

This You?' (It Definitely Is)

The Twitter meme of the moment is all about accountability.



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All of a sudden, everybody seems to care about black lives.

Well — not everybody, of course. But since the slow, recorded killing of George Floyd by Officer Derek Chauvin made headlines at the end of May, the floodgates have been kicked open. From Taylor Swift to Star Wars to your friends confessing their “white privilege” on Facebook, protecting black lives has been at the top of minds where it never seemed to exist before.

Yet some who have finally chosen to chime in and proclaim that yes, black lives matter, have been greeted by a pesky little critter best described as The Ghost of Racism Past. The Ghost exists in many forms, but on Black Twitter as of late, it has frequently taken on the shape of two simple words.

“This you?”

Brutally crisp and blatantly rhetorical, the phrase has become a catchall representing the internet currency of receipts, forcing bandwagon participants to confront things they might have said or done that seemingly contradict their newfound commitment to the cause.

The N.F.L. player Drew Brees, for instance, participated in the thoroughly muddled but hugely popular social media campaign Blackout Tuesday, tweeting a link to his Instagram page, where he'd posted a black square to express “solidarity” with black people. A short and sweet “This you?” was waiting for him in the form of a user's retweet, accompanied by a photo of a smiling Mr. Brees alongside President Trump and Melania Trump. (Until very recently, Mr. Brees had also been a vocal critic of football players kneeling to protest police brutality during the national anthem.)

The main account for H & M France tweeted, in French, support for black Americans. “This you?” a user retweeted, with an image of the retailer's ad from 2018 featuring a black boy in a hoodie that reads “Coolest Monkey in the Jungle.”

The Baltimore Police Department tweeted photos of its officers kneeling with protesters. “This you?” someone retweeted, with a screenshot of a New York Times article featuring the mug shots of the Baltimore officers involved in the arrest of Freddie Gray, who died in their custody in 2015.

“This you,” Mark Wahlberg?

“This you,” Justin Bieber?

“This you,” Disney?

Usually this specter floats in the internet ether, left unacknowledged (at least directly) by the subject it haunts and taunts. But the rest of us see it and take note and sometimes add our own sassy tweets approving this swift undercutting of performative wokeness.

Certainly, this manner of exchange is nothing new for Twitter, where call-out culture has long reigned supreme, for better and for worse. But there's something especially apt right now about this particularly succinct framing, which, according to the website Know Your Meme, has morphed from merely catching a Twitter user in a mildly embarrassing act of deception to a mode of accountability for palling around with President Trump.

It's delectable. It's satisfying. It's a message.

A message for the moment, in which combating anti-blackness — or rather wanting to appear as if one is combating anti-blackness — is The Thing to do. In many ways, this wave of protests feels quite different from others: Anti-racist literature lists are being shared far and wide; inboxes are awash in carefully worded Very Special Emails from businesses espousing key phrases like “racial disparities” and “We pledge to do better.” Protests from city to city and country to country have carried on for many days — now featuring Ben Affleck! — and show little sign of slowing anytime soon.

Yet George Floyd's death is not the first to be captured in a disturbing video and go viral. (See: Walter Scott, Philando Castile and Eric Garner, for starters.) And it's not the first to spark widespread protests across the nation and even the globe (Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin). For those who have been doing the real work for some time, protesting is more than a trend.

"This you?" captures the sense among some that for all the attention given and demonstrating and donating that has occurred in the past two weeks, not much has changed — yet. It taps into a feeling that these affirmations of black life by public figures and corporations alike are merely lip service for the time being, catching on the way trends often do — if everyone "cool" is doing it, it's finally safe for them to do, too. It highlights the hypocrisy and disconnect between actions and words, and does so in the infinitely shareable, memeable, retweetable syntax of the internet.

That's its power. A detailed tweet revealing how a star who just announced #blacklivesmatter also has a history of mistreating her black colleagues is juicy to read. But a "This you?" retweet from a random user is like a simple alley-oop; it just hits differently.

It's a way to keep people and organizations in check, and nudge them to work harder to receive their cookies, to make it clear that this won't be easy for them, because it has never been easy for black people. A black square, a hashtag, a one-time donation alone isn't going to cut it and, frankly, is a very low bar to clear. Part of doing the work and moving forward is taking responsibility for the past. We've only just begun.

It's a question, but not really. Everyone knows it's you. They just want to make sure you know it's you.

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