



DON'T Call Me "African-American," Says Smokey Robinson

Call him an "An Old-Fashioned Man" if you want, to quote one of his song's titles, but there's something you'd better not call Smokey Robinson: African-American. The legendary 82-year-old crooner made this crystal clear recently while appearing on *The View*, saying, among other things, that black servicemen dying in our wars didn't give their lives for African nations — they died for America.

The topic arose, music website Vibe [reported](#) Thursday, because for Black History Month a teacher had animated a 2004 poem Robinson penned entitled "A Black American." The singer was then asked about the poem's meaning in *The View* interview, and the first thing he stated, emphatically, was "I *resent* being called an African-American — I really do."

Robinson proceeded to say that while he has traveled the world, he has never even been to Africa. He went on to explain, "I think that when you do that [use "African-American"], you're disclaiming all the contributions that black people have made to America. You see, I consider myself to be a black American, and I enjoy being called black."

The entertainer then complained that "black" has been "negativized"; in fact, "even black people back in the day calling each other black was a sign for a fight or something like that," he stated.

Robinson's perhaps most powerful point was when he mentioned that black American servicemen did not die for "Timbuktu or Cape Town or Kenya; they died for Mississippi and Alabama and Georgia and Louisiana and Texas and Virginia."

Interestingly, the Vibe article author, a young black woman named Mya Abraham, transcribed this incorrectly: She portrayed Robinson as having said the black servicemen were not "dying *for* African countries but instead dying *in* states like Mississippi." (Emphasis added.) Obviously, dying "for" has far different meaning than dying "in."

Was Abraham being deceitful? Perhaps more likely is that, while operating from memory, her own prejudices colored the transcription. Put differently, she remembered the line the way *she wanted to*.



Smokey Robinson (AP Images)



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on March 12, 2022

But Robinson isn't the only one to take issue with the term "African-American." In fact, I [wrote about it in 2004](#).

"Many terms have been used to refer to black people; some were meant to be pejorative or came to be seen as so and some weren't," I began. Examples are "negro" and "colored," the former of which, Robinson pointed out in 2020, means "black" in Spanish. I then continued, [writing](#) that one quality all the terms shared, however,

was that they referred only to racial characteristics, not geographical area of origin. If you're a black American you're an American with dark skin and if you're a white American you're an American with light skin, but in either case the label attached to you indicates that you are of the American nation and culture. The term African-American is very different. It partially shifts the focus away from the land in which we live and toward a different part of the world. This is destructive and divisive because [many] black Americans already feel alienated from their nation, and this new label can only exacerbate this problem.

Yet even more can be said. I further added that

the phrase African-American is also very imprecise when read literally. If I'm a Boer Afrikaner or an Arab North African who has immigrated to our nation and has been naturalized, am I an "African-American"? Strange, too, because you would think that adding a hyphen, a word and six syllables to a group's description should make it more accurate, not less.

Of course, this is really just the most egregious example of a wider problem in that most all of us are hyphenating ourselves nowadays; we may say we're Italian-Americans, Greek-Americans, etc. But think about it: If we don't think of ourselves first and foremost as being American, it's unlikely that on an emotional level we will want to take great pains to protect American traditions and institutions. I, for one, am American. I have a certain heritage, for sure, but your nationality is determined by the nation of which you are a citizen. So if I'm asked the question, "What are you?" there are many conceivable answers. I could say that I'm a writer, a man, a child of God or something else. But if the intent of the question is to inquire about my nationality, the fact of the matter dictates that there is only one correct answer: I'm American.

Robinson was very passionate and sincere in his interview, but also sincerely wrong on one point: when complaining that only "white history is taught in our schools" (video below). First, the singer's meaning is that only white people's accomplishments are therein recognized. Yet the truth today is quite the opposite: Members of politically favored groups are actually "over-represented."

But the deeper issue is that it's misguided to conceive of there as being "white history" or "black history" or "hispanic history" or "women's history." There is only *history*.

To assign history based on quota is akin to thus apportioning Supreme Court seats or vice-presidential slots. The result is the same, too: What's subject to the quotas is qualitatively degraded.

As for Robinson's poem "A Black American," he gave a splendid rendition of it in 2020 (video below). While not perfect, the poem has some good messages, and a couple of politically incorrect ones, too.



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For example, Robinson — who himself is partially of Nigerian, Scandinavian, Portuguese, and Cherokee ancestry — pointed out that owing to intermarriage, almost no American blacks are 100 percent “black.”

Apropos of this, another famous mixed-race American often cast as “black,” legendary golfer Tiger Woods, actually calls himself “cablinasian.” A combination of Caucasian, black, American-Indian, and Asian, the term reflects Woods’s entire heritage — not just part of it.

While we should focus on race less, there is a lesson here: If we’re going to talk about any matter, race included, we should do it accurately and intelligently. Embracing “African-American” is not a step in this direction.



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