

- Yaseen Eldik: I don't know if you have any awareness or sort of consciousness about the historical significance of the word trap and its racial associations. Do you?
- The Student: No. In the GroupMe, someone said something about an event to celebrate whiteness, and then they accused me of cosplaying in blackface, which I haven't. I have no idea where that is.
- Yaseen Eldik: Yeah.
- The Student: Someone said apple pie is African-American, but I'm pretty sure it's just American.
- Yaseen Eldik: Yeah, so I just want to disentangle some of what might seem to you to be confusing or unclear associations that are being made with the word or the concept of trap. So there are two sort of distinct ways of thinking about the word trap that relate to your correspondence being characterized as racially insensitive.
- [00:01:00]
- Yaseen Eldik: So in one paradigm, we would think about the word trap through the lens of a sort of crack den or a crack house, okay? So that's one social reference for it.
- [00:01:30]
- Yaseen Eldik: The sort of racial associations with that connotation would sort of be bound up in some of the drug use that has been historically associated with poor Black and brown communities in this country. So that word trap can be triggering for Black and brown communities who have either been affected or deeply impacted by that sort of racial rhetoric, that type of stereotyping, that type of prejudice.
- Yaseen Eldik: So that's just broadly one way to think about it, and then the historical significance there would be related to sort of the war on drugs and then the war on crime and the ways in which that's contributed to mass incarceration and felon disenfranchisement.
- [00:02:00]
- Yaseen Eldik: So there's a rich history there that sort of just bundled into kind of the nerves of that that word specifically.
- The Student: Okay.
- Yaseen Eldik: In another paradigm, you have the word trap, which refers specifically to a genre of hip-hop, we could say, which is specifically Black hip-hop, we could say. And in the past, college students, mainly fraternities and sororities throughout the US, tend to have events where they celebrate Black culture or Black tradition sort of as white people through mockery.
- [00:02:30]
- Yaseen Eldik: And so they would use charcoal, and they would sort of paint their faces with the charcoal. And it would sort of be a form of blackface.
- Yaseen Eldik: And they would do it sort of in the name of Black hip-hop, Black tradition, maybe for some of them celebrating it. But it also has historical significance for Black
- [00:03:00]

communities because of its relationship with blackface, which, as you know, stems as far back to the Antebellum period when Black people couldn't act in theater.

Yaseen Eldik: And so white people would perform as Black people and sometimes would even perform as slaves, and they would wear blackface. So the use of the word trap and the way that blackface has lived on through events that involve the word trap or involve Blackness or involve hip-hop can be even more deeply triggering for Black communities, right?
[00:03:30]

Yaseen Eldik: So that's also seen as racialized, and then you compound that with the fried chicken reference, which is also a reference that is often used by the white majority to sort of characterize the cuisine and so the culture of Black communities. And it's also been used to undermine arguments that structural or systemic racism have contributed to health disparities in the US, and there's also sort of offhanded comments made often about why Black communities tend to be more overweight.
[00:04:00]

Yaseen Eldik: And so there's a lot of racism that's even tied into the use of the word for fried chicken with trap. And then I also think some people were offended, although it wasn't as clear, with sort of the basic bitch part of the email, which I think is problematic in part because it references women in a certain type of way, and I think it's mainly affecting for white women, but it also felt like it was derogatory [inaudible 00:04:37] gender.
[00:04:30]

Yaseen Eldik: I just wanted to provide you with this context and this background as a way to educate you, not as a way to make an assumption about what you should have known or been aware of or conscientious of at the time you wrote the email. And I don't want you to feel like this is a moment to provide an argument that might oppose anyone [crosstalk 00:05:02].
[00:05:00]

The Student: I think I'll just not use the word anymore.

Yaseen Eldik: Yeah, exactly, right?

The Student: I've used it openly for months, and no one's said a thing, but I think it would have been better if someone had said something at any point. So I do appreciate-

Yaseen Eldik: And I do think, to be quite frank, as a man of color, there probably isn't as much of a scrutiny of you as there might be of sort of a white person in the same position. And I just want to acknowledge that there's a complexity to that too.

The Student: Yeah.

[00:05:30]

Yaseen Eldik: I think the email's association with FedSoc was very triggering for students that already feel like FedSoc belongs to political affiliations that are oppressive to certain communities through policies, right? That, of course, obviously includes the LGBTQIA community and Black communities and immigrant communities.

[00:06:00]

Yaseen Eldik: And so there's just a lot [crosstalk 00:06:02] social and political record, right, that was just sort of on the periphery of what you wrote, and so for you, it's not immediately obvious because of perceptual segregation and experiential segregation. And I think that I just want this conversation to be a moment to check in with you and think how in our role as student affairs professionals can we help you-

[00:06:30]

The Student: Yeah. I'm glad we're having this talk because I wasn't going to walk around looking for somebody to talk to, but I was just hoping that someone at some point would actually come up and talk to me because I didn't get this email from you guys until this morning. No one posted in the GroupMe other than Sonora's final response since 10:14 PM last night, so I was thinking I would just run into someone at some point and maybe have this talk.

Yaseen Eldik: I'm happy-

[00:07:00]

The Student: But I guess that we're already having this. But I guess one thing, am I being accused of discrimination and harassment in the specific targeting people sense? Because that's how the email from you guys kind of read.

Yaseen Eldik: So a student did bring a complaint that this email was a form of discrimination. I think sort of the harassment piece might be more related to how this has been psychically damaging and psychically harmful.

[00:07:30]

Yaseen Eldik: But I do think that it's important to at least just acknowledge that one of your classmates did see this correspondence as being discriminatory, and then another read it just plainly as being anti-Black and perpetuating anti-Blackness.

Yaseen Eldik: So I just want to know from you how you're feeling about all of this, what you would like potential next steps to look like, because I have a few suggestions. But I just want to know how you're doing.

[00:08:00]

The Student: Honestly, I'm a little tired. I've been a little stressed dealing with this for a while.

The Student: I'd like to just kind of get behind this as soon as possible. I feel like we had that long meeting with NALSA, and we instituted more email reviews.

[00:08:30]

The Student: So we'll actually talk about them before I send out to the NALSA listserv. And I think we took a lot of care of the procedural failures last night.

The Student: I think we're going to have Catherine Danson kind of in our next board meeting. And I think next steps, I think kind of let it slide.

[00:09:00]

The Student: I think it'll die down. If people want to talk to me, I'm open to it.

Yaseen Eldik: Yeah. I was wondering if one of the things we might be able to think about, just in terms of community feeling, is, and I would have to check with the students that sort of brought the concerns to our office earlier, but I don't know how you are on sort of thinking about forgiveness or asking for forgiveness or just apologizing and maybe just trying to deescalate some of that tension.

[00:09:30]

The Student: That's what I was thinking. If anyone wants to talk to me, I'm welcome to it, but if they don't want to, I get that.

The Student: I don't want to force anything. If they don't want to talk to me, that's fine.

Yaseen Eldik: Do you-

Ellen Cosgrove: Just so you know, we've gotten two more complaints that have sort of come in since this morning related to this.

[00:10:00]

Yaseen Eldik: Yeah, I think there are a few different ways we can do this. One, you could write an email just to us that we could then send to the students that are bringing the complaints that sort of says, "To whomever is writing to the Office of Student Affairs about this, I want you to know that I deeply regret the email that I wrote.

Yaseen Eldik: "I didn't at all think about the implications of it in this way. I would like to expressly apologize and would like to learn and grow, and I invite you to reach out to me directly if it's something you might be comfortable with so I can explain to you this in person or over the phone.

[00:10:30]

Yaseen Eldik: "You should know that I'm taking the time to be educated on the issues, and I hope to do better." And I'm happy to help you think about some of that language.

[00:11:00]

Yaseen Eldik: That, I think, might be better than us just writing back to people [inaudible 00:11:02] your heart and mind are. At the same time, I don't want to diverge too far from who you are as a person and what you otherwise might do in a situation like this, but as someone who wants to be an ambassador of community here, I think that that's the quickest way to resolution.

The Student: Yeah.

Yaseen Eldik: Yeah.

[00:11:30]

Ellen Cosgrove: The one other thought I had was since a number of these have come from BALSA

members, whether a note to the Balsa leadership.

Yaseen Eldik: Specifically, yes.

Ellen Cosgrove: Yeah.

Yaseen Eldik: Yeah.

Ellen Cosgrove: As a possibility. I think we're trying to do a couple different things.

Ellen Cosgrove: Nipping things in the bud is always a good thing to do. Part of the reason why I said we've gotten two more messages is just we got first one at nine-something this morning and shortly after that reached out to you.

[00:12:00]

Ellen Cosgrove: But they're sort of coming, and in our experience, again, every situation can be different, but it tends to be that these things just amplify over time, and people write.

Ellen Cosgrove: So for your sake as well as the community's sake, I think kind of addressing this quickly is important. I think the second thing is that it's really more this is concerning... Several people said they didn't even know who you were, but they were just concerned about the rhetoric.

[00:12:30]

Ellen Cosgrove: So I think what Yaseen's saying makes sense of, "Look, you guys don't know me from a hole in the wall, but I didn't intend to offend anybody when I wrote this. And now I understand [crosstalk 00:12:37]- "

The Student: Yeah. I guess the one thing I dislike about doing the pre-letter to forward any time it comes in is that I've already had one email just thrown publicly. I think that will just escalate it more, like read into the lines and try to do something with it, at least that's something that I have in my head.

[00:13:00]

The Student: That's why I'd rather it just be one-on-one things. If they'd like to talk to me, they can, and keep it from having a publishable statement.

Yaseen Eldik: So I don't want to put the onus on Black students to reach out to you to talk more. I also don't want to make our office look like an ineffective source of resolution

[00:13:30] because we're just writing to students and telling them, "He's so sorry. Accept our expression of his apology on your behalf," because it looks almost as if we've all just sort of folded into each other.

Yaseen Eldik: And it erases your individuality and your agency in this, and so it's hard because we're up to almost eight or nine student complaints about this. And you want this to go away, I think, as quickly as possible with the helpful resolution of now

[00:14:00] knowing that there will be a procedure for emailing students about events in the future.

Yaseen Eldik: But also, I think that you as a person want some character-driven rehabilitation, and I think the best way for that to happen, and knowing the students, I think it would be the most appreciated, would be an email where you just explicitly accepted some responsibility and just apologized. I can't imagine that that would do anything other than make you look like a thoughtful, reasonable, kind person.

[00:14:30]

Yaseen Eldik: And that is more likely to have this go away, which is clearly what you want, than, I think, any other alternative. Part of what I also worry about is this lingering over your own reputation as a person, not just here but when you leave.

[00:15:00]

Yaseen Eldik: And it's just something to think about. The legal community is a small one.

Yaseen Eldik: Your classmates are your peers, and I don't want you to be in an echo chamber where people make you think that you did nothing wrong.

Yaseen Eldik: This isn't a conversation about whether you did anything wrong. It's about language that was used that was triggering, and you're just trying to take responsibility for managing through some of the tension related to that, and I think that's just the responsible way forward.

[00:15:30]

The Student: Okay.

Yaseen Eldik: So that's my advice to you as sort of a mentor to a student, and I'm happy to help you. If you're so exhausted and tired and sort of feeling down because of this, I'm happy to help.

[00:16:00]

Yaseen Eldik: I mean, it's part of my role. I'm happy to help you.

Yaseen Eldik: I'm happy to help draft the first iteration of this, and then you can decide what feels the most pure to you. I'm not trying to tell you to do this, and so you're off on your own.

Yaseen Eldik: I want to help give you guidance and nurture your social and intellectual development here as a student. It's not an admission of guilt.

[00:16:30]
Yaseen Eldik: And I was very clear in the [inaudible 00:16:29] meeting. This isn't adjudicatory.

Yaseen Eldik: And this isn't going beyond the community of the school. But I actually do think that the community of the school should be our main priority when we think about why we motivate ourselves to act and to remediate issues as they come up.

The Student: Okay. Can I think about it for a little while?

Yaseen Eldik: Absolutely. Think about it.

The Student: Again, I slept maybe four hours last night.

Yaseen Eldik: Yeah.

Ellen Cosgrove: Yeah.

[00:17:00]

Yaseen Eldik: Think about it. It's hard, and I'm grateful you took the time to meet with us and to listen to me and to become more aware about this.

Ellen Cosgrove: I don't need to catch up.

Yaseen Eldik: I was going to say, some students have asked us to say something as an institution-

Ellen Cosgrove: That was the point I was going to make is-

Yaseen Eldik: ... about this.

Ellen Cosgrove: ... there have been multiple letters have said the law school should take a stand.
[00:17:30] And again, I think we're always looking for ways to not ratchet things up unnecessarily but at the same time, as Yaseen said, to sort of address it in a way that's clean and that's respectful to the needs of the students who brought the complaints to us.

Ellen Cosgrove: I want you to take time so that you can be comfortable with the decision you reach. At the same time, I think I just do know in a situation like this, people start to escalate.

[00:18:00]

Ellen Cosgrove: And the more it escalates, the more rigid people might get in terms of what expectations are. And so the diffusing it is always the most effective way to go, which means doing something sooner rather than later.

Ellen Cosgrove: But again, take time. But just try not to take too much time.

Yaseen Eldik: But I think that [crosstalk 00:18:19] I think there is room right now for forgiveness. I don't think the people that wrote to us want to be carceral with you, but I think it raises questions for some students about the values of this community, and where does the law school align its values, given some of the underlying context to the words that you used?
[00:18:30]

Yaseen Eldik: And I do want so much for your time at the law school to be pleasant. I want you to be able to continue to move between different realms.

[00:19:00]

Yaseen Eldik: I believe you are on the FedSoc board, and you're involved with the Republican group. And I don't want you to feel like this is a partisan issue and you're taking a partisan line when that's actually not what any of this is about.

Yaseen Eldik: This isn't about you being affiliated with conservative student groups. This isn't a part of some assassination against conservative student groups on college campuses.

[00:19:30]

Yaseen Eldik: It's not intended to malign your character because of that. I think it's really an attempt to understand why it is that someone would write an email that looks like it's inviting others to make a mockery of Black people, and I think if there's one really kind of simple, easy way of thinking about it, it would be that.

The Student: Okay.

[00:20:00]

Yaseen Eldik: And I'm at the ready to help you. If you want to put an email together, I can send it out to the students.

Yaseen Eldik: I guarantee you that it will be screenshotted. It'll be passed around, but I think for anyone who is on the fence about whether they need to be an ally to Black students on this issue, including other Black students, they would see your email and be like-

[00:20:30]

The Student: Okay. I know whenever I see policy emails publicly, it always feels like people are mocking the apology for either not going far enough or not accepting-

Yaseen Eldik: But there are-

The Student: ... full guilt and saying they meant it.

Yaseen Eldik: But the alternative is no apology, which speaks volumes. And listen, I write. I write speeches.

Yaseen Eldik: I write essays. I write emails. I write, and I always know when I write that my writing will fall short.

The Student: Okay.

[00:21:00]

Yaseen Eldik: And there will be a group of people who read it who are eye-rolling or sighing or grunting, and as someone who's a diversity professional in this space, it's haunting. I'm haunted by the shortcomings that are inherent in using words within the confines of a bureaucracy, in an institution, with various stakeholders and various stakeholder [crosstalk 00:21:23].

The Student: I guess I'm thinking that the screenshot itself, in being spread around, will speak its own more volumes because no response has no screenshot [crosstalk 00:21:33].
[00:21:30]

Yaseen Eldik: But no response, we're left with the Black mockery. An apology, you erase that narrative by saying, "I claim ignorance because I had no idea, but I've learned more, and now I know, and I am sorry."

Yaseen Eldik: "And that was not at all what I was trying to do, and I've gone back to the NALSA board with this. We have met."

[00:22:00]

Yaseen Eldik: "Emails will go through a process with different eyes where there are different perspectives, and so if something like this were to happen again, because I wasn't aware, someone else will be aware for me. I'm trying to learn and grow." Hard stop.

The Student: Okay. Yeah, that makes a lot of sense when you put it that way.

Yaseen Eldik: Yeah, it does, and I don't want to be a part of conversations about you being a person that you're not. And having met with you and spoke with you, you're an honest person.
[00:22:30]

Yaseen Eldik: You're someone that clearly has integrity, and you're a good person. And I want that to be what people see from you.

Yaseen Eldik: And I would hate to have to spend however much longer in this vortex of people making claims about who you are without even having met you once. So I'm very protective over you, especially given this conversation, which is why I'm even more like, "Please, let's put something together."
[00:23:00]

The Student: I think part of it is I'm just very tired, and I don't want to draft an email at least right now.

Yaseen Eldik: Yeah, yeah. But I will draft it for you, and then you can look at it-

The Student: Yeah, I think-

Yaseen Eldik: ... and you can see what you want.

The Student: Okay. And-