

ALSO BY RANDALL KENNEDY

Race, Crime, and the Law

NIGGER

The Strange Career of
a Troublesome Word

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CHAPTER THREE

Pitfalls in Fighting *Nigger*: Perils of Deception, Censoriousness, and Excessive Anger

After the Civil War, a former master approached a former slave while she was tending livestock. "What you doin', nigger?" he asked, as he had probably done on many previous occasions. But this time her response was different: she replied, "I ain't no nigger. I's a Negro and I'm Miss Liza Mixon." Stung, the former master chased his former slave with a whip.¹

Until the civil rights revolution of the 1960s, whites in the South typically refrained from addressing blacks as "Mr." or "Mrs." but instead called them by their first names or by titles signifying a senior with servile

status—titles such as “Uncle” or “Auntie.” Addressing all black men as “boys,” regardless of their age, was another way for whites to observe Jim Crow etiquette.

Positive modifications to such practices have been effected only through struggle. To avoid or at least minimize belittlement, some blacks made a habit of identifying themselves only by their last names. Blacks furiously objected to *Negro* being spelled with a lower- as opposed to an uppercase *N*, and on March 7, 1930, the editors of the *New York Times* announced that the paper would henceforth capitalize the *N* in *Negro*. The U.S. Government Printing Office followed suit three years later. Within a decade, capitalization would become the rule at the Supreme Court as well.²

Referring to blacks derogatorily as niggers, however, was the custom to which blacks objected most strongly. In 1939, when David O. Selznick was in the throes of producing *Gone With the Wind*, he received hundreds of letters from blacks warning him to remove all “nigger” references from his upcoming film. The letter writers were concerned because the novel on which the film was based was full of such references. So, too, were early drafts of the film script. Initially Selznick sought to solve the problem by promising that the N-word would not be spoken by any white characters, but once he had

been made aware of the intensity of blacks’ feelings, he resolved to prohibit its use entirely and took pains to publicize his decision. A form letter declared that his studio had been “in frequent communication with Mr. [Walter] White of the Society for the Advancement of Colored People, and has accepted his suggestions concerning the elimination of the word ‘nigger’ from our picture.”³

In the years that followed, blacks began to win other, similar battles. By the 1940s, “sensitivities were sufficiently aroused for Joseph Conrad’s *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897) to be removed from open shelves in school libraries; for Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings’s *The Yearling* (1938) to be released in a ‘school edition’ that omitted two passages containing the word [nigger]; and for Agatha Christie’s play *Ten Little Niggers* (1939) to be retitled for American consumption as *Ten Little Indians* (and then retitled again as *And Then There Were None*).”⁴

In the 1960s and the decades thereafter, campaigns against racial indecency gained unprecedented support in mounting countless challenges to racist cultural artifacts. Scores of landmarks on official maps, for example, once bore such names as Nigger Lake, Niggerhead Hill, and Old Nigger Creek. *Nigger*, as we have seen, can have many meanings. But in the context of naming land-

marks—an endeavor monopolized until recently by white men—it is clear that the *nigger* memorialized on maps was not the *nigger* of irony or affection but the *nigger* of insult and contempt. Widespread anger at cartographic slurs prompted Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall to insist in 1963 that the Board on Geographic Names replace all references to *Nigger* with *Negro*.⁵

That same year, during court proceedings in Etowah County, Alabama, a prosecutor insisted upon addressing white witnesses by their last names and black witnesses by their first. At issue in the proceedings was the legality of arrests of civil rights protesters. The prosecutor began his cross-examination of one of the protestors by asking her name. She replied, "Miss Mary Hamilton." Addressing her as "Mary," he asked who had arrested her. She repeated her full name and added, "Please address me correctly." The prosecutor nevertheless continued to call her simply Mary, and the judge directed her to answer the question. She refused, whereupon the judge held her in contempt of court and immediately imposed a jail sentence and a fine. His ruling, however, would not stand; the Supreme Court of the United States would later reverse it.⁶

In Mississippi in 1964, during a *successful* gubernatorial campaign, Paul Johnson repeatedly joked that the

acronym NAACP stood for "Niggers, Apes, Alligators, Coons, and Possums."⁷ Such an electoral outcome would be inconceivable today in any state. No serious politician, not even a David Duke, could casually and unapologetically refer to "niggers" and hope to win an election. *Nigger* has been belatedly but effectively stigmatized—an important, positive development in American culture.

Progress, however, begets new problems, and our subject is no exception. The very conditions that have helped to stigmatize *nigger* have also been conducive to the emergence of certain troubling tendencies. Among these latter are unjustified deception, overeagerness to detect insult, the repression of *good* uses of *nigger*, and the overly harsh punishment of those who use the N-word imprudently or even wrongly.

The stigmatization of *nigger* has unavoidably created an atmosphere in which people may be tempted to make false charges in order to exploit feelings of sympathy, guilt, and anger. The most notorious instance of such deception involved an allegation made by a black teenager named Tawana Brawley, who claimed that several white men had abducted her, raped her, and scrawled *nigger* on her body with feces. Her charges have now been fully discredited, though some still profess to believe her

story.⁸ Brawley, however, was not alone in seeking to exploit goodwill through a hoax. In 1995 Tisha Anderson, a black woman, and William Lee, her white boyfriend, insisted that they had received hateful messages ("Niggers don't belong here") and been victimized by vandals who had scrawled racist slurs on the walls and steps of their apartment building ("Niggers live here"). It was all a lie: *they* were the ones who had defaced the building, in an attempt to escape their lease.⁹ In another case, Persey Harris III filed charges against the owner of a restaurant, asserting that the man had come after him with a stick while shouting racial epithets. Harris later confessed that he had lied and explained that he had been trying to create the predicate for a civil lawsuit.¹⁰ A Maryland woman, Sonia James, charged that thugs had flooded her home, slashed her furniture, and spray-painted racial slurs on her walls. Insurance companies covered her claims, the police set up a station near her house, and many people, after hearing of the alleged hate crime, sent gifts of money, food, and clothes. In actuality, the vandal was James herself.¹¹

In yet another case, Sabrina Collins, a black freshman at Emory University, claimed that someone had targeted her with death threats and racist graffiti. Her alleged ordeal became national news. At one point it was re-

ported that she had been so traumatized by racist mistreatment that she had curled up into a fetal position and ceased speaking. Subsequently, however, it became clear that Collins herself had committed the acts in question. That a college student would perpetrate such a hoax was bad enough, but worse still was the reaction voiced by Otis Smith, the president of the Atlanta branch of the NAACP, who dismissed as largely irrelevant the finding that Collins had lied. Echoing Tawana Brawley's apologists, he maintained that to him, it did not matter "whether [Collins] did it or not."¹² Rather, what concerned Smith was "all the pressure these black students are under at these predominantly white schools."¹³ If the hoax served to highlight that issue, he suggested, then he had no problem with Collins's means of publicity. It is difficult to imagine anything that could be more discrediting to a civic leader than the remarks attributed to Smith. Not only do they exhibit an egregious indifference to truthfulness in public discussion; they also indicate an inability to distinguish between a coherent political strategy and a pathetic escapade that was probably nothing more than a desperate plea for help.

Of all the things that have hurt the campaign against *nigger-as-insult*, unjustifiable lying and silly defenses have

inflicted the most damage. But worrisome, too, are the badly mistaken attacks undertaken against people who never should have been seen as enemies.

One infamous round of wrongheaded protest was directed against David Howard, the white director of a municipal agency in Washington, D.C. Howard unwittingly entered the fray when he told members of his staff that in light of budgetary constraints, he would have to be "niggardly" with the money at his disposal. Apparently believing that *niggardly* (which means miserly or stingy) was related to *nigger*, a couple of Howard's black subordinates began a whispering campaign that blossomed into a public outcry. Howard resigned. The mayor of Washington, Anthony Williams, immediately accepted his resignation, declaring that Howard had shown poor judgment.

For several days afterward this incident became a focus of discussion in forums high and low. Some observers voiced indignation at Howard's language and refused to be mollified by explanations of the etymological difference between *nigger* and *niggardly*. "Do you really think," asked one Washingtonian, "[that Howard] didn't notice he had to pass 'nigger' before he could get to the 'dly'?"¹⁴ In print, too, a few commentators maintained that Howard had shown poor judgment, a lapse for which he

could justly be sanctioned. Julianne Malveaux, for example, wrote, "I have a bunch of dictionaries and I understand that 'niggardly' and 'niggling' are not the same as the N-word. But I am still annoyed, amazed, outdone [by Howard]. . . . He understands that perhaps there are other ways to indicate a tightness in a budget—that one might say 'parsimonious,' 'frugal,' or 'miserly.' No matter how many times teutonics attempts to trump ebonics, the fact is that the n-words—be it the N-word or 'niggardly'—rankle."¹⁵ Others declined to attack Howard but suggested that *niggardly* and other, similar words prone to be misunderstood might be best avoided.¹⁶ "Would the openly gay Howard not flinch, not even a little bit," columnist Debra Dickerson asked, "if a superior found a reason to mention tossing a 'faggot' on the fire or going outside to smoke a 'fag'? Two more perfectly harmless and obscure words—but why go there?"¹⁷ Refusing to be bound by the dictionary definition of *niggardly*, Courtland Milloy of the *Washington Post* asserted that "when the subject of race is at hand . . . the only dictionary that counts is the one that gives meaning to human experience." Milloy placed a question mark over "any white person who says 'niggardly' . . . when [that person] could have said miserly."¹⁸

Many other commentators, however, took the oppo-

site view, and sharply criticized the way Howard had been treated. Julian Bond, the chairman of the board of directors of the NAACP, remarked facetiously that "the Mayor has been niggardly in his judgment on this issue."¹⁹ Writing in the Raleigh, North Carolina, *News and Observer*, Barry Saunders averred that the episode demonstrated the malevolent influence of "people whose antennae are always up, seeking out an affront where none exists so they can respond out of all proportion."²⁰ Similarly dismissive was the columnist Tony Snow, who pronounced Howard the victim of a "linguistic lynching." According to Snow, "David Howard got fired because some people in public employ were morons who a) didn't know the meaning of 'niggardly,' b) didn't know how to use a dictionary to discover the word's meaning and c) actually demanded that he apologize for their ignorance."²¹

Eventually Mayor Williams, who has been criticized as insufficiently "black" by many Washingtonians, offered Howard another position in the D.C. government and admitted that he had been wrong to accept his resignation without first educating himself fully about what had transpired. By then, though, the damage had been done. By fearfully deferring to excessive and uninformed out-

rage, the mayor had lowered his own standing in public opinion.

What happened in Washington will forever shadow the history of *niggardly* and serve as a benchmark of hypersensitivity. Around the same time, however, an even more alarming incident involving *niggardly* occurred at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where a professor used the word during a lecture in a class he was teaching on Chaucer. A black student who was upset by the similarity between *niggardly* and *nigger* approached the professor after class to express her concerns. He apparently thanked her for sharing her perceptions with him and proceeded to explain the origin of *niggardly* and hence its distance from the N-word. In the next session the professor once again referred to *niggardly* and then defined it for the class. Notwithstanding the clarification, the same black student who had previously spoken with the professor stormed out of the classroom, crying. According to one news report, she referred to her experience in the Chaucer class as evidence of the need for a stringent speech code that would apply to all members of the faculty, regardless of the intent behind their "offensive" words.²²

A misplaced protest notable for the distinguished

character of its antagonists erupted in the pages of *Boston Magazine* in May 1998, following the publication of a long, largely complimentary article by Cheryl Bentsen about Henry Louis Gates Jr., the chair of the Department of Afro-American Studies at Harvard University. Gates is a controversial figure about whom it is virtually impossible to write without getting involved in the disputes that surround his celebrity. In this instance, however, disputation arose not from Bentsen's profile itself but from the title given to it by the editors of the magazine. The cover of the April issue featured the phrase "Head Negro in Charge," a softened version of a term well known in black circles: "Head Nigger in Charge," or HNIC. Scores of readers objected, including one who declared in an agitated letter to the editor:

The title is EXTREMELY RACIST!!! As a black American, I am outraged and insulted. The term [HNIC] was used in the days of slavery when white foremen would designate a black person to oversee (that is to keep in check) other blacks. The title shows your ignorance and indifference to the black community. I vow NEVER to purchase or support your magazine in any way. I will also rally every single person I know to boycott your magazine.²³

Another reader wrote:

I am a subscriber . . . who is really offended by the headline of the Gates article. I can accept that you did not mean offense; but if members of the black community express dismay at the use of language, it is appropriate to say: I am sorry. . . . I will refrain from using such language in the future.²⁴

Craig Unger, then the editor of *Boston Magazine*, responded to the controversy by asserting:

The term HNIC is part of the vernacular of black writers and intellectuals. It denotes the phenomenon of the white establishment selecting one African-American to speak for the race. It was in that context that we used HNIC, and there was clearly no intent to offend. On the contrary, we are proud of our story, and we want nothing to overshadow it. Our use of the expression, however, has obviously upset some people, and I sincerely regret that.²⁵

Many critics of the "HNIC" title proceeded as if their offended sensibilities alone should settle the matter—as

if their sense of outrage necessarily made the act they objected to a bad act warranting an apology. Repeatedly, people voiced anger at *Boston Magazine* without troubling to state what justified their anger. Natalie Anderson's letter to the editor, for example, charged that the title of the article was "EXTREMELY RACIST," but it neglected to explain what was so racist about it. True, "HNIC" has historically denoted a black person who is in command of a given situation only thanks to the backing of whites.²⁶ But clearly the editors of *Boston Magazine* were aware of that meaning and simply wished to add a provocative and ironic twist to a largely admiring profile of a prominent black figure by suggesting that despite massive changes in race relations, whites still retain the power to select who among blacks will be accorded the mantle of leadership—a point that has been made by numerous black intellectuals, including Gates himself.

In truth, the anger directed at *Boston Magazine* had to do not so much with the content of the disparaged title as with its provenance—that is, the fact that the phrase had been co-opted by the magazine's white editors. For many people, *nigger* and its cognates take on completely different complexions depending on the speaker's race. Had the "HNIC" profile and title appeared in *Essence*,

Emerge, *Ebony*, or some other black-owned publication, there would have been no controversy. But *Boston Magazine* is white-owned and marketed mainly to whites, situating "HNIC" in a context that, for some observers, raised several difficulties: the embarrassment of discussing certain racial topics before a predominantly white audience; fear of, and anger about, a white entrepreneur intruding into black cultural territory; and the suspicion that whatever the setting, whites derive racist pleasure out of hearing, saying, or even alluding to "nigger." For these reasons, even blacks who use *nigger* themselves adamantly insist that it is wrong for whites to do so.²⁷ On the album containing his "I hate niggers" skit, for example, Chris Rock also presents a sketch in which a white man approaches him after a performance and appreciatively repeats some of what Rock has just said onstage. The next sound heard is that of the white man being punched.²⁸ Rock's message is clear: white people cannot rightly say about blacks some of the things that blacks themselves say about blacks. Just as a son is privileged to address his mother in ways that outsiders cannot (at least not in the son's presence), so, too, is a member of a race privileged to address his racial kin in ways prescribed to others.

Although many whites follow this convention, some rebel. Two noteworthy examples are Carl Van Vechten and Quentin Tarantino.

Van Vechten sparked controversy when, in 1926, he published *Nigger Heaven*, a novel about black life in Harlem. The title alone alienated many blacks, including some who knew the author personally. Van Vechten had, for example, selected some lines of poetry by his friend Countee Cullen to serve as the epigraph for his book, but when he told the poet about his proposed title, he turned, in Van Vechten's words, "white with rage."²⁹ And soon their friendship ended. At an antilynching rally in Harlem, a protester burned a copy of *Nigger Heaven*. And in Boston, the book was banned.

Van Vechten was well aware that the title would singe the sensibilities of many potential readers. Even his own father objected to it: "Your 'Nigger Heaven' is a title I don't like," Charles Duane Van Vechten informed his son in 1925. "I have myself never spoken of a colored man as a 'nigger.' If you are trying to help the race, as I am assured you are, I think every word you write should be a respectful one towards the blacks."³⁰ Yet the younger Van Vechten persisted, emblazoning upon his novel a title that still sparks resentment.

It should not be overlooked, however, that while

many blacks condemned *Nigger Heaven*, others—including some of the most admired black intellectuals of the day—applauded it. Charles Chesnutt, the first black professional man of letters, praised Van Vechten in a letter, telling him that he hoped that the novel would "have the success which its brilliancy and obvious honesty deserve." Walter White, himself a novelist as well as a leading official with the NAACP, expressed both admiration and regret that he had not thought of the title first. Paul Robeson sent Van Vechten a congratulatory telegram that stated, in part, "NIGGER HEAVEN AMAZING IN ITS ABSOLUTE UNDERSTANDING AND DEEP SYMPATHY THANKS FOR SUCH A BOOK." Charles S. Johnson, editor of *Opportunity*, one of the key journals of the Harlem Renaissance, commented that he "wish[ed] a Negro had written it." Along the same lines, novelist Nella Larsen mused, "Why, oh, why, couldn't we have done something as big as this for ourselves?"³¹

James Weldon Johnson, author of "Lift Evr'y Voice and Sing" (the "Negro National Anthem"), wrote an effusive review in which he declared that Van Vechten had paid colored people "the rare tribute of writing about them as people rather than as puppets."³² Later, in his autobiography, Johnson would assert that "most of the Negroes who condemned *Nigger Heaven* did not read

it; they were estopped by the title." Looking toward the future, he would conjecture that "as the race progresses it will become less and less susceptible to hurts from such causes."³³ On this point he was clearly wrong, for as we have seen, even in this new century *nigger* retains its capacity to anger, inflame, and distract.

The white film director Quentin Tarantino has recently updated the racial politics triggered by Van Vechten's novel by writing film scripts in which *nigger* figures prominently. Tarantino's leading man in *Jackie Brown*, a black gun runner, casually uses the word throughout the film; in one sequence he hugs a black underling and, with apparent affection, calls him "my nigger," only to murder him in cold blood a few minutes later. In *True Romance*, Tarantino orchestrates a confrontation between a white man and a Sicilian mobster. The man knows that the mobster is about to kill him, and in a final gesture of defiance, he laughingly tells him that since North African moors—"niggers"—conquered Sicily and had sex with Sicilian women, his ancestors must have been niggers. Further, the condemned man speculates that the Sicilian's grandmother "fucked a nigger" and that therefore the mobster himself is "part eggplant." And in Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, a scene featuring a black hit man, his white partner, and a white friend of the black hit man has the professional

assassins showing up unexpectedly at the home of the friend to dispose of a bloody car with a corpse inside. Exasperated, the white friend complains to his black hit-man buddy that "storing dead niggers ain't my fucking business." It isn't so much the fact that he will be breaking the law by helping to conceal a murder that worries him; rather, it's the fear that his wife will divorce him if she comes home while the hit men are still in the house. This white man who talks of "dead-nigger storage" loves his wife and is absolutely terrified by the prospect of losing her. It is important to note that she is black.

Spike Lee, among others, has taken exception to Tarantino's playfulness with *nigger*. When it was noted in response that some of his own films also make extensive use of *nigger*, the director replied that as an African American, he had "more of a right to use [the N-word]."³⁴ Lee himself has not articulated the basis for that asserted "right," but at least three theories are plausible. One is that the long and ugly history of white racist subordination of African Americans should in and of itself disqualify whites from using *nigger*. A second holds that equity earned through oppression grants cultural ownership rights: having been made to suffer by being called "nigger" all these years, this theory goes, blacks should now be able to monopolize the slur's peculiar cultural capi-

tal.³⁵ A third theory is that whites lack a sufficiently intimate knowledge of black culture to use the word *nigger* properly.

All three of these theories are dramatized in Lee's film *Bamboozled*, a farce about a black scriptwriter who, in order to keep his job, creates a television-network variety show featuring all of the stereotypical characteristics through which blacks have been comically defamed: blackface, bugging eyes, extravagant buffoonery, the omnipresent grin. Lee takes care to make the worst of *Bamboozled*'s many villains an obnoxious, presumptuous, ignorant white man—Dunwitty—who deems himself sufficiently “black” to boast to his African American subordinates that he knows more about “niggers” than they do.³⁶

The great failing of these theories is that, taken seriously, they would cast a protectionist pall over popular culture that would likely benefit certain minority entrepreneurs only at the net expense of society overall. Excellence in culture thrives, like excellence elsewhere, in a setting open to competition—and that includes competition concerning how best to dramatize the N-word. Thus, instead of cordoning off racially defined areas of the culture and allowing them to be tilled only by persons of the “right” race, we should work toward enlarging the

common ground of American culture, a field that is open to all comers regardless of their origin. Despite Spike Lee's protests to the contrary, Quentin Tarantino is talented and has the goods to prove it. That is not to say that he should be exempt from criticism, but Lee's racial critique of his fellow director is off the mark. It is almost wholly ad hominem. It focuses on the character of Tarantino's race rather than the character of his work—brilliant work that allows the word *nigger* to be heard in a rich panoply of contexts and intonations.

In 1997 in Ypsilanti, Michigan, a computer technician named Delphine Abraham decided to look up the definition of *nigger* in the tenth edition of *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*.³⁷ This is what she found:

1: a black person—usu. taken to be offensive 2: a member of any dark-skinned race—usu. taken to be offensive 3: a member of a socially disadvantaged class of persons <it's time for somebody to lead all of America's ~s . . . all the people who feel left out of the political process—Ron Dellums>

usage *Nigger* in senses 1 and 2 can be found in the works of such writers of the past as Joseph Conrad, Mark Twain, and Charles Dickens, but it

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now ranks as perhaps the most offensive and inflammatory racial slur in English. Its use by and among blacks is not always intended or taken as offensive, but, except in sense 3, it is otherwise a word expressive of racial hatred and bigotry.

Abraham recorded what she subsequently felt and did:

I felt that the first two definitions labeled me and anyone else who happened to be Black or have dark skin a nigger. Outraged, I called Merriam-Webster in Springfield, Massachusetts. I reached the company's president and publisher, John Morse, who was polite but really didn't seem to understand my concerns. Not getting a response that satisfied me, I told him before hanging up, "Something should be done about this, and I think I'm going to start a petition drive to have the word removed or redefined."

Just by speaking locally, I gathered more than 2,000 signatures within the first month. I was interviewed by the Associated Press news service, on radio talk shows, and even on CNN. Newsgroups on the Internet joined the campaign. Syndicated newspaper columnists weighed in. The NAACP, through its president and CEO, Kweisi Mfume,

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suggested organizing a boycott if Merriam-Webster did not review the definition.

Most people believe, as I do, that the N-word needs a more accurate first definition reflecting that it is a derogatory term used to dehumanize or oppress a group or race of people.³⁸

The question is, should Abrahams, Mfume, or anyone else have felt insulted by Merriam-Webster's definition?

No.

The definition notes that the term is usually taken to be offensive and then states, for good measure, that the N-word "now ranks as perhaps the most offensive and inflammatory racial slur in English." Abrahams claimed that the Merriam-Webster definition labeled as a nigger anyone who happened to be black. But that view is unreasonable given the totality of the definition offered by the dictionary. In defining *nigger*, moreover, Webster's 10th does not vary from its typical practice. For instance, in defining *honky*, the dictionary posits: "*usu. disparaging*: a white person."

In response to Abraham's petition drive, representatives of Merriam-Webster tried to depoliticize the matter by portraying the dictionary as a mechanical, autonomous linguistic mirror. To this end, the marketing

director repeatedly averred that "a dictionary is a scholarly reference, not a political tool. As long as the word is in use, it is our responsibility as dictionary publishers to put the word into the dictionary."³⁹ Similarly, the company president, John R. Morse, portrayed his editors as mere technicians lacking independent powers of their own. Dictionary makers, Morse maintained, "do not invent the words that go into the dictionary, and they don't decide what meanings they will have."⁴⁰ Morse simultaneously undermined his own point, however, by noting that "offensive words . . . appear only in hardcover college-level dictionaries, which are edited expressly for adults. Slurs and other offensive words are not included in dictionaries intended for children. Nor are they published in any smaller, abridged dictionaries, such as paperbacks." With respect to these other dictionaries, the managers of Merriam-Webster had decided, for various reasons, to excise the N-word. Whether or not this decision was a sound one is, for the moment, irrelevant. The important thing to recognize is that dictionary makers do, in fact, exercise judgment, notwithstanding Morse's evasive denial.

Deciding whether to note or how to define a deeply controversial word is an inescapably "political" act, and claims to the contrary are either naive or disingenuous.

The issue, then, is not whether editors shape the substance of their dictionaries. Of course they do. The issue is the substance of the choices made. Some of Merriam-Webster's critics have condemned the editors' decision to include any reference at all to *nigger*. "If the word is not there [in the dictionary], you can't use it," one protester asserted in favor of deleting the N-word altogether.⁴¹ That tack, however, is glaringly wrongheaded. Many terms that are absent from dictionaries are nonetheless pervasive in popular usage. Moreover, so long as racist sentiments exist, they will find linguistic means of expression, even if some avenues are blocked. There are, after all, numerous ways of insulting people.

In sum, the campaign against *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* was misguided. The dictionary defined the term adequately, and the dictionary's editors were correct in including the N-word despite the embarrassment and hurt feelings the term inflicts. *Nigger* should have a place in any serious dictionary. The word is simply too important to ignore.

A second, and achingly poignant, example of mistaken protest is the widespread repudiation of *Huckleberry Finn*, now one of the most beleaguered texts in American literature. Monthly, it seems, someone attacks Mark

Twain's most famous book on the grounds that it is racist. The novel's most energetic foe, John H. Wallace, calls it "the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written."⁴² For many of *Huckleberry Finn*'s enemies, the most upsetting and best proof of the book's racism is the fact that *nigger* appears in the text some 215 times. At one point, for example, Huck's aunt Sally asks him why he is so late arriving at her house:

"We blowed a cylinder head."

"Good gracious! Anybody hurt?"

"No'm. Killed a nigger."

"Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt."⁴³

Wallace asserts that this exchange, within the context of the novel as a whole, strives to make the point that blacks are not human beings.⁴⁴ That interpretation, however, is ludicrous, a frightening exhibition of how thought becomes stunted in the absence of any sense of irony. Twain is not willfully buttressing racism here; he is seeking ruthlessly to unveil and ridicule it. By putting *nigger* in white characters' mouths, the author is not branding blacks, but rather branding the whites.

There was a time when Twain's own use of *nigger* sig-

naled contempt. As a young man inculcated with white-supremacist beliefs and sentiments, he viewed blacks as inferior and spoke of them as such.⁴⁵ As he matured and traveled and became more cosmopolitan, however, Twain underwent a dramatic metamorphosis. He grew to hate slavery and the brutality of Jim Crow and began to express his antiracist perspective satirically through his writings. *Huckleberry Finn* is the best fictive example of Twain's triumph over his upbringing. In it he creates a loving relationship between Huck and Jim, the runaway slave, all the while sardonically impugning the pretensions of white racial superiority. Among Twain's nonfiction, a striking example of his revolt against bigotry is his piece "Only a Nigger," in which he speaks in the voice of an apologist for a lynching:

Ah, well! Too bad, to be sure! A little blunder in the administration of justice by southern mob-law: but nothing to speak of. Only "a nigger" killed by mistake—that is all. . . . But mistakes will happen, even in the conduct of the best regulated and most high-toned mobs, and surely there is no good reason why Southern gentlemen should worry themselves with useless regrets, so long as only an innocent "nigger" is hanged, or roasted or [] to

death now and then. . . . What are the lives of a few "niggers" in comparison with the impetuous instincts of a proud and fiery race? Keep ready the halter, therefore, o chivalry of Memphis! Keep the lash knotted; keep the brand and the faggots in waiting, for prompt work with the next "nigger" who may be suspected of any damnable crime!⁴⁶

Wallace, I suppose, would read this as an endorsement of lynching. But obviously it is intended to be just the opposite. The same holds true for *Huckleberry Finn*, which Twain designed to subvert, not to reinforce, racism.

I am not ruling out criticism of the novel. Perceptive commentators have questioned its literary merits.⁴⁷ It is undoubtedly true, moreover, that regardless of Twain's intentions, *Huckleberry Finn* (like any work of art) can be handled in a way that is not only stupid but downright destructive of the educational and emotional well-being of students. To take a contemporary example, the producers of *Mississippi Burning* intended their film to carry an antiracist message, but that did not prevent it from contributing inspiration to a wayward youth who, in 1990, burned crosses outside the residence of a black family in St. Paul, Minnesota, in an effort to frighten them into moving.⁴⁸

Such concerns, however, are different from the one I am addressing. I am addressing the contention that the presence of *nigger* alone is sufficient to taint *Huckleberry Finn* or any other text. I am addressing those who contend that *nigger* has no proper place in American culture and who thus desire to erase the N-word totally, without qualification, from the cultural landscape. I am addressing parents who, in numerous locales, have demanded the removal of *Huckleberry Finn* from syllabi solely on the basis of the presence of the N-word—without having read the novel themselves, without having investigated the way in which it is being explored in class, and without considering the possibilities opened up by the close study of a text that confronts so dramatically the ugliness of slavery and racism. I am addressing eradicationists who, on grounds of racial indecency, would presumably want to bowdlerize or censor poems such as Carl Sandburg's "Nigger Lover," stories such as Theodore Dreiser's "Nigger Jeff," Claude McKay's "Nigger Lover," or Henry Dumas' "Double Nigger," plays such as Ed Bullins' "The Electronic Nigger," and novels such as Gil Scott-Heron's *The Nigger Factory*.

A third category of misguided protest involves cases in which insulted parties demand excessive punishment.

Consider what happened in 1993 at Central Michigan University (CMU).

Keith Dambrot was in his third year as the school's varsity men's basketball coach.⁴⁹ CMU also designated him as an "assistant professor"; presumably his subject was basketball. At halftime during a game against Miami University of Ohio, Dambrot tried to focus and inspire his team, made up of eleven blacks and three whites. He asked his players for permission to use with them a term that they often used with one another: the N-word. They nodded their assent, at which point Coach Dambrot said, "We need to be tougher, harder-nosed, and play harder. . . . We need to have more niggers on the team."⁵⁰ He then admiringly referred to one white member of the team as a nigger and went around the locker room categorizing the other players, by name, as either niggers or half-niggers. The niggers were the players who were doing their jobs well. The half-niggers or non-niggers were the ones who needed to work harder. Coach Dambrot later explained that he had used the term *nigger* "for instructional purposes with the permission of my African American players, and I used the term in the sense in which it is used by my African American players . . . to connote a person who is fearless, mentally strong, and tough."⁵¹

Despite the halftime pep talk, Central Michigan lost the game. But that was merely the beginning of Coach Dambrot's problems.

Word soon spread on campus about Coach Dambrot's locker-room speech. He must have become aware of this, and realized that some observers might take offense, because he asked the university's athletic director to speak to the members of the team about the incident. None of them voiced any objection to what the coach had said. Nonetheless, the athletic director told Dambrot that regardless of his intentions, his use of *nigger* had been "extremely inappropriate."⁵² The director then warned the coach that if he used the term again, he would be fired.

Soon thereafter, a student who had previously quit the basketball team complained about the coach's language to the university's affirmative-action officer. This administrator, a white woman, demanded that the coach be punished. She insisted that a formal reprimand be placed in his personnel file, that he be suspended without pay for five days, and that during his suspension he arrange for a sensitivity trainer to meet with the team to explain why the use of *nigger* was always inappropriate. She further specified that attendance at this sensitivity-training session should be made mandatory, that Coach

Dambrot should "help assure that the team is not hostile to the training," and that he should "convey his support of this training session to the players and the staff."⁵³

The coach did not resist, hoping that the incident would blow over quietly. His hopes, however, were shortly to be dashed. Publicity triggered two demonstrations at which eighty to a hundred protestors expressed their disapproval of the coach's purported "racism." The president of the university responded by announcing that the coach had been disciplined, declaring that "the term [*nigger*] is inappropriate under any circumstances," and avowing that he was "deeply sorry about the hurt, anger, [and] embarrassment its use ha[d] caused individuals as well as the entire university community."⁵⁴ By that time, though, critics of the university, including state legislators, were calling for harsher punishment, which was soon forthcoming.

On April 12, 1993, the university administration fired Coach Dambrot on the grounds that "public reaction to the incident [had] created an environment that makes it impossible for the university to conduct a viable basketball program under [his] leadership."⁵⁵

Dambrot then sued the university, claiming that his discharge constituted a violation of his First Amendment rights. In a gesture of solidarity, members of the basket-

ball team also sued the university, claiming that its speech code violated *their* First Amendment rights. The students prevailed—judges invalidated CMU's speech code—but not so their coach: judges ruled that the First Amendment did not bar the university from firing him. As interpreted by the Supreme Court, the First Amendment protects (to some extent) speech that touches upon matters of public concern. Therefore, if the coach had been talking to his team at halftime about, say, the racist history of the term *nigger*, his comments probably would have been protected. But in the view of the judges, Dambrot's speech did not touch upon a matter of public concern and was therefore fully vulnerable to the university's censure.

Here, however, I am interested not so much in the courts' conclusion that the university had the authority to fire the coach—a legal conclusion that seems to me to have been correct—as in the judgment that the university officials exercised pursuant to that authority. That judgment—or, more accurately, that *misjudgment*—casts a revealing light on our society's continued grappling with *nigger* and the cultural dynamics that surround it. The initial response by the athletic director—ordering the coach to desist—was sufficient. It recognized the undue risk that the coach's words might be misunderstood

by members of the wider university community, while acknowledging that Dambrot had meant no harm.

Subsequent actions taken by university officials were excessive. First, the sensitivity-training session ordered by the affirmative-action officer was just the sort of Orwellian overreaching that has, unfortunately, tarnished the reputation of multiculturalist reformism. Among her requirements in regard to the session, after all, were that it must brook no debate over the propriety of the coach's language; that it must involve the coach in pacifying his players' resistance; that player attendance must be mandatory; and that the coach must explicitly state his support for the process regardless of his own opinions. Second, prior to firing Coach Dambrot, CMU officials seem to have made little effort to clarify the controversy or to suggest to the university community that this was a situation in which underlying realities were considerably more ambiguous than surface appearances might indicate. The fact is that Dambrot, though imprudent, was obviously employing *nigger* in a sense embraced by his players—a sense in which the term was a compliment, not an insult.⁵⁶ Sometimes it may be necessary for an administration to sacrifice a deserving employee in order to mollify public anger that might otherwise pose a threat to the institution's future. In this

case, however, the CMU authorities capitulated too quickly to the formulaic rage of affronted blacks, the ill-considered sentimentality of well-meaning whites, and their own crass, bureaucratic opportunism.

An even more deplorable incident took place in 1998 at Jefferson Community College in Louisville, Kentucky, where an adjunct professor named Ken Hardy taught a course on interpersonal communications.⁵⁷ In a class exploring taboo words, students cited a number of insulting terms such as *faggot* and *bitch*. A member of the class mentioned *nigger*, and in the course of the discussion, Hardy repeated it. One of the nine black students in the twenty-two-person class objected to the airing of *that* word. Classmates disagreed, giving rise to a debate in which most of those present participated. At one point Hardy lent his support to the student who had first objected, suggesting that the class should take seriously the proposition that certain words were simply too volatile to be spoken out loud.

During a break, the student who had objected approached Hardy and requested that he stop using the N-word. Hardy defended the class discussion that had transpired but offered the student the option of sitting out the remainder of the session. She rejected that alternative. Subsequently she noted her continued disap-

proval in a letter to Hardy and also relayed her complaint to the Reverend Louis Coleman, a prominent local civil rights activist. Coleman, in turn, called the president of the college and asked him to "look into the matter." Hardy soon found himself in a tense meeting with the acting dean of academic affairs, who indicated, among other things, that the school could ill afford to antagonize prominent citizens. Although Hardy did not know it at the time, his career at Jefferson was at an end. A few days later the dean left a message on his phone stating that he would have no job at the college come fall.

The dismissal at Jefferson was worse than the one at CMU because it arose from a teacher's effort to make a point that was directly relevant to the intellectual concerns of a college-level course. By contrast, Coach Dambrot had acted imprudently in gratuitously using the word *nigger* in a context readily available to misinterpretation. Common to both cases, however, was the overeagerness of academic administrators to fire a subordinate for a *single* perceived misstep, even in circumstances in which the alleged wrongdoer had quite obviously been innocent of any intention to insult or otherwise harm those whom he addressed.

A much more sensible and humane response was modeled by high school students in Gould, Arkansas, in

1988.⁵⁸ A white teacher got into trouble because of a remark she made to an all-black class of students who were, according to her, becoming rambunctious. Exasperated, she said something designed to get their attention: "I think you're trying to make me think you're a bunch of poor, dumb niggers, and I don't think that." Upon hearing about her comment, ninety-one parents signed a petition demanding her removal. The school board requested the teacher's resignation after she acknowledged that she had committed "a dumb, stupid mistake." She was reportedly about to leave the town for good when students circulated petitions asking the board to reconsider its decision. The petitions were signed by 124 out of the town's 147 high school students, only two of whom were white. In light of this development, the school board, chaired by a black man, reversed itself. Asked to explain the students' intervention, a student leader replied, "We were ready to forgive and go on. . . . Anybody ought to get a second chance."

The student's statement, generous as it is, needs a bit of qualification. The offer of a second chance ought not to be automatic but should instead hinge on such variables as the nature of the offender's position and the purpose behind his or her remark. In contrast to District Attorney Spivey, the teacher held a position that, while

important, did not entail her exercising powers like those wielded by a prosecutor. Moreover, again in contrast to District Attorney Spivey, the teacher was not attempting to humiliate anyone. She was simply trying to instruct her students for their own benefit, albeit in a regrettable manner. In such circumstances she, like Coach Dambrot, deserved a second chance.

Advocates of broader prohibitions against "hate speech" maintain that the current legal regime is all too tolerant of *nigger*-as-insult and other forms of racial abuse. Several of the most prominent of these advocates—notably Charles Lawrence, Mari Matsuda, and Richard Delgado—have, in their positions as professors in law schools, provided intellectual underpinnings for campaigns aimed at banishing hate speech.⁵⁹ They and their allies have succeeded in persuading authorities at some colleges and universities to enact new speech codes. They have succeeded, too, in shaking up and enlivening civil libertarians, a group that had become intellectually complacent in the absence of a strong challenge. They have been unable, however, to sway the judiciary and have thus been forced to witness the invalidation of speech codes tested in litigation.⁶⁰ They have also largely failed to capture opinion. In the American culture wars

of the 1980s and 1990s, the left-liberal multiculturalists who sought increased regulation of hate speech were soundly trounced by a coalition of opponents who effectively derided them as censorious ideologues—otherwise known as the P.C. (Political Correctness) Police.

The point, however, is not simply that the champions of speech codes lost on a variety of important fronts; it is that they *rightly* lost. For one thing, proponents of enhanced hate-speech regulation have typically failed to establish persuasively the asserted predicate for their campaign—that is, that verbal abuse on college campuses and elsewhere is a "rising," "burgeoning," "growing," "resurgent" development demanding countermeasures.⁶¹ Regulationists do cite racist incidents on campus—the African student at Smith College who found a message slipped under her door reading, "African Nigger do you want some bananas?";⁶² the counselor at Purdue University who was greeted by the words "Death Nigger" etched onto her door;⁶³ the taunt written on a blackboard at the University of Michigan: "A mind is a terrible thing to waste—especially on a nigger"⁶⁴—but too often the dramatic retelling of an anecdote is permitted to substitute for a more systematic, quantitative analysis. Indeed, some commentators do not even seriously attempt to docu-

ment their assertions but instead simply note a number of apparently outrageous events and then charge, without substantiation, that these episodes are, for example, representative of "a rise in the incidence of verbal and symbolic assault and harassment to which black and other traditionally subjugated groups are subjected."⁶⁵ A list of twenty, fifty, one hundred, or even three hundred racist incidents may appear to offer a terrible indictment of race relations on American campuses—until one recalls that there are hundreds of institutions of higher education across the country. Bearing in mind the numbers of young collegians who are constantly interacting with one another, often in close quarters, is a useful aid for keeping in perspective the catalogue of racist episodes that regulationists point to as the predicate for what they see as urgently needed reform.

A persuasive assertion that racially assaultive speech is on the rise ought logically to entail positing that there was a greater incidence of such speech in year Y than in year X. Demonstrating such a trajectory, however, is a daunting enterprise. After all, even when one is able to say that the number of reported incidents in a certain year was greater than the number of reported incidents in another year, there remains the problem of determining whether

the reporting itself was a mirror of reality or a result of efforts to elicit from subjects their dissatisfaction with conduct they perceived to be offensive. Acknowledging such complications opens the way to considering alternative interpretations to those put forth by the regulationists. One alternative is that the growing number of reported episodes involving hate speech is a function of both an increased willingness to report perceived insults and an increased willingness to record them, which would mean that the perception of a rising tide of racial vilification is an illusion that paradoxically signals progress rather than regress. Or it may be that the regulationists are correct—that increased reporting does in fact reflect a greater incidence of verbal abuse. Even if that is so, however, there remains a question of interpretation. Here again, it is possible that episodes of verbal abuse are actually indicative of racial progress. On some campuses, for example, racist verbal abuse may not previously have been a problem simply because there were too few blacks around to generate racial friction. More recently, with the advent of a critical mass of black students, the possibilities for racial conflict may have escalated. At institutions where this is the case, increasing numbers of racial insults could be merely a function of more frequent inter-

racial interaction and all that comes with it—for good and for ill.

Proponents of enhanced speech codes portray blacks on predominantly white campuses as being socially isolated and politically weak. Yet the regulationists clearly believe that the authorities to whom they are appealing are likely to side with these students and not with their antagonists. This, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. observes, is the “hidden foundation for the [anti-] hate speech movement. . . . You don’t go to the teacher to complain about the school bully unless you know the teacher is on your side.”⁶⁶

Resorting to school authorities, however, has had its own costs. In stressing the “terror” of verbal abuse, proponents of hate-speech regulation have, ironically, empowered abusers while simultaneously weakening black students by counseling that they should feel grievously wounded by remarks that their predecessors would have shaken off or ignored altogether.

An examination of the substance of the regulationists’ proposals turns up suggested reforms that are puzzlingly narrow, frighteningly broad, or disturbingly susceptible to discriminatory manipulation. In 1990, after much debate, Stanford University prohibited “harassment by

personal vilification,” which it defined as speech or other expression that

- a) is intended to insult or stigmatize an individual or a small number of individuals on the basis of their race, color, handicap, religion, sexual orientation, or national and ethnic origin; and
- b) is addressed directly to the individual or individuals whom it insults or stigmatizes; and
- c) makes use of insulting or “fighting” words or nonverbal symbols.⁶⁷

Perhaps the most notable feature of this provision is how little it accomplished. One of the incidents at Stanford that had fueled the call for a speech code in the first place involved the defacement of a poster bearing a likeness of Beethoven. After an argument with a black student who claimed that the composer had been partly of African descent, white students darkened a portrait of him and exaggerated the curliness of his hair and the thickness of his lips. They then affixed their negrofied poster to the door of the black student’s room. Regulationists were outraged by this conduct, which they perceived as being aggressively racist. But the Stanford code

would not have covered this action or, for that matter, most of the other verbal or symbolic "assaults" about which regulationists complain. During the first five years of Stanford's code, in fact, no one was ever charged with a violation. Some might argue that this record suggests that the code effectively prevented bad conduct, thus obviating the need for disciplinary proceedings. But a more plausible explanation is that conduct of the sort prohibited by the code was virtually nonexistent before its enactment and virtually nonexistent afterward—a veritable straw man.⁶⁸

The Stanford code covered a single, specific type of speech: vulgar racial insults directed from one person to another in a face-to-face encounter. Such exchanges do happen; at the University of Wisconsin, for instance, a group of white male students reportedly followed some black female students, all the while shouting, "I've never tried a nigger before."⁶⁹ But conduct of this sort is sanctionable via traditional legal machinery (or if not through reputation-besmirching publicity), without resort to newfangled modes of repression. It is likely, moreover, that especially on a college campus, antiblack polemics that are polite, skillful, and conventionally garbed—think of *The Bell Curve*—will be far more hurtful to African Americans than the odd *nigger*, *coon*, *jiga-*

boo, or other racial insult, which in any case will almost certainly be more discrediting to the speaker than to the target. Yet under the Stanford code, the damaging but polite polemic is protected, while the rude but impotent epithet is not. This problem of underinclusiveness is a major embarrassment for the regulationist camp because, as Gates notes, "the real power commanded by the racist is likely to vary inversely with the vulgarity with which it is expressed. Black professionals soon learn that it is the socially disenfranchised—the lower class, the homeless—who are more likely to hail them as 'niggers.' The circles of power have long since switched to a vocabulary of indirection." By focusing on vulgar words that wound, regulationists "invite us to spend more time worr[ying] about speech codes than [about] coded speech."⁷⁰

Because speech codes of the Stanford variety fail to address what some regulationists see as intolerable forms of speech, broader prohibitions have been proposed. Professor Charles Lawrence, for example, has urged that the ban on racial epithets be extended beyond the context of face-to-face encounters, while Professor Mari Matsuda has advocated punishing "racist speech" in general. Such proposals, however, encroach upon legal doctrines that have helped to make American

culture among the most open and vibrant in the world.⁷¹ Under the overbreadth doctrine, regulation must be narrowly drawn so as to touch only that conduct which a governing authority may validly repress; where a regulation sweeps within its ambit a substantial amount of protected speech along with unprotected conduct, the overbreadth doctrine instructs courts to invalidate the regulation. Under the vagueness doctrine, regulation that may chill protected expression must be drawn with especially rigorous exactitude. And under the doctrine of content neutrality, a governmental authority cannot prohibit certain forms of speech merely because it objects to the ideas or sentiments the speaker seeks to communicate. To quote one of many Supreme Court pronouncements on this theme: "If there is one star fixed in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion or other matters of opinion."⁷² The cumulative effect of these and related speech-protective doctrines is a conspicuous toleration of speech and other representations that many people—in some instances the vast majority of people—find deeply, perhaps even viscerally, obnoxious, including flag burning, pornography, Nazis' taunting of Holocaust

survivors, a jacket emblazoned with the phrase "Fuck the Draft" worn in a courthouse, *The Satanic Verses*, *The Birth of a Nation*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. And just as acute wariness of public or private censorship has long furthered struggles for freedom of expression in all its many guises, so has resistance against censorship always been an important and positive feature of the great struggles against racist tyranny in the United States, from the fight against slavery to the fight against Jim Crow.⁷³ For this reason, we may count ourselves fortunate that the anti-hate-speech campaign of the regulationists fizzled and has largely subsided. This particular effort to do away with *nigger*-as-insult and its kindred symbols was simply not worth the various costs that success would have exacted.

Finally, I turn to the eradicationists—those who maintain that *all* uses of *nigger* are wrongful and hurtful and ought to be condemned by dint of public opinion. Their absolutist position simply fails to acknowledge adequately either the malleability of language or the complexity of African American communities. Even the proponents of enhanced speech codes—the "regulationists" whom I have just criticized—make a distinction

between racist and nonracist, impermissible and permissible usages of the N-word. Professor Delgado has proposed, for example, that whites who insultingly call blacks niggers should be subject to suit for money damages. He goes on to explain, however, that the salutation " 'Hey, nigger,' spoken affectionately between black persons and used as a greeting, would not be actionable" under his scheme.⁷⁴ Similarly, though without expressly mentioning *nigger*, Professor Matsuda has indicated that her approach would allow words generally seen as racial insults, and thus otherwise prohibitable, to be protected in the context of a "particular subordinated community" that tolerated the use of such terms as a form of "word-play."⁷⁵ She elaborates, "Where this is the case, community members tend to have a clear sense of what is racially degrading and what is not. The appropriate standard in determining whether language is persecutorial, hateful, and degrading is the recipient's community standard. We should avoid further victimization of subordinated groups by misunderstanding their linguistic and cultural norms."⁷⁶

Matsuda, however, minimizes the reality of cultural conflict within groups. As we have seen, for example, blacks differ sharply over the use of *nigger*. Some condemn it absolutely, unequivocally, across the board, no

matter who is voicing the hated N-word and no matter what the setting. This has long been so. Writing in 1940, Langston Hughes remarked:

The word *nigger* to colored people of high and low degree is like a red rag to a bull. Used rightly or wrongly, ironically or seriously, of necessity for the sake of realism, or impishly for the sake of comedy[,] it doesn't matter. Negroes do not like it in any book or play whatsoever, be the book or play ever so sympathetic in its treatment of the basic problems of the race. The word *nigger*, you see, sums up for us who are colored all the bitter years of insult and struggle in America.⁷⁷

Hughes overgeneralized. *All* Negroes do not react to *nigger* in the way he described. Hughes himself did not; he applauded his friend Carl Van Vechten's novel *Nigger Heaven*. He was also certainly aware that blacks used "nigger" freely when outside the presence of whites.⁷⁸ Hughes was correct, though, in suggesting that some blacks—then as now—detest *nigger* so thoroughly that they eschew efforts to distinguish between good and bad usages of the term and instead condemn it out of hand. "Everyone should refrain from [using the N-word] and

provide negative sanctions on its use by others," black-studies professor Halford H. Fairchild has argued. What about blacks' using the term ironically, as a term of affection? "The persistent viability of the N-word in the black community," Fairchild writes, "is a scar from centuries of cultural racism."⁷⁹ Voicing the same message, Ron Nelson, an editor of the University of North Carolina newspaper, notes that while "most blacks . . . understand the implications and racist history of the word *nigger*, it has somehow dangerously and disturbingly found its way into everyday language." Castigating blacks' playful use of the N-word as "self-defeating," "hypocritical," and "absurd," Nelson asserts that its usage "creates an atmosphere of acceptance [in which whites wonder,] After all, if blacks themselves do it, why can't others[?]"⁸⁰ The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist E. R. Shipp is of the same opinion. In an article revealingly entitled "N Word Just as Vile When Uttered by Blacks," Shipp declared that "there needs to be no confusion. . . . The N-word has no place in contemporary life or language."⁸¹

Bill Cosby is another who attacks blacks' use of *nigger*. Addressing African American comedians, Cosby has argued that when *nigger* pops out of their mouths as entertainment, all blacks are hurt. He fears that white onlookers will have negative impressions of African

Americans reinforced when blacks laughingly bandy about the N-word. He fears that many whites largely ignorant of black America will be all too literal-minded and will fail to understand the joke. Notwithstanding Cosby's criticisms and pleas, many black comedians have continued to give *nigger* a prominent place in their acts. Several of them were mainstays of *Def Comedy Jam*, a popular show that appeared on the Home Box Office cable-television network in the 1990s. Taking aim at *Def Comedy Jam*, Cosby likened it to an updated *Amos 'n' Andy*: "When you watch [*Def Comedy Jam*], you hear a statement or a joke and it says 'niggers.' And sometimes they say 'we niggers.' And we are laughing [at it], just as we laughed at *Amos 'n' Andy* in the fifties. But we don't realize that there are people watching who know nothing about us. This is the only picture they have of us other than our mothers going to work in their homes and pushing their children in the carriages and dusting their houses. . . . And they say, 'Yeah, that's them. Just like we thought.'"⁸²

Cosby's reference to *Amos 'n' Andy* was intended to damn *Def Comedy Jam* by associating it with a program that some blacks regard as a terrible affront to African Americans.⁸³ *Amos 'n' Andy* began as a radio show in 1928. It was written and dramatized by two white men

with roots in minstrelsy who animated the misadventures of a group of blacks living and working in Harlem. Episodes of the show focused on marital woes and infidelities, inept efforts to realize professional or entrepreneurial ambitions, and petty bickering within a semi-secret fraternal order named the Mystic Knights of the Sea. Among the show's personalities were Andy (an amiable dunce), the Kingfish (a schemer who constantly bilked stupid Andy), Amos (an earnest taxicab driver), Algonquin J. Calhoun (an inept and unethical attorney), Sapphire (Andy's angry, contemptuous, shrewish wife), and Lightnin' (a slow, easily befuddled housepainter).

Amos 'n' Andy was one of the most successful programs in the history of radio. It inspired a comic strip, a candy bar, greeting cards, phonograph records, and a film. It coined phrases—for example, "holy mackerel"—that have become embedded in colloquial speech, and touched hundreds of thousands of Americans in all manner of surprising ways. Owners of restaurants, hotels, and movie theaters piped the show into their establishments for fear that if they didn't, customers would leave in droves to hear the latest installment. Eleanor Roosevelt was a fan, as was Huey P. Long, the flamboyant, demagogic governor of Louisiana, who nicknamed himself Kingfish under the show's influence.

In 1951, when *Amos 'n' Andy* moved to television, an all-black cast (the first on network TV) superseded the white men who had previously supplied the voices of the black characters. Although the show lasted only two seasons, syndicated reruns would be aired on local television stations until the mid 1960s.

Amos 'n' Andy's harshest critics denounced it as "the ultimate metaphor of whites' casual contempt for blacks."⁸⁴ W. J. Walls, a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, contended in 1929 that the radio program degraded blacks by presenting African American characters with "crude, repetitional, moronic mannerisms" who spoke "gibberish." Bishop Walls stated that there did exist "unlettered and mentally imbecilic" Negroes. But *Amos 'n' Andy*, in his view, focused unduly on that "rapidly decreasing" portion of the African American population, thereby allowing "the crude deeds of unfortunates to be paraded as the order and pattern of a whole people." Responding to defenders who pointed out that the word *nigger* was never heard on the show, the bishop suggested that blacks needed to cease being satisfied with merely the absence of the worst racial derogation.⁸⁵

Robert L. Vann, the editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, also attacked *Amos 'n' Andy*. In 1931 he launched a drive to obtain one million signatures on a petition demanding

that the Federal Radio Commission ban the program. The petition complained that "two white men . . . have been exploiting certain types of American Negro for purely commercial gain" and that their representations "are of such character as to prove detrimental to the self-respect and general advancement of the Negro." More specifically, "Negro womanhood has been broadcast to the world as indulging in bigamy, lawyers as schemers and crooks and Negro Secret Orders as organizations where money is filched from . . . members by dishonest methods, thereby placing all these activities among Negroes in a most harmful and degrading light."⁸⁶ According to the *Courier*, 740,000 people eventually signed the petition.

A third important critic of *Amos 'n' Andy* was the NAACP. When the program switched over to television in 1951, the country's foremost guardian of black advancement vigorously objected. Until that point the organization had refrained from criticism, but according to the NAACP leadership, "The visual impact [of the television show makes it] infinitely worse than the radio version." Anticipating Bill Cosby's annoyance with *Def Comedy Jam*, NAACP officials asserted that *Amos 'n' Andy* "say[s] to millions of white Americans who know noth-

ing about Negroes . . . that this is the way Negroes are."⁸⁷

A thorough assessment of such critiques requires an acknowledgment of the plurality of tastes, aspirations, interests, and perspectives within African American communities.⁸⁸ While an appreciable number of blacks repudiated *Amos 'n' Andy*, many others enjoyed it, a fact memorialized in letters, newspaper accounts, and the racial demographics of the show's audience. Black support, moreover, extended beyond the ranks of ordinary folk, finding a foothold in institutions and among cadres of intellectuals and activists. Thus, even as the *Pittsburgh Courier* was railing against the white authors of *Amos 'n' Andy*, the *Chicago Defender*, the nation's leading black weekly newspaper, was designating them honored guests at a parade and picnic on that city's South Side. In 1930, a young black journalist who would eventually head the NAACP defended *Amos 'n' Andy* and criticized its critics. According to Roy Wilkins, black opponents of the show should stop "sniffing about with [their] heads in the clouds," put aside "false pride," and start producing some humor of their own that would earn a share of the hundreds of thousands of dollars that the white producers of *Amos 'n' Andy* were making. Wilkins saw nothing wrong

with the portraiture generated by *Amos 'n' Andy*. How would critics wish to have the show's characters presented? he asked. "In plug hats, with morning coat, striped trousers, glassined hair, spats, patent leather shoes, and an Oxford accent? Instead of having them struggling with the immediate and universal problem of how to get and keep a decent and usable spare tire for the taxicab, would [the critics] have them prating about mergers, mortgages, international loans and foreign trade balances?" Praising its "universal appeal," Wilkins concluded that *Amos 'n' Andy* was "clean fun from beginning to end," with "all the pathos, humor, vanity, glory, problems and solutions that beset ordinary mortals."⁸⁹

Wilkins's perspective was by no means idiosyncratic. A prominent black attorney in Worcester, Massachusetts, declared that he could discern no good objection to *Amos 'n' Andy*; he found the show truly funny and dismissed the racial critique of the series as nothing more than the whining of blacks who were "thin-skinned" and "super-sensitive."⁹⁰ Interpreting the show completely differently than its detractors, a black fan in Chicago maintained that *Amos 'n' Andy* showed that "the Negro race has and does . . . produce people who are worthwhile."⁹¹ Theophilus Lewis, an acerbic black columnist for the *Amsterdam News*, suggested that the *Courier's* petition cam-

paign against the program would serve one good end: "When they complete their tally of signatures we will know precisely how many half wits there are in the race."⁹²

In the 1950s, when debate shifted to the fate of *Amos 'n' Andy* on television, black opinion remained divided, though its opponents had gained considerable ground. As head of the NAACP, Roy Wilkins switched sides and called for the show to be taken off the air. In adopting that position he was supported by, among others, Thurgood Marshall (who would later, as we have seen, become the first black Supreme Court justice) and William Hastie (who would be the first black to sit on a federal court of appeals). Nevertheless, as Bill Cosby recognized, many blacks continued to support the show. In an ad hoc "man in the street" survey conducted by the black *Journal and Guide* newspaper in Norfolk, Virginia, a large majority of blacks voiced approval of *Amos 'n' Andy*. A poll taken by an opinion-research firm hired by an advertiser found the same result: among 365 black adults contacted in New York and New Jersey, 70 percent expressed a favorable view of the program.⁹³

Today's conflicts over *nigger* replicate yesterday's conflicts over *Amos 'n' Andy*. Among the supporters of that show were black entertainers who stood to make money

and gain visibility by participating in its production. Among the supporters of *Def Comedy Jam* and other, similar programs of our own day are black performers hungry for a break; to them, Bill Cosby's militant aversion to the N-word as entertainment is an indulgence that they themselves are hardly in a position to afford. Black critics of the campaign against *Amos 'n' Andy* charged that the show's detractors were excessively concerned about white people's perceptions. Today a similar charge is leveled. Some entertainers who openly use *nigger* reject Cosby's politics of respectability, which counsels African Americans to mind their manners and mouths in the presence of whites. This group of performers doubts the efficacy of seeking to burnish the image of African Americans in the eyes of white folk. Some think that the racial perceptions of most whites are beyond changing; others believe that whatever marginal benefits a politics of respectability may yield are not worth the psychic cost of giving up or diluting cultural rituals that blacks enjoy. This latter attitude is effectively expressed by the remark "I don't give a fuck." These entertainers don't care whether whites find *nigger* upsetting. They don't care whether whites are confused by blacks' use of the term. And they don't care whether whites who hear blacks using the N-word think that African Americans

lack self-respect. The black comedians and rappers who use and enjoy *nigger* care principally, perhaps exclusively, about what they *themselves* think, desire, and enjoy—which is part of their allure. Many people (including me) are drawn to these performers despite their many faults because, among other things, they exhibit a bracing independence. They eschew boring conventions, including the one that maintains, despite massive evidence to the contrary, that *nigger* can mean only one thing.

108. *Lee v. the Superior Court of Ventura County*, 11 Cal. Rptr. 2d 763 (Cal. Ct. App. 1992). Actually, Lee petitioned to change his name to "Misteri Nigger" but stated that he intended for the *i* at the end of the first name to be silent (*ibid.*).

109. *Ibid.* at 764.

110. *Ibid.*

3. Pitfalls in Fighting Nigger

1. Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long* (1979), 59.

2. See Charles Miller, "Constitutional Law and the Rhetoric of Race," in Paul Finkelman, ed., *African Americans and the Law* (1992), 416; Mencken, *American Language*, 379; Irving Lewis Allen, "Sly Slurs: Mispronunciation and Decapitalization of Group Names," *Names* 36 (1988): 217.

3. See Aljean Harmetz, *On the Road to Tara* (1996), 144; Leonard J. Leff, "Gone With the Wind and Hollywood's Racial Politics," *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1995.

4. Hugh Rawson, *Wicked Words* (1989), 270.

5. At the same time, Secretary Udall changed all "Jap" references to "Japanese." See Mark Monmonier, *Drawing the Line: Tales of Maps and Cartocontroversy* (1995), 52. See also Lois Thomas, "What's in a Name," *In These Times*, October 20, 1997; Richard Willing, "Cripple Creek, Squaw Tits, and Other Map-making No-Nos," *Washington Magazine*, June 1996.

6. See *Hamilton v. Alabama*, 376 U.S. 650 (1964). See also Petition for Writ of Certiorari to the Supreme Court of Alabama, No-793 (filed January 29, 1964).

7. William Bradford Huie, *Three Lives for Mississippi* (1965), 35.

8. See Robert McFadden et al., *Outrage: The Story Behind the Tawana Brawley Hoax* (1990); Grand Jury of the Supreme Court, State of New York, County of Dutchess, Report of the Grand Jury and Related Documents Concerning the Tawana Brawley Investigation (1988).

9. See Kathryn K. Russell, *The Color of Crime: Racial Hoaxes, White Fear, Black Protectionism, Police Harassment, and Other Micro-aggressions* (1998), 157; James Merolla, "Newport Woman Reports Getting More Racist Messages: Tisha Anderson Says She Is Afraid to Leave Her Apartment after Receiving Telephone Threats and a Note," *Providence Journal-Bulletin*, November 16, 1995; "Anonymous Donor Offers Reward in Racist Threat; Police Report No New Leads on Slurs Scrawled on Walls and Steps of the Newport Green Apartment Complex," *Providence Journal-Bulletin*, November 14, 1995. For a glimpse of the wasted effort, damaging confusion, and hurtful recrimination generated by this episode, see Celeste Katz, "Newport NAACP Branch Meets over Racist Attacks; They Question the Newport Police's Efforts and Demand Further Action in the Case of Tisha Anderson," *Providence Journal-Bulletin*, November 18, 1995. For a murky case that seems to have involved another racial hoax in Providence, see Marion Davis, "Charges against Clemente Dismissed; Garrick Clemente Was Accused of Hiring Someone to Paint a Racial Slur on His Front Door," *Providence Journal-Bulletin*, August 5, 1996.

10. Russell, *The Color of Crime*, 162; "Sentencing in False Report of Racism," *Seattle Times*, December 11, 1996.

11. Russell, *The Color of Crime*, 163; Caitlin Francke,

"Hate-Crime 'Victim' Pleads Guilty; Tenant Painted Slurs in her Townhouse," *Baltimore Sun*, January 16, 1997; Ed Heard, "Support Pours in for Targets of Racial Graffiti; North Laurel Family Gets Donations, Encouragement," *Baltimore Sun*, April 26, 1996.

12. Peter Applebombe, "Woman's Claim of Racial Crime Is Called a Hoax," *New York Times*, June 1, 1990; see also Russell, *The Color of Crime*, 160.

13. Applebombe, "Woman's Claim of Racial Crime Is Called a Hoax."

14. See Debra Dickerson, "The Last Plantation: The 'Niggardly' Scandal Should Teach Whites to Watch Their Language and Blacks to Toughen Up," *Salon*, February 5, 1999.

15. Julianne Malveaux, "Of N-Words and Race Men," *Black Issues in Higher Education*, February 18, 1999. See also Roy Riley, "David Howard Is History Because of Indiscretion," *Washington Times*, February 26, 1999: "Mr. Howard is history because he was not bright enough . . . not to utter the word 'niggardly' in a city that is predominately black."

16. See, e.g., Jonathan Yardley, "Cool Words Can Influence, So Drop Them," *Newsday*, February 4, 1999; Steven Pinker, "Racist Language, Real and Imagined," *New York Times*, February 2, 1999.

17. Dickerson, "The Last Plantation."

18. Courtland Milloy, "Some Words Just Taste Unpleasant on the Tongue," *Washington Post*, January 31, 1999.

19. Sam Fullwood III, "D.C. Mayor Under Fire in War of Words over Word Use," *Los Angeles Times*, January 29, 1999.

20. Barry Saunders, "That D.C. Style: A Kinte Cloth Man-

tle of Oppression," *News and Observer* (Raleigh, North Carolina), February 6, 1999.

21. Tony Snow, "Linguistic Lynching over 'Niggardly,'" *Des Moines Register*, February 3, 1999. See also editorial, "Obsessing over the N-Word," *Hartford Courant*, February 3, 1999 ("Talk about the excesses of political correctness: last week, an assistant to Washington's new Mayor lost his job for being literate. . . . A person shouldn't lose his job because others misunderstood proper word usage"); Lynda Hill, "A Word, a Hairtrigger Racial Sensitivity, a Job Lost," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 3, 1999; Ken Hamblin, "PC Police Strike Again," *Denver Post*, February 2, 1999; Cynthia Tucker, "The Blacker-Than-Thou Thing," *Denver Post*, February 2, 1999.

22. See Gwen Carleton, "'Niggardly' Upsets UW Student," *Capitol Times* (Madison, Wisconsin), February 2, 1999.

23. Natalie Anderson, letter to the editor, *Boston Magazine*, May 1998.

24. Sandra B. Fleishman, letter to the editor, *Boston Magazine*, May 1998.

25. Craig Unger, "A Letter from the Editor," *Boston Magazine*, May 1998.

26. See Lawrence Otis Graham, "Head Nigger in Charge: Roles That Black Professionals Play in the Corporate World," *Business and Society Review*, June 22, 1995.

27. See, e.g., Stan Simpson, "In Defining the N-word, Let Meaning Be Very Clear," *Hartford Courant*, November 3, 1997: "What would happen if a white friend were to come up to me and say [as does my black brother], 'Hey, Nigger! How are you doing?' Well, excuse my ebonics, but we be fightin'."

28. Listen to Chris Rock, "Niggers vs. Black People," on *Roll with the New* (1997). For the video performance, see Chris Rock, *Bring the Pain* (1996).
29. Quoted in Kathleen Pfeiffer, introduction to Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven* (University of Illinois Press ed., 2000; orig. pub. 1926), xiv.
30. Quoted *ibid.*
31. Quoted *ibid.*, xiv, xxx, xxxi.
32. Quoted *ibid.*, xxx.
33. Quoted *ibid.*, xxvii.
34. See Kevin Merida, "Spike Lee, Holding Court: The Director Talks Movies, Hollywood, Basketball and, Oh Yes, Controversy," *Washington Post*, May 1, 1998.
35. See Lynne K. Varner and Hugo Kugiyu, "What's in a Name?—A Hated Racial Slur Finds New Currency—and Controversy—in Popular Culture," *Seattle Times*, July 6, 1998.
36. See Richard Corliss, "The Scheme of a Notion," *Time*, October 9, 2000; "Spike's Minstrel Show," *Newsweek*, October 2, 2000.
37. Delphine Abraham, "Changing Webster's Dictionary," *Essence*, March 1998.
38. *Ibid.*
39. "NAACP Leader Kweisi Mfume Says Merriam-Webster's Decision on Use of Racial Slurs Is 'Unacceptable,'" *Jet*, May 25, 1998.
40. See John M. Morse, "Sparing Sensitivities Isn't Dictionary's Job," *USA Today*, May 11, 1998.
41. Quoted in Jarvis DeBerry, "Keeping a Hateful Word inside a Dictionary," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, June 23, 1998.

42. John H. Wallace, "The Case against *Huck Finn*," in James S. Leonard, Thomas A. Tenney, and Thaddious M. Davis, eds., *Satire or Evasion: Black Perspectives on "Huckleberry Finn"* (1992), 16.
43. Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Thomas Cooley, Norton critical ed., 3d ed. (1999).
44. Wallace, "The Case against *Huck Finn*," 21.
45. See Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture* (1996), 73–74.
46. Quoted *ibid.*, 82.
47. See, e.g., Jane Smiley, "Say It Ain't So, Huck: Second Thoughts on Mark Twain's 'Masterpiece,'" in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Norton critical ed.
48. See *United States v. J.H.H.*, 22 F.3d 821 (8th Cir. 1994).
49. See *Dambrot v. Central Mich. Univ.*, 55 F.3d 1177 (6th Cir. 1995). See also Michael P. Pompeo, "Constitutional Law—First Amendment—Athletic Coach's Locker Room Speech Is Not Protected under First Amendment, Even Though University Policy Is Found Unconstitutional—*Dambrot v. Central Michigan University*, 55 F.3d 1177 (6th Cir. 1995)," *Seton Hall Journal of Sport Law* 6 (1996): 277. My understanding of *Dambrot* has also been enriched by conversations with Professor Robert A. Sedler, who represented Coach Dambrot on appeal.
50. See First Brief of Plaintiffs-Appellants—Cross-Appellees in *Dambrot v. Central Mich. Univ.* at 6 (quoting Complaint of Keith Dambrot).
51. *Ibid.* Coach Dambrot had also said on one occasion prior to the locker-room incident that his players should not be "niggers in the classroom." Questioned later about that

comment, the coach explained that he had been trying to express his feeling that "you can't be aggressive, tough, hard-nosed in class, especially at a school like Central Michigan University where the faculty members don't understand a lot about black people or have many black people in class" (55 F.3d at 1181).

52. First Brief of Plaintiffs-Appellants-Cross-Appellants, *Dambrot v. Central Mich. Univ.* at 10 n. 4.

53. *Ibid.* at 11-12 n. 7.

54. *Ibid.* at 12-13 n. 9.

55. *Ibid.* at 13 n. 11.

56. Other coaches have used *nigger* in the same way Dambrot did. For example, testifying on Dambrot's behalf, Adele Young, an African American basketball coach, explained that "a coach is around the players seven days a week, nine months of the year. The players are a part of the coach's family. A coach can pick up the players' language and speech patterns without being aware of a change. . . . My players, both African-American and White, use [*nigger*] freely as I do in the coach setting. When used in this way, 'nigger' means a tough, hard player. Coach Dambrot understood the way players use 'nigger' and when he used it, he used it the very same way they did" (*Ibid.* at 9).

57. Chris Colin, "The N-Word," Salon.com, November 8, 1999; Alison Schneider, "To Many Adjunct Professors, Academic Freedom Is a Myth," December 10, 1999. See also *Hardy v. Jefferson Community College*, 2001 FED App. 0267P (6th Cir. 2001).

58. See "Black Students Forgive Teacher's Mistaken Slur," *New York Times*, October 17, 1988.

59. See Richard Delgado, "Words That Wound: A Tort Action for Racial Insults, Epithets and Name-Calling," *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 17 (1982): 133; *idem*, "Campus Antiracism Rules: Constitutional Narratives in Collision," *Northwestern University Law Review* 85 (1991): 343; Charles Lawrence III, "If He Hollers Let Him Go: Regulating Racist Speech on Campus," *Duke Law Journal*, 1990, 431; Mari J. Matsuda, "Public Response to Racist Speech: Considering the Victim's Story," *Michigan Law Review* 187 (1989): 2320.

60. See, e.g., *UWM Post, Inc., v. Bd. of Regents*, 774 F. Supp. 1163 (E.D. Wis. 1991); *Doe v. Univ. of Michigan*, 721 F. Supp. 852 (E.D. Mich. 1989).

61. For examples of this rhetoric, see Lawrence, "If He Hollers Let Him Go," 434, 449; Matsuda, "Public Response to Racist Speech," 2370 ("Marked rise of racial harassment, hate speech, and racially motivated violence marks our entry into the 1990s"). Even fervent opponents of speech codes accede without sufficient questioning to their antagonists' portrayal of rising waves of campus racism; see, e.g., Nadine Strossen, "Regulating Racist Speech on Campus: A Modest Proposal?," *Duke Law Journal*, 1990, 484, 488. For useful commentary on this point, see James B. Jacobs and Kimberly Potter, *Hate Crimes: Criminal Law and Identity Politics* (1998), 45-64; Richard Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Virtue* (1994), 183-215.

62. Lawrence, "If He Hollers Let Him Go," 433.

63. *Ibid.*, 432.

64. *Ibid.*, 433.

65. *Ibid.*, 434.

84. Ibid., 9.

85. Ibid., 171–73.

86. Ibid., 173–74. See also the photograph following page 82.

87. Ibid., 215–16.

88. I have focused in the text that follows on black defenders of *Amos 'n' Andy*, but the show also had countless white fans and a number of white champions, some of whom were undoubtedly profoundly racist. In August 1931, the editor of the *Sterling City* (Texas) *New Record*, for example, denounced Negro critics of *Amos 'n' Andy* as “a lot of fool Niggers” and opined that the series brought out “nigger characteristics true to Nigger nature just as it is among the denizens of the colored race in large cities” (quoted in Ely, “*The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy*,” 185).

89. Quoted *ibid.*, 171.

90. Ibid., 181.

91. Quoted *ibid.*, 182.

92. Quoted *ibid.*

93. Ibid., 222.

4. How Are We Doing with *Nigger*?

1. Susan Schmidt, “Sen. Byrd Apologizes for Racial Remarks,” *Washington Post*, March 5, 2001.

2. See Annie Nakao, “N-Word Use Increasing, Not Without Protest; Use of the Racial Slur Among all Ethnicities Elic-

its a Variety of Emotions,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 29, 2001.

3. For a biting critique of Tucker’s humor, including his use of *nigger*, see Justin Driver, “The Mirth of a Nation: Black Comedy’s Reactionary Hipness,” *New Republic*, June 11, 2001.