour*, and the *New York Times*. In 2016 she took a position as senior vice president at First Look Media, where she serves as editor for Topic.com.

"Variety Show" first appeared October 25, 2015, in the online version of the *New York Times Magazine*; it was subsequently published in the print version as well. The *New York Times Magazine* is a supplement to the *New York Times*, featuring longer articles and noted for its photography. Other articles from that date centered on the algorithms that increasingly shape our lives, a profile of a woman who works as a fisherman on Long Island bay, and a review of the memoir of Ben Bernanke, former chairman of the Federal Reserve.

In this essay Holmes considers the ways in which *diversity* has lost all meaning as it has circulated widely in culture. Rather than encouraging truly integrated corporate and cultural environments, the term is implemented through token representatives and lip service to the ideals it represents. Thus any true social change is avoided through an evacuation of meaning from the concept. Diversity becomes an end point, a box to check off, rather than a starting point for a more inclusive world.

How does diversity operate in the environments within which you move? Are they truly diverse? How can we make them so?

► TAGS: *civil rights, culture, identity, media, race and ethnicity, social change*

► CONNECTIONS: *Appiah, Coates, Cohen, Das, Gay, Gilbert, Lukianoff and Haidt, Watters, Yoshino*

Variety Show

How does a word become so muddled that it loses much of its meaning? How does it go from communicating something idealistic to something cynical and suspect? If that word is *diversity*, the answer is: through a combination of overuse, imprecision, inertia, and self-serving intentions.

Take the recent remarks by the venture capitalist John Doerr at this year's TechCrunch Disrupt conference in September. Doerr, who with his firm, Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers, has invested in Google, Facebook, and Amazon, was on hand to discuss diversity in the overwhelmingly white and male Silicon Valley. After explaining that K.P.C.B. had begun putting its employees through training in unconscious bias — the company was the subject of a high-profile 2012 sex-discrimination lawsuit brought by a former executive, Ellen Pao, which Pao lost — the 64-year-old

Harvard Business School graduate professed himself “deeply committed to diversity,” adding: “We have two new partners who are so diverse I have a challenge pronouncing their names.”

Doerr was quick to issue an apology for what he called “an unfortunate joke,” but his conflation of a few additions with substantial changes in corporate hiring and recruitment practices inadvertently revealed what’s so irritating about the recent ubiquity of the word *diversity*: It has become both euphemism and cliché, a convenient shorthand that gestures at inclusivity and representation without actually taking them seriously.

Many Silicon Valley firms are scrambling to hire executives to focus on diversity—there’s an opening at Airbnb right now for a “Head of Diversity and Belonging.” But at the biggest firms, women and minorities still make up an appallingly tiny percentage of the skilled work force. And the few exceptions to this rule are consistently held up as evidence of more widespread change—as if a few individuals could by themselves constitute diversity.

When the word is proudly invoked in a corporate context, it acquires a certain sheen. It can give a person or institution moral credibility, a phenomenon that Nancy Leong, a University of Denver law professor, calls “racial capitalism” and defines as “an individual or group deriving value from the racial identity of another person.” It’s almost as if cheerfully and frequently uttering the word *diversity* is the equivalent of doing the work of actually making it a reality.

This disconnect is not, of course, limited to tech. In this year’s annual *Publishers Weekly* survey of book-publishing employees, respondents—89 percent of whom were white—found “no real change” in the racial composition of the work force since last year, despite “increased attention given to diversity.” The television and film industries are being investigated by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission over complaints of sex discrimination. And yet, as is the case in Silicon Valley, small victories are often overenthusiastically celebrated as evidence of larger change. In September, for example, when Viola Davis became the first African American woman to win the Best Actress in a Drama Series Emmy, the moment was cheered in the press as a triumph of racial equity in Hollywood. But just a month before, Stacy L. Smith, a professor of communication at USC who, with other researchers, had just released a damning report that studied gender bias in 700 films made between 2007 and 2014, lamented “the dismal record of diversity, not just for one group, but for females, people of color and the LGBT community.”

Why is there such a disparity between the progress that people in power claim they want to enact and what they actually end up doing about it? Part of the problem is that it doesn’t seem that anyone has settled on what diversity actually means. Is it a variety of types of people on the stages of awards shows and in the boardrooms of Fortune 500 companies? Is it raw numbers? Is it who is in a position of power to hire and fire and shape external and internal cultures? Is it who isn’t in power, but might be someday?

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Adding to the ambiguity is the fact that the definition of *diversity* changes depending on who is doing the talking. The dictionary will tell you that it is “the quality or state of having many different forms, types, ideas,” and the word is often used, without controversy, to describe things like the environment and stock-market holdings. But in reality—which is to say, when applied to actual people, not flora, fauna, or financial securities—the notion of diversity feels more fraught, positioning one group (white, male Americans) as the default, and everyone else as the Other. Multiple studies suggest that white Americans understand “diversity” much differently than black Americans. When Reynolds Farley, a demographer at the University of Michigan, researched the attitudes of people in Detroit about the racial composition of residential neighborhoods in 1976, 1992, and 2004, most African Americans considered “integrated” to be a 50/50 mix of white and black, while a majority of whites considered such a ratio much too high for their comfort each time the study was conducted.

Bragging about hiring a few people of color, or women, seems to come from the same interpretive bias, where a small amount is enough. It also puts significant pressure on the few “diverse” folks who are allowed into any given club, where they are expected to be ambassadors of sorts, representing the minority identity while conforming to the majority one. All this can make a person doubt the sincerity of an institution or organization—and question their place within it. When I was starting out in magazines, I was told by a colleague that my hiring was part of the company’s diversity push, and that my boss had received a significant bonus as a result of recruiting me. Whether or not it was true, it colored the next few years I spent there, making me wonder whether I was simply some sort of symbol to make the higher-ups feel better about themselves.

Diversity “is an empty signifier for me now,” says Jeff Chang, the author of 2014’s *Who We Be: The Colorization of America*, though “I still strongly believe in the possibility.” Chang prefers *equity* to *diversity*, saying that the latter has been “deradicalized” from its roots in the multicultural movements of decades past. He recalls an anecdote about a diversity week at a Texas university where few white students bothered to show up. “Diversity,” Chang says, “has become a code word for ‘all those other folks.’” The problem with code words is that they’re lazy: They’re broad rather than specific, and can provide cover for inaction—the “I don’t know how to do this or what it means, so can someone else please do the work for me?” maneuver.

Talk is cheap, of course, and sometimes you get the sense that the people talking the most about diversity are the people doing the least effective work on it. In the season premiere of his HBO reality series *Project Greenlight*, Matt Damon explained—to a veteran African American producer, Effie Brown—that focusing on diversity in the casting of a film was more important than promoting diversity among those working behind the camera. It was a striking example not just of mansplaining but also of whitesplaining. His implication—roundly criticized on social media and in industry publications—is that on-screen visibility is everything, when what Hollywood needs just as much, if not more, are black studio executives, writers, directors, and producers: the people who decide what stories are told in the first place.

Maybe it’s not surprising that just a month later, the African American director Ava DuVernay made the opposite argument of Damon’s at the Elle Women in Hollywood Awards. DuVernay, who made *Selma*, pointed out that of the 100 top-grossing films

last year, only two were directed by women. She urged constant vigilance and proactive searching within the industry: "We have to ask our agents about that script by the woman screenwriter. We have to ask, 'Hey, are there any women agents here that I could talk to?' We have to ask our lawyers about women in the office. We have to ask, when we're thinking about directors or D.P.s, 'Will women interview?'" Her words were powerful and refreshingly specific; they were also further evidence that the work of articulating and creating diversity often — usually! — falls to those who are themselves considered "diverse."

It's something I have experienced myself. Over the past few years, numerous editors have reached out to me asking for help in finding writers and editors of color, as if I had special access to the hundreds of talented people writing and thinking on- and off-line. I know they mean well, but I am often appalled by the ease with which they shunt the work of cultivating a bigger variety of voices onto others, and I get the sense that for them, diversity is an end—a box to check off—rather than a starting point from which a more integrated, textured world is brought into being. I'm not the only one to sense that there's a feeling of obligation, rather than excitement, behind the idea. DuVernay herself hinted at this when she, too, admitted that she hates the word. "It feels like medicine," she said in her speech. "*Diversity* is like, 'Ugh, I have to do diversity.' I recognize and celebrate what it is, but that word, to me, is a disconnect. There's an emotional disconnect. *Inclusion* feels closer; *belonging* is even closer."

Questions for Critical Reading

1. What does *diversity* mean? Reread Holmes's essay to formulate a definition that better matches her vision for the word. Locate passages that support this definition.
2. What's the difference between equity and diversity? As you review Holmes's essay, consider the difference that an equity approach might make to the situations she describes.
3. Holmes, quoting Nancy Leong, uses the term *racial capitalism*. Note the definition of this term. How does it operate in relation to her larger argument?

Exploring Context

1. Holmes mentions that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was investigating sex discrimination in the film and television industries. Visit the EEOC website at eoc.gov. Explore the site for information on diversity initiatives. What role does the government play in promoting diversity? How successful is it?
2. Explore the website for the Emmys at emmys.com. Based on what you find there, do you think the issues with diversity in media have changed since Holmes wrote this essay?
3. Using a search engine, locate the website of a major corporation, such as Microsoft or Apple, and look for information on any diversity initiatives the company might have. Connect these to Holmes's analysis. Are some corporations better than others when it comes to truly implementing diversity?

Questions for Connecting

1. In "(Un)American, (Un)Cool" (p. 102), Kavita Das seems to have similar concerns with how diversity operates in the United States. Synthesize her analysis with Holmes's argument. How can you use both essays to propose strategies that would help us move to a more diverse environment? Consider using your responses to Questions for Critical Reading.
2. Might Kenji Yoshino's vision of civil rights in "Preface" and "The New Civil Rights" (p. 452) offer a solution to the problems that Holmes delineates? Apply his analysis to her essay. Which model of civil rights would help us achieve equity? Incorporate your work on diversity and equity from Questions 1 and 2 of Questions for Critical Reading.
3. In "The Coddling of the American Mind" (p. 263), Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt argue that college campuses suffer from what might be considered an oversensitivity to diversity. How can you reconcile that with Holmes's argument about diversity in the larger culture? Is there something uniquely insular about college? How can their arguments also help explain the tepid response to diversity in the larger world?

Language Matters

1. Considering counterarguments is an important element in academic writing. Propose a series of counterarguments to Holmes's points. How might she respond?
2. Listen to the latest podcast from Grammar Girl at grammar.quickanddirtytips.com. How might you apply what she's talking about in the podcast to this essay? How might you apply it to your writing instead?
3. Holmes uses the relatively new words *mansplaining* and *whitesplaining*. Using a grammar handbook, reference source, or the web, research neologisms. How are new words created? When might you want to create terms in your own writing? What cultural forces enable new or slang words to enter common use?

Assignments for Writing

1. Working from your responses to Questions for Critical Reading, write a paper in which you locate strategies we might use to create a more inclusive world. What would it take to move from diversity to equity? Consider using your responses to Exploring Context and Question 2 of Questions for Connecting to support your argument.
2. Holmes's central contention is that the word *diversity* has lost its meaning. Write a paper in which you describe the processes through which words change or lose meaning, using Holmes's discussion of *diversity* as support. Is it possible for us to change the meaning of *diversity* again? What would need to happen for that to occur?
3. Who is responsible for diversity? Working from Holmes's essay as well as your work in Exploring Context write a paper in which you determine which sectors should take the lead in promoting diversity. The government? Businesses? Cultural institutions? Or does everyone have a role to play? Use your responses to Questions for Critical Reading and Exploring Context to support your answer. You may also find your work in Questions 2 and 3 of Questions for Connecting useful.