



## The New Heresy and the Modern Inquisition

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### **Abstract**

*In this paper, I look critically at a new trend on college campuses regarding the banning of certain words, especially the biggest racial taboo word in the USA. I contend that these new bans impede the rise of a dialogic, democratic, and pluralistic temperament, ultimately promoting and legitimizing violence as good and necessary.*

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Many college students are increasingly demanding the banning of certain words from campuses. Professors and instructors who utter these supposedly offensive words, or allow students to do so, even in a pedagogical context, now face either investigation, suspension, or termination. We commonly view these cases as free speech issues. Colleges are supposedly violating our free speech rights by punishing us for using words like “cunt,” “fag,” “retard,” and “nigger” in our classrooms. However, in this paper, I contend that the banning of words on campuses, especially “nigger,” represents a much larger problem. It impedes the forging of a dialogic, democratic, and pluralistic temperament that is vital for the prosperity of any modern society, threatens the flourishing of human diversity and all that comes with this flourishing, and reinforces the belief that violence is good and necessary. Ultimately, I contend that banning words, like the banning of many other things that college students are calling for, such as films, songs, books, speakers, objects, and topics, represents a politics that limits our moral, ideological, and epistemological imagination.

The word “nigger” is often referred to as “the nuclear bomb of racial slurs.” No doubt, it is all but impossible to separate this word from over 350 years of slavery, Black Codes, and Jim Crow. If communication is all about context, then there is no separating this word from this historical context. Those who decide to utter this word in the classroom would do well to show regard for this context and proceed carefully and sensitively. However, to claim that the word is inherently offensive and that there should be no regard for intent or context is to assume that the world is inherently monologic, that is, things in the world lend for only one meaning, and that human beings can reliably command these meanings. History reminds us again and again that these two things are false. Instead, the world is inherently dialogic. That is, everything in the world lends for diverse and multiple meanings, and human beings will never be able to

reliably command these meanings. So whereas monologue fosters an autocratic temperament, dialogue fosters a democratic temperament, one that is always making moral, ideological, and epistemological space for perspectives different from our own. Thus, I contend that the banning of words like “nigger” on college campuses speaks to much larger issues about what kind of world are our institutions of higher learning cultivating and legitimizing. Why are such institutions choosing to create a world that values monologue over dialogue, conformity over diversity, autocracy over democracy? Why do we assume that the banning of things naturally makes for the rise of better things?

In the following sections of this paper, I attend to the implications of our choosing monologue over dialogue. The paper begins with a presentation of a few recent cases involving the use of the word “nigger” on college campuses. In all these cases, as with nearly all the other cases, professors and instructors were either investigated, suspended, or terminated for using the word in a classroom setting, such as quoting a passage in a book by a Black author or reading out loud a judicial opinion written by a Black judge that contains the word. I then present and discuss seven major problems found in the framing and handling of these cases, such as the violation of many key tenets of communication theory. The paper ends with a few thoughts on how I try in my own teaching to embody a dialogic, democratic, and pluralistic temperament in an age where college students, especially those who identify as progressive, are increasingly demanding the banning of supposedly offensive words and phrases and the punishing of teachers who are seen as either encouraging or tolerating the uttering of these words and phrases, regardless of intent or context (Flaherty, 2021).

### On Being Investigated, Suspended, and Terminated

Recently, a professor at the University of Windsor uttered the word “nigger” in a class setting to warn students about the offensive language they would encounter in an assigned book (Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*) for the class. Still, many students said that what the professor did was “egregious,” “appalling,” and “hurtful and violent to Black students.” In a letter addressed to the president of the university, many students and faculty also expressed “grave concerns” over what the professor did (La Grassa & Aziz, 2020). In an apology, the professor said,

Last night in class when I was giving a content warning for the sexual and racial violence depicted in the book we are preparing to read, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, I used the n-word as an example of the racist language that will appear throughout this book. Hearing that word come from my mouth filled students with pain, fear, anger, and disappointment. Rather than read the word that Walker uses throughout the book, I should have left it as “n-word” because the racist weight of that word carries with it generations of trauma and harm. To all of my students, I apologize for setting a poor example and undermining my own content warning for the text that we are reading. To the students who were directly harmed by this, I apologize for bringing this pain into this course for you.

One student who refused to accept the professor’s apology said that the word “nigger” is attached to a “long history of dehumanizing, vilifying, violating, harming and killing Black people,” and for that reason alone, it is “deeply unacceptable for non-Black people to use it” (La Grassa & Aziz, 2020). For this student, the meaning of words supposedly has nothing to do with intent and context. Human beings supposedly have no capacity to control what words mean and even to alter the meaning of a word.

In another recent incident at the University of Ottawa, an instructor was suspended after a student complained that the instructor used the word “nigger” during a class as an example of a word that a community has reclaimed. After faculty came out in support of the instructor, saying in a letter that using the actual word in the classroom can have educational value and that a classroom is a place for debate,

many students expressed outrage over the letter. In a statement, these students said that using the n-word in a classroom constitutes “racial violence” and will always be “offensive, hurtful and reprehensible to members of the Black community.” Other students said that the word should be banned, even in classrooms, to protect Black students. “We do not believe that there is any appropriate setting which this word can be used because it is directly harmful to all of the Black students on campus” (Glowacki, 2020).

At Duquesne University, the Dean of the School of Education recently fired an instructor for using the word “nigger” in a classroom setting (News Staff, 2020). In a letter apologizing to the students in the class where the word was used, the Dean thanked the students for sharing the “troubling and disturbing language” used by the instructor. The Dean also said,

To be clear, I believe that there is never a time, pedagogically or otherwise, for a professor to create a hostile learning environment. I know this from my experience as a student, a professor, and now as Interim Dean of the School of Education. Using the ‘N word’ or seemingly encouraging students to use that word is not in keeping with the mission of the University, the School of Education, or the Pennsylvania Department of Education. As a professor in the Leading Teaching Program here in the School of Education, I often speak about teachable moments. This is one of them. As an educator, you should always be mindful of the impact of your actions on the students you are obligated by the profession to teach. Your intentions are of no consequence when a student’s learning is disrupted by what you believe to be okay. Your actions are what students will remember. (News Staff, 2020)

Timothy Boudreau, a professor at Central Michigan University, was recently terminated for using the word “nigger” when discussing a 1993 case in which a Central Michigan basketball coach was also fired for using the full word when addressing team members (Schneider, 2021). Although no player on the basketball team was offended, and the coach did ask permission before using the full word, he was still fired. The coach eventually prevailed in court. Prof. Boudreau was using this case in a classroom lecture 17 years later to make the point that even ugly speech is constitutionally protected. In discussing the case, Prof. Boudreau uttered the full word. “I quoted the exact language from cases because it’s accurate and complete, which is essential in a journalism course,” Prof. Boudreau told a student newspaper, *The College Fix*. “I quoted the basketball coach’s words accurately. He used the complete word, not the euphemism. I am extremely reluctant to censor language in a legal case. Doing so neuters the language, misrepresents the facts and raises a lot of questions. Media law, or any course that focuses on the First Amendment, is certain to involve words that offend all sorts of listeners for all sorts of reasons — LGBTQ, Black students, Christians, Jews, and many others. Which terms should I censor? Why those and not others?” (Schneider, 2021).

However, one student, who recently graduated, posted a video condemning Prof. Boudreau for using the full word in his classes. “Since we are exposing racists, let me introduce you to @cmuniversity professor Tim Boudreau who freely uses the n-word in class whether it be providing examples or quoting an individual. I know I wasn’t the only student of color who felt humiliated and uncomfortable by his racially insensitive statements” (Schneider, 2021). The university then posted a statement on Instagram vowing to investigate Prof. Boudreau’s “racist conduct” and apologizing to the student for what transpired in Prof. Boudreau’s classes. In full, the statement reads,

Thank you for bringing this to our attention. We are sorry this happened. At CMU, we are committed to building an inclusive environment where every person feels welcome and valued. Racist conduct by any member of our university community violates that commitment as well as our core values. We have forwarded

your message to the appropriate campus offices so they can be properly reviewed. Please know that CMU takes these types of reports very seriously and investigates them to the full extent possible. (Schneider, 2021)

The university subsequently offered Prof. Boudreau the chance to publicly apologize and promise to never again use the word in the classroom. After Prof. Boudreau refused, he was quickly suspended and an investigation set in motion. He was also instructed “to stay away from campus” and “from students.”

The university eventually released a report criticizing Prof. Boudreau for, among other things, creating a hostile learning environment by failing to offer students a “trigger warning” before using the full word. However, one student told a student newspaper that Prof. Boudreau did provide a warning early in the semester that he would be using racial slurs when discussing the case involving the basketball coach. “I know that such language upsets some students, so I always warned my students that we would occasionally use words that might offend them. Call it a trigger warning or just common courtesy, but I routinely alerted them to that possibility” (Schneider, 2021).

Greg Greubel, Prof. Boudreau’s attorney, said that the university’s decision to terminate Prof. Boudreau for “accurately quoting” the actual words “in a judicial opinion is as unconstitutional as it is ridiculous” (Schneider, 2021). In fact, the judicial opinion that made for Prof. Boudreau’s troubles was written by Damon Keith, an African American, and uses the actual word (“nigger”) 19 times. In a letter of support for Prof. Boudreau to the President of Central Michigan University, a group of prominent law professors from outside the university wrote that Judge Damon Keith “could have exclusively used an expurgated version of the word. But he chose not to, and we think not by accident. Rather, Judge Keith likely (1) thought it important to accurately quote the facts, even when the facts include offensive words, and (2) drew a sharp distinction between wrongfully using a word as an insult (or perhaps even as an odd compliment, as Coach Dambrot may have misguidedly intended it), and properly mentioning it as a fact. Judge Keith knew the case would be read . . . and doubtless discussed by many people of all races—in future oral arguments, in law firm conversations about how best to use the precedent, and in classrooms. Yet he precisely and repeatedly discussed the facts, and counted on people to understand that there is a world of difference between factual mentions and insulting uses” (Scales et al., 2020).

The letter also noted that the full word “appears in nearly 10,000 court decisions (and those are just the ones available on Westlaw) since 2000 alone. These include opinions from Supreme Court Justices including Justices Sotomayor, Thomas, O’Connor, Ginsburg, and a six-Justice *per curiam* signed on to by Chief Justice Roberts and Justices Kennedy, Ginsburg, Breyer, Sotomayor, and Kagan. They include opinions from illustrious federal appellate judges and state court judges, including liberal luminaries who yield to no-one in their desire for racial equality” (Scales et al., 2020). Moreover, “Prof. Tim Boudreau was teaching a class about law, in which doubtless some students wanted to become lawyers and all wanted to learn about the legal system. He was discussing an important case—the earliest appellate precedent on campus speech codes. The case sheds important light on general First Amendment debates . . . governs the rights of (among others) student newspapers and students on social media . . . By following the norms of the legal profession in accurately quoting the case, Prof. Boudreau acted entirely properly” (Scales et al., 2020). The letter also said that Prof. Boudreau was “following practices that are standard in the university more generally for pretty much all other words, and that remain standard among many professors for this word as well. The university, like the courtroom, is supposed to be a place where people accurately and unflinchingly discuss the truth. That some people find certain facts to be offensive, whether facts about the world or facts in a court opinion, cannot require professors to expurgate those facts (just as it does not require judges to expurgate those facts)” (Scales et al., 2020).

Prof. Boudreau eventually settled with the university. “I taught the course to about 1,500 students over some 15 years and never once received a complaint about the language until a single student posted to social media last year,” Prof. Boudreau told a university newspaper. “Apparently most of them heard my frequent warnings. It’s unfortunate at least one missed them” (Schneider, 2021).

Philip Adamo, a professor of History and Medieval Studies at Augsburg University, and Director of the Honors Program, was recently suspended for using the word “nigger” when discussing the appropriateness of using the full word when discussing James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*. According to an account of the case by Colleen Flaherty (2019), a student in the class quoted in full a section of the book containing the word (“You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger.”) Recognizing that some students were shocked, Prof. Adamo asked the class whether it is appropriate to use the word the way an author does. He uttered the full word once when posing this matter. (“In an academic context, quoting from an author’s work, was it appropriate to use the word nigger if the author had written it that way? Wasn’t substituting the euphemistic phrase ‘the N-word’ in these cases, in fact, a disservice to Baldwin’s prose?”) After a lengthy discussion it was unanimously agreed that the word was too fraught to use going forward.

After class, Prof. Adamo sent an email to the class with links to two articles by Black writers (Andre Perry and Ta-Nehise Coates) discussing the use of the word. Some students told Prof. Adamo that he sent the articles to “defend the use of the N-word” (Flaherty, 2019). Several nonenrolled students then showed up in Prof. Adamo’s next class session, saying they were there to observe as leaders within the honors program. Students then asked Prof. Adamo to leave so they could discuss the situation. Prof. Adamo told the students that there was work to be done, but eventually left the room. The nonenrolled students told the students that they were there to make sure that “you guys felt safe” as they have “a right to always feel safe” in class, “especially first generation college students.” Students in the class also said that there was another N-word in the book (“negro”) that is also offensive and should be replaced with the N-word. One of the nonenrolled students filmed Prof. Adamo discussing the word with students. He was cordial and deferential. Soon after this class, Prof. Adamo told the Provost what transpired. She suggested that Prof. Adamo send a letter to all the students in the honors program. The letter said, in part, that the classroom “is a place where any and every topic can be explored, even those topics considered to be taboo. This is how I understand academic freedom, which is a precious thing to me and other professors. It is the currency that allows us to speak truth to power.” Prof. Adamo also sent a separate letter to the nonenrolled students praising them for their defense of the program’s values, but also his concerns about them showing up unannounced and filming him without his permission.

However, after the incident, the Provost removed Prof. Adamo from the classroom and ended his directorship of the Honors Program. Prof. Adamo subsequently went on medical leave due to stress. The university then began a formal review and extended Prof. Adamo’s suspension for the Spring semester. Prof. Adamo’s suspension letter said that students raised several issues that fell into the following categories: bias and discrimination, respect for students, teaching competence, and program leadership. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) sent a letter on Prof. Adamo’s behalf to the university saying that the suspension “appears to have been primarily based on classroom speech that was clearly protected by principles of academic freedom” (Flaherty, 2019).

In a column in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* defending Prof. Adamo’s use of the word, Randall Kennedy (2019), a Black professor of law at Harvard University, described the case as a “dispiriting farce” that “undermines Augsburg’s claim to be a serious institution of higher learning.” According to Prof. Kennedy, “This is not a case of a professor calling someone “nigger.” This is a case of a professor exploring the thinking and expression of a writer who voiced the word to challenge racism. This is not a case of a

professor negligently throwing about a term that's long been deployed to terrorize, shame, and denigrate African-Americans. This is a case of a professor who, attentive to the sensibilities of his students, sought to encourage reflection about their anxieties and beliefs." He also said that the President and the Provost "have most betrayed academic ideals" at Augsburg University. "They are the ones who punished Adamo. They are the ones who allowed a perfectly acceptable pedagogical decision to be turned into an academic crime. They are the ones who have . . . neglected to say anything critical about the students who encroached upon a professor's classroom. They are the leaders who, in a moment of crisis, have failed miserably to educate their campus about the aims and priorities, freedoms and limitations that should be part and parcel of life at a serious university" (Flaherty, 2019).

In a statement about the controversy, the President of the university, Paul C. Pribbernow, said, "We know that the work of fostering an inclusive learning environment is ongoing, and we are fully committed to it. We are grateful to the students, faculty and staff who have spoken courageously to raise campus awareness, who have engaged in actively listening to the issues being expressed, and who have called for changes that advance our equity work. Augsburg will address this important topic like it has many other critical issues in our 150-year history: we will acknowledge and engage the topic, not shrink from it, and work together to make the university better."

At Rutgers University, a group of Black law students recently demanded that Prof. Vera Bergelson, a law professor, publicly apologize for supposedly allowing a White student to say the full word when quoting a court case with the full word. In discussing a legal opinion, a White female law student repeated a quote from a defendant which was used in an opinion written by a past State Supreme Court judge, Alan B. Handler. The student said, "He said, . . . and I'll use a racial word, but it's a quote. He says, "I'm going to go to Trenton and come back with my niggers" (Tully, 2021). A petition calling on the student and the professor to apologize began to circulate after a White student told a Black classmate about the incident. The petition reads: "At the height of a "racial reckoning," a responsible adult should know not to use a racial slur regardless of its use in a 1993 opinion. We vehemently condemn the use of the N-word by the student and the acquiescence of its usage." Prof. David Lopez, Co-Dean of the Law School, said in a statement, "I share the views of several of our faculty members who understand and express to their students that this language is hateful and can be triggering, even in the context of a case, and ask that it not be used."

Prof. Bergelson said she never heard the word being used by the student. It was a virtual class. She told *The New York Times* that she was only made aware of the concerns months later when the petition began circulating (Tully, 2021). Prof. Bergelson added, "I wish I could go back in time to that office hour and confront it directly. I would never use the word in class." However, she believes that other professors and students should be free to make their own choices. Within days, she convened a meeting with the criminal law class and other first-year students to discuss the incident and to offer an apology. The student also apologized during the meeting. In another statement, Co-Deans David Lopez and Kimberly Mutcherson said, "As the Co-Deans of Rutgers Law School, we recognize the hurt that our students experienced following this incident, and we know that none of the involved parties acted with any ill intent. We are committed to doing better for our community moving forward. This experience raised critical issues about law school pedagogy and provided us with a welcome opportunity to talk as a community of faculty, students, staff, and administration committed to antiracism about productive ways to teach about race in our classrooms" (Fruen, 2021).

Adam Scales, a Black professor at Rutgers Law, who signed a statement supporting Prof. Bergelson, told *The New York Times* that he opposes even voluntary limits on speech (Tully, 2021). He also said that using euphemisms like "N-word" to avoid saying the full word obfuscates its repugnant history. "There is something extremely antiseptic about the term N-word. There is something that softens the

impact.” Gary L. Francione, another law professor who signed the statement, said “Although we all deplore the use of racist epithets, the idea that a faculty member or law student cannot quote a published court decision that itself quotes a racial or other otherwise objectionable word as part of the record of the case is problematic and implicates matters of academic freedom and free speech.” However, in a column in *The Washington Post* about the Rutgers controversy, Jonathan Capehart (2021), an editorial board member of the newspaper, contends that the full word should never be used under any circumstances, and hopes that one day White people, especially, would come to realize why. “For African Americans,” writes Capehart, “the n-word is not a Rorschach test. It’s a stress test, the intensity of which rises and falls depending on one’s mood and sense of charity in the moment it tumbles from non-Black lips.”

However, for Randall L. Kennedy and Eugene Volokh (2021), also writing in *The Washington Post* about the Rutgers controversy and others involving professors saying the word “nigger” in classes, banning words in classrooms is dangerous. “We believe that the campaign to make certain words taboo—literally unsayable—dangerously encroaches on academic freedom and freedom of expression. It also diminishes the opportunity for students to learn lessons useful to their future professional careers and to their roles as citizens. (That is true both of racial slurs and of other slurs.) Any word emerging in court proceedings should be repeatable in a law school classroom. As for other university departments, any word that appears in a historical document, novel, film or song should be mentionable for the purpose of study.”

As for complaints from students that hearing or even reading the word “nigger,” regardless of context, interferes with their ability to learn, Profs. Kennedy and Volokh offer three counter arguments. “First, feelings of hurt are not unchangeable givens untouched and untouchable by the ways in which institutions respond to them. The more that schools validate the idea that such hurt is justified, the more that emotion will be embraced, and the more there will be calls to broaden and harden linguistic taboos. . . . Second, complaints of distress cannot suffice to bar teachers from teaching about the facts, whether related to specific words, or to upsetting subjects, such as rape, genocide or slavery. That is especially so when teachers are training students to become professionals who must often deal with awful facets of human nature.” Finally, “All of the recent controversies over mentions of the most controversial racial slur in classrooms have involved speakers who are White. Those calling for apologies and punishments often expressly demand an asymmetrical rule that Black speakers are given leeway, while non-Black speakers are held to a rigid, strictly enforced injunction. We oppose such discrimination. The one of us who is Black and has had racial slurs hurled at him on numerous occasions rejects the dubious racial privilege that this rule would offer. The other of us who is White rejects the intellectual disablement that this rule would entail.” For Profs. Kennedy and Volokh, “Prohibiting some teachers, on the basis of racial identity, from saying a word that others are permitted to say violates anti-discrimination laws, and it certainly violates sound academic practice.” We could also add to Profs. Kennedy and Volokh’s list the argument that the authors of books that contain the word nigger who are now deceased never give any person, Black or White, permission to change the words in their books and would even support any changes. As Michiko Kakutani (2011) explains, “Authors’ original texts should be sacrosanct intellectual property, whether a book is a classic or not. Tampering with a writer’s words underscores both editors’ extraordinary hubris and a cavalier attitude embraced by more and more people.” This attitude assumes, among other things, that “readers are entitled to alter [any text] as they please” and “that the very idea of authorship is old-fashioned.”

Instructors are also being suspended for saying words in other languages that merely sound like “nigger.” Case in point, the University of Southern California recently replaced Prof. Greg Patton, a professor of business communication, with another instructor in one of his graduate classes for saying a Chinese word that merely sounds like “nigger.” According to an account of the incident by Colleen Flaherty (2020), Prof. Patton was teaching a lesson on “filler words” in other languages in his graduate course on communication for management. “Taking a break between ideas can help bring the audience in,” Prof.

Patton said. “In China, the common pause word is ‘that that that.’ So in China it might be *ne ga, ne ga, ne ga*.” Prof. Patton never mentioned that 那个, or *ne ga*, (alternatively spelled *nà ge* and *nèige*) sounds like the word nigger.

Some or nearly all of the Black students across three sections of the course wrote a letter to Geoffrey Garrett, Dean of the Marshall School of Business, saying that they were offended by what Prof. Patton said and described him as insensitive and incapable of teaching the three-week intensive communications course. “The way we heard it in class was indicative of a much more hurtful word with tremendous implications for the Black community,” wrote the students. “There are over 10,000 characters in the Chinese written language and to use this phrase, a clear synonym with this derogatory N-Word term, is hurtful and unacceptable to our USC Marshall community. The negligence and disregard displayed by our professor was very clear in today’s class.” The Black students also wrote that “in light of the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the recent and continued collective protests and social awakening across the nation, we cannot let this stand.”

A few days later, Dean Garrett sent students an email saying that Prof. Patton was being replaced as instructor of the course, effective immediately. “It is simply unacceptable for faculty to use words in class that can marginalize, hurt and harm the psychological safety of our students,” Garrett wrote. Prof. Patton “repeated several times a Chinese word that sounds very similar to a vile racial slur in English. Understandably, this caused great pain and upset among students, and for that I am deeply sorry.” However, Prof. Patton’s suspension angered many other students and alumni. One petition calling for Prof. Patton’s reinstatement had over eleven thousand signatures. Nearly a hundred alumni of the business school, many of whom are Chinese and now live in China, also sent a letter to the dean and other administrators expressing support for Prof. Patton. “All of us have gained enormous benefit from the academic leadership of Prof. Patton. His caring, wisdom and inclusiveness were a hallmark of our educational experience and growth at USC and the foundation of our continued success in the years following. We unanimously recognize Prof. Patton’s use of ‘*na ge*’ as an accurate rendition of common Chinese use, and an entirely appropriate and quite effective illustration of the use of pauses. Prof. Patton used this example and hundreds of others in our classes over the years, providing richness, relevance and real world impact.” The letter also invoked China’s Cultural Revolution, which some signers said they and their parents lived through. “The current incident, and Marshall’s response so far, seem disturbingly similar to prevalent behavior in China at that time—spurious accusations against innocent people, which escalated into institutional insanity.” In various blog posts in China, the incident was referred to as “a contemporary version of the literary inquisition.” Another post asked, “Is it now forbidden to speak Chinese in the United States?”

CC Chen, a student at the USC, defended Prof Patton, saying that it was “clearly an academic lecture on communication” and the professor was “describing a universal mistake commonly made in communication.” “For him to be censored simply because a Chinese word sounds like an English pejorative term is a mistake and is not appropriate, especially given the educational setting. It also dismisses the fact that Chinese is a real language and has its own pronunciations that have no relation to English.” Chengyan Wu, Co-President of USC Chinese Student and Scholar Association, said that “Restating the rights of one minority group should not be at the expense of violating the other. We have the right to use our own language” (Allen, 2020).

The school said in a statement that “We acknowledge the historical, cultural and harmful impact of racist language,” and that the university is “committed to building a culture of respect and dignity where all members of our community can feel safe, supported and can thrive.” In a letter to the Marshall Graduate Student Association’s executive board, Prof. Patton offered “another deep apology for the discomfort and



pain that I have caused members of our community. My intent has always been to provide a dynamic, diverse and supportive learning environment and I recently learned this has not always been the case” (Flaherty, 2020). He also said that he has taught the course in question for 10 years and the Chinese filler-word example he used “was given to me by several international students several years back.” The inclusion of other languages in the course is “part of a deep and sustained effort at inclusion as I have reached out to find and include many international, global, diverse, female, broad and inclusive leadership examples and illustrations to enhance communication and interpersonal skill in our global workplace.” Prof. Patton also said that when he read in his preliminary course evaluations where three students wrote they were troubled by his particular illustration, his “heart dropped” and he has “felt terrible ever since.” He said he emailed the entire program the next morning to apologize profusely. “I was willing to look at whatever I could do, personally and organizationally, to help the students and their classmates heal” (Flaherty, 2020).

The controversy at USC resembles one that also recently occurred at the University of Illinois law school where a law professor was suspended for using “n\_\_\_\_\_” in place of the word. According to a report of the incident by Andrew Koppelman (2021), the professor, Jason Kilborn, gave an examination in “Civil Procedure II” that had a question that included a hypothetical in which a company, sued for discrimination, had obtained evidence that damaged its own defense. The question was whether the company must disclose that evidence to the plaintiff if requested. In the scenario described on the exam, a former employee told the company’s lawyer “that she quit her job at Employer after she attended a meeting in which other managers expressed their anger at Plaintiff, calling her a “n\_\_\_\_\_” and “b\_\_\_\_\_” (profane expressions for African Americans and women) and vowed to get rid of her.” This is the exact wording and symbolizing found on the test. Prof. Kilborn never used the word nigger or even the N-word.

Still, a Black student said that upon seeing the sentence with “n\_\_\_\_\_” she became “incredibly upset” and experienced “heart palpitations.” (Koppelman, 2021). The Black Law Students Association complained to the dean of the law school and central administration, demanding that Prof. Kilborn be stripped of his committee assignments (“Someone who exhibits such poor judgment should not be able to hold an additional position of power” (Koppelman, 2021). It denounced him on Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter, and filed a complaint with UIC’s Office for Access and Equity. In a petition, the Black Law Students Association said that,

The slur [“n\_\_\_\_\_”] shocked students [,] created a momentous distraction and caused unnecessary distress and anxiety for those taking the exam. Considering the subject matter, and the call of the question, the use of the “n\_\_\_\_\_” and “b\_\_\_\_\_” was certainly unwarranted as it did not serve any educational purpose. The question was culturally insensitive and tone-deaf. It lacked basic civility and respect for the student body, especially considering our social justice efforts this year. The integration of this dark and vile verbiage on a Civil Procedure II exam was inexcusable and appropriate measures of accountability must be executed by the UIC administration.

We cannot ignore the history and violence the N-word represents and the psychological impact, and mental trauma students were subjected to. The implication of such vile and gratuitous verbiage on a Civil Procedure II exam demonstrated a lack of respect, decency, and civility. (Koppelman, 2021)

The dean of the law school subsequently placed Prof. Kilborn on indefinite administrative leave and removed him from all his committee assignments. He was also instructed to stay off campus and barred from all faculty communications. In a statement, the law school said that,

Before winter break, Dean Dickerson apologized to the students who expressed hurt and distress over the examination question. The Law School acknowledges that the racial and gender references on the

examination were deeply offensive. Faculty should avoid language that could cause hurt and distress to students. Those with tenure and academic freedom should always remember their position of power in our system of legal education.

The Law School is working with UIC's Office for Access and Equity to conduct a thorough review of this matter, and Dean Dickerson and other Law School and University leaders have scheduled a meeting with student leaders. We remain committed to ensuring that all of our students have a safe and supportive environment and that all members of the Law School community live up to our shared values. (Koppelman, 2021)

These are only a few of many recent incidents where instructors and professors have either been investigated, suspended, or terminated for using the word “nigger” in a classroom setting and in ways that many, including prominent Black scholars, view to be pedagogically sound, such as warning students that the word will appear in an assigned reading or refusing to censor the word when it came up in a discussion about a reading by a Black author. Let us also note that the word “nigger” is merely one of the words that is resulting in professors and instructors being investigated, suspended, and terminated. Finally, besides calling for the banning of words, the banning of books, the banning of classes, the banning of songs (such as Toto's Africa), the banning of costumes, the banning of topics, the banning of certain kinds of relationships, the banning of objects (such as Black and Indigenous students at the University of Wisconsin recently demanding that university administrators remove a rock from campus), and the banning of speakers, students and faculty are also now calling for the banning of films that supposedly make them feel “unsafe” and “unwelcome.” The University of Michigan cancelled (and then later rescheduled) the showing of the film *American Sniper* after students complained in a letter to university administrators that “watching this movie is provocative and unsafe to [Middle Eastern and North African] and Muslim students, who are too often reminded of how little the media and world values their lives” (New, 2015). Upon first cancelling the film, the university said in a statement “We deeply regret causing harm to members of our community and appreciate the thoughtful feedback provided to us by students and staff alike. . . . While our intent was to show a film, the impact of the content was harmful, and made students feel unsafe and unwelcome at our program.” After the university's decision to cancel the film was met with protest, the university said in a new statement that the film would now be screened in a “separate forum that provides an appropriate space for dialogue and reflection” (New, 2015). Students at other colleges have also called for the banning of *American Sniper* and other films.

### The Many Problems with Banning Words

We can all appreciate the need to create classrooms and campus environments that are devoid of hostility and animosity, especially towards people who have too long been marginalized and brutalized. But there is much about the politics of banning words that is troubling and even dangerous. Below I present and discuss a few of these concerns.

#### *#1 No power in words*

Human beings are narrative beings. We are “*homo narrans*”—storytellers. We make sense of the world, ourselves, and each other by the stories we create, share, and consume. Many narratives begin with a set of beliefs that often have no basis in science, evidence, or knowledge. For instance, who made God, or what was the bang that set off the big bang? The banning of words is a narrative within a much larger narrative. This much larger narrative assumes that words have power, thus hateful words supposedly have the power to do hateful things. However, this narrative never tells us how words come to have power. We are, again, simply to assume that words have power. Also, why do only certain words have power? Further, if certain words do have the power to do hateful things, why are so many immune to the supposed negative and debilitating effects of this power? Further, who is willing to publicly bear witness to the claim

that words have power, as in being willing to publicly admit that another person's words can change what they believe and value without their consent? For example, "Yes, I did once love and admire Jews. But after listening to speeches by Hitler for the past few months, I now feel differently. Evidently, words have power!" Finally, many contend that the word "nigger" acquired its power from history. But how do we even begin to explain that process in ways that are empirically verifiable or at least coherent and consistent? After all, when does anything in history ever lend for one meaning? In other words, to say that the word "nigger" acquired its power from history is to suggest that it did so through a process devoid of interpretation. History supposedly shaped the meaning of the word, giving it a fixed meaning that that human beings cannot alter. However, as much as the word "nigger" has a torturous history, it is always human beings in the end who determine what words mean. Also, because our own histories, ideologies, geographies, and temporalities are different, regardless of the fact that we all identify as Black, the meanings we attach to this word, and thus how we respond to it, will always be different.

The pervasiveness of the belief that words have power reflects an important point that is at the center of William J. Bernstein's (2021) book, *The Delusion of Crowds: Why do People go Mad in Groups*, "Humans understand the world through narratives. However much we flatter ourselves about our individual rationality, a good story, no matter how analytically deficient, lingers in the mind, resonates emotionally, and persuades more than the most dispositive facts or data." In this case, the notion that words have power makes for an easy way to make sense of things. It neither threatens nor challenges us. On the other hand, this is a problem that narratives tend to present. Narrative, writes Roy Scranton (2019), "is the enemy." It is "a trick to seduce the mind into making sense of reality, a way of structuring the unknown that presumes we already know how things will end. ... Narrative is how we reassure ourselves everything's going to be ok." In many instances, such is no doubt the case. A narrative can stop us from dealing with what is real and binding, such as the fact that our actions and decisions are destroying the planet. A narrative can also stop us from doing what is morally hard and difficult, such as forgiving those who trespass against us. In such instances, writes Scranton, "Narrative seduces. Narrative misunderstands. Narrative confuses. Narrative lies. Narrative is the enemy." However, on the other hand, "narrative is inevitable, for without narrative, human existence is absurd." But no narratives can account for every truth. In order for narratives to achieve coherence, truths have to be twisted, distorted, and omitted. This is what narratives do. We never make sense of things by merely looking at one thing. We make sense of things by merging and converging things, which always involve bending, suppressing, and distorting other things. In this case, what is being suppressed in calls for the banning of words are the many things, like intent and context, that shape what words mean to us. If narratives are creatures of words, then no narrative will ever lend for one interpretation.

### *#2 Meaning is in us*

No doubt, the word "nigger" has a torturous legacy. However, "nigger" is a word. Its meaning is determined by us. We have the power to control what the word means and how it affects us. As Volosinov (1994) notes, "there is no reason for saying that meaning belongs to a word as such. In essence, meaning belongs to a word in its position between speakers; that is, meaning is realized only in the process of active, responsive understanding. Meaning does not reside in the word or in the soul of the speaker or in the soul of the listener. Meaning is the *effect of interaction between speaker and listener produced via the material of a particular sound complex*" (p. 53). This important point is discussed early in nearly every introductory communication textbook. "The important point to remember," writes Lee Thayer (2011) in *Explaining Things: Inventing Ourselves and Our Worlds*, "is that *nothing* we encounter in the world—including words and images—contains or conveys meanings. It is we humans who provide that in every instance. What something means is not what that something means, but what it means to the person making the interpretation of some aspect of the world" (p. 104). Thus, for Thayer (2009), "Communication is first of all

about interpretations. Nothing comes to us with its meaning inscribed on its back. What something means to you or to me is found in interpretation” (p. 21). For Virginia P. Richmond and James C. McCroskey (2009), “The idea that meanings are in words is perhaps the most common misconception about communication... No word has any meaning apart from the person using it. No two people share precisely the same meanings for all words. *Meanings are in people, not words*. Therefore, we must realize that what we say to others ... might not convey the meaning we intend” (p. 17). In *Introduction to Communication*, Sheila Steinberg (2006) writes, “words are arbitrary signs that members of a culture agree to use to represent the things they sense and experience. It is because meaning does not reside in words that different cultures can also agree that *hond*, *chien*, *injha*, *mpya*, and *dog* can be used to talk about the same animal” (p. 49). However, because all human beings are of different experiences, different backgrounds, different resources, different tribulations, and different perspectives, our meanings will always be different. In this case, “nigger” will never have only one meaning. Moreover, that meaning is found outside of words means that no language is inherently and objectively anything. What constitutes offensive, derogatory, and even hurtful language is subjective and interpretive, determined by all kinds of human forces and practices. To honor human diversity is to respect our right to name, describe, and experience things differently, meaning in ways that reflect our different backgrounds, circumstances, tribulations, ambitions, and so forth. So as much we should respect the rights of some to interpret a word a certain way, we should also respect the rights of others to interpret the same word differently. When we are deprived of this kind of rhetorical agency, diversity means nothing.

### #3 Context matters

As Gregory Bateson (2000) correctly notes, “without context, there is no communication” (p. 408). In other words, meaning and context are bound up with each other. Meanings shape contexts, and contexts shape meanings. To know our meanings of things involves knowing the context that is situating and locating our meanings. In short, without context, determining meaning is impossible, ultimately making communication impossible. Thus, for students and faculty to insist that a White professor using the word nigger in a classroom is always wrong, regardless of intent or context, is simply false. Indeed, as seen in these college incidents, many communication problems arise from our failure to properly understand the context that is locating our meanings. But determining any context is difficult. As Corey Anton (2007) observes, “We speak of words as if they help to establish context while we nonetheless speak of them as gaining their meaning from their context; people are said to take words out of context and we often use words to create context. This range of understanding reveals how context, (or that to which that word supposedly refers) is anything but clear, distinct, or generally agreed upon” (p. 88). For Jacques Derrida (1977), “a context is never absolutely determinable, or rather . . . its determination can never be entirely certain or saturated” (p. 3). The reason being that there are different kinds of contexts. There can be a racial context, a relational context, a cultural context, a historical context, a pedagogical context, and even a personal context. There is no way to know exactly what context is in play. Also, what I conceive and perceive to be the proper context can be different from what you conceive and perceive to be the proper context. Contexts also mean that what I find to be appropriate can be different from what you find to be appropriate. Finally, contexts are fleeting and always changing. Because contexts are always changing, meanings are always changing. In this regard, context presents many challenges to communication with regard to knowing what a person means.

We attend to communication by attending to context. For example, in many places in the South, Black civil rights activists organize what is now called reenactment history, which mostly involves reenacting the lynching of African Americans. In these reenactments, Black civil rights activists demand that the White actors use the full word, nigger. For the Black activists who direct these reenactments, White actors using the full word is important as regards fully and accurately capturing the incident. As Cassandra Green

recently told a group of White actors involved in one of these reenactments, “I know it’s hard on you guys, cause when you have to stand up there and say nigger and a lot of these things, it’s not easy, and that’s why it’s so hard to get people to do it” (Ford & Haney, 2018). Evidently, the Black civil rights activists who direct these reenactments understand well that context is important in terms of understanding how and where words are used.

#### *#4 No group is a monolith*

Banning the word “nigger” on college campuses assumes that all persons of a certain group, in this case Black folks, support these bans. There is supposedly no significant diversity within the Black community. But as seen in the writings of Black professors who oppose these bans, such as John McWhorter (2019) from Columbia University, Randall Kennedy (2003, 2020) from Harvard University, Vershawn Young (2020) from the University of Waterloo, Henry Louis Gates (1993) from Harvard University, and David Bradley (2014) from University of Oregon, this is false. Andre Perry (2018), an education consultant, writes, “Teachers must teach the N-word, particularly in literature and music, in the context of the history of white supremacy, lynching, economic suppression as well as segregation and discrimination. . . . There is no escaping the fact that teachers must use the N-word. Pretending the word doesn’t exist because it makes you uncomfortable is . . . an act of delusion.”

John Ridley, a Black author and filmmaker who has written extensively about the word “nigger,” told *The New York Times* that efforts to ban the word are insulting because they suggest that Black folks can be cowed “by six letters and two syllables.” He also said, “I honestly think that with everything that’s going on in America, that the idea of trying to ban a word to solve a problem is just ridiculous. And for people of color . . . for us to be worried about this word is ridiculous” (O’Connor, 2007). Evidently, no Black person has the right to say that using the word “nigger” in a classroom setting “is directly harmful to all of the Black students on campus.” Neither does the Dean of Education at Duquesne University has any right to say that using the full word in a classroom setting always creates a hostile learning environment. There is always diversity—diversity of thought, diversity of feeling—in any community. Diversity is the constant in human affairs. However, these new bans on supposedly offensive and hateful speech suppress and diminish diversity by demanding conformity under the threat of investigation, suspension, and termination.

#### *#5 No proof in banning things*

Besides calling for the banning of words, college students and faculty are also calling for the banning of books, the banning of speakers, the banning of classes, the banning of songs, the banning of films, the banning of conferences, the banning of costumes, and the banning of relationships (such as those between faculty and students). We no doubt like the idea of banning things. We believe that banning things is good. It fixes things. But how is the banning of things by progressives any different to the banning of things by conservatives, such as the banning of abortions, the banning of certain kinds of immigrants, the banning of transgender people from bathrooms, and the banning of any teaching of critical race theory? How can new social worlds become possible when both sides are employing the same politics? What becomes of Audre Lorde’s (1984) notion that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”? (p. 122).

To believe in the efficacy of banning things is to assume that there are things outside of us that can harm and hurt us. To ban things is remove those things from our environment, thereby removing any threat those things can possibly pose to us. In this way, banning things is about expelling things and walling off ourselves from supposedly dangerous things. It is about erecting a wall between us and these harmful things. So in a world that values banning things, walls abound, physically and discursively. There is always division and separation. Just like how every list of banned words aims to create an ideal campus, every

border wall seeks to keep out those human beings who supposedly threaten our ideal country. In both instances, the goal is to protect us from things that threaten us. In both instances, the goal is to create a safe space for us. But do such protections work? In fact, are such protections even healthy for us?

We need look no further than the study of living systems to understand why the politics of banning words is dangerous. There are no impermeable walls in the natural world. For sure, there is division and separation, with different species and ecologies thriving in different places and under different conditions. However, species and ecologies that deliberately isolate themselves from other species and ecologies die. In other words, closed systems perish in the natural world. Species and ecologies only thrive in open systems, meaning systems that are permeable and vulnerable to all manner of forces and influences (Capra & Luisi, 2014). There is also no hierarchy in open systems, meaning that there is no one entity unilaterally imposing a set of rules and regulations on any system. Instead, open systems succeed by encouraging and demanding that all things confront and reckon with other things, in the process changing and evolving in ways that promote cooperation. All species and ecologies have to respond transactionally to the needs and challenges that other species and ecologies present. No one entity ever gets everything it wants. To say that there is no hierarchy in open systems is to also say there is no autocracy in open systems. Our prosperity is purely dependent on our ability to get along well with others.

Banning words makes us closed systems. It stops us from confronting and reckoning with things we personally and subjectively judge to be abominable. It thereby stops us from acquiring new capacities and capabilities that come from facing new challenges. We come to falsely believe that we are better off in banning things than confronting things. Indeed, many of our neuroses and psychoses come from us being closed systems, walled off from all things that challenge us to change and evolve. It is therefore no accident that the age of banning nearly everything is also the age of college students dealing with unsurpassed levels of mental health problems. Recent surveys find that in the US three out of five students now experience “overwhelming anxiety,” and two out of five students are “too depressed to function” (Roy, 2018).

Finally, analysts now tell us that banning supposedly bad things only makes those things more persistent and virulent. It does so by turning things into closed system, saving these things from inquiry and criticism. In this case, there is no research showing that banning words is ending the rise of hate. In fact, analysts—pointing to the rise of hate groups across Europe—contend that laws that aim to ban words contribute to the rise of hate by driving the hate underground and in the ballot boxes. Indeed, Hitler’s rise occurred when Germany had hate speech laws and was also vigorously enforcing such laws. As Flemming Rose explains after studying that period of Germany’s history,

The assertion that Nazi propaganda played a significant role in mobilizing anti-Jewish sentiment is, of course, irrefutable. But to claim that the Holocaust could have been prevented if only anti-Semitic speech and Nazi propaganda had been banned has little basis in reality. Leading Nazis such as Joseph Goebbels, Theodor Fritsch, and Julius Streicher were all prosecuted for anti-Semitic speech. Streicher served two prison sentences. Rather than deterring the Nazis and countering anti-Semitism, the many court cases served as effective public-relations machinery, affording Streicher the kind of attention he would never have found in a climate of a free and open debate. In the years from 1923 to 1933, *Der Stürmer* [Streicher’s newspaper] was either confiscated or editors taken to court on no fewer than thirty-six occasions. The more charges Streicher faced, the greater became the admiration of his supporters. The courts became an important platform for Streicher’s campaign against the Jews. In the words of a present-day civil-rights campaigner, pre-Hitler Germany had laws very much like the anti-hate laws of today, and they were enforced with some vigor. As history so painfully testifies, this type of legislation proved ineffectual on the one occasion when there was a real argument for it. (News Desk, 2015)

What then is the value of banning words on college campuses when there is nothing empirically or historically to support doing so?

### #6 *No accounting of harm*

The politics of banning words assumes that words can cause harm and injury, just like how weapons can cause harm and injury, and that “nigger,” being the most hateful of words, can cause the most harm and injury. We are always hearing and reading about the damage the word inflicts, regardless of intent or context. Faculty who opposed Prof. Adamo at Augsburg University said in a statement that Prof. Adamo’s “repeated use of the N-word has caused harm to our students. This term, the most violent and racially charged word in American culture, has historically been used in the U.S. by white people to dehumanize and humiliate Black people. We also acknowledge that this harm was intensified when Adamo defended his use of the N-word multiple times against the objections of students of color” (The Echo, 2018). Moreover, asserting “academic freedom in defense of language that harms students turns the very principle that makes true learning possible into a mechanism for enforcing institutional racism. The incident illustrates the urgent need for many of our faculty to be more self-critical in their positions of power and racial (as well as gender and other forms of) privilege. Furthermore, it underscores the very real power of words to cause damage and trauma. We believe that further conversations about academic freedom can only take place after we acknowledge that harm has been done to these students.”

The statement makes further mention of how language “inflicts harm” and “denies a student’s humanity.” For these faculty, intent and context have nothing to do with how the word was used in Prof. Adamo’s classroom. Merely uttering the word is enough to inflict harm and injury. Thus, for these faculty, intent and context supposedly have nothing to do with communication. However, to hold this to be true would mean rejecting everything that is found in communication theory as regard the vital role that agency plays in shaping how we respond to things. It would also mean rejecting everything found in choice theory, which has long been effectively guiding many recovery programs. We are therefore to believe from these incidents on college campuses involving the word nigger that Black people are devoid of agency and merely passive victims of language. Glenn Loury (2021), a prominent Black scholar at Brown University, contends that it is “morally offensive” to impute that Black folks are devoid of agency. For Loury, “It infantilizes them, makes them mere puppets at the end of strings being pulled by others. In the extreme, it robs them of their human dignity. And perhaps worst of all, it robs a community of the ability to make social judgements. It undermines the capacity to clearly delineate right and wrong ways of living and to urge individuals to live rightly.” Similarly, John McWhorter (2021) contends that White university administrators refusing to push back critically on Black students’ many demands to ban things represents a new kind of racism.

There is also no research that supports the notion that simply being exposed to certain words causes harm. Psychologists contend that what is happening reflects a self-fulfilling prophecy—if you believe that speech can harm you, then speech will harm you. Research also shows that persons respond differently to hate speech. As Jesse Singal (2017) points out, “there’s no evidence that the mere *presence* of a conservative speaker on campus is harming students in some deep psychological or physiological way (with the exception of outlying cases involving preexisting mental-health problems). This is a silly idea that should be retired from the conversation about free speech on campus.” In fact, social scientists contend that being exposed to hate speech can actually be good for us by pushing us to develop new social skills, new temperaments, and new ways of thinking about things (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). This thesis is emerging from a lot of research that is now consistently revealing that human development is about becoming resilient and divergent. We become so by confronting things that are difficult, demanding, and even impossible.

## #7 *Violence is a problem*

Finally, what is especially troubling about these incidents on college campuses involving supposedly offensive words is how faculty, students, and university administrators appear to have no qualms about employing and demanding violence and vengeance to deal with transgressors, even those who never had any intent to do any kind of harm. I define violence as the deliberate use of force and social forces to impose one's will on others without any consent. From how students and faculty are demanding that professors be punished for using certain words in the classroom, we are to assume that in order for the classroom to be a safe and inclusive safe, violence is necessary. Those who offend our own sensibility, rationality, and modality must face violence and vengeance. According to a recent report, the targeting of faculty by college students has increased exponentially since 2015, with nearly three out of four cases resulting in faculty being sanctioned for speech that is constitutionally protected (FIRE, 2021). Even when instructors and professors who are accused of offending students apologize again and again, students still demand that they face dire consequences. Apparently, mercy and forgiveness have nothing to do with becoming learned, educated, and enlightened. What then becomes the value of studying the lives and teachings of persons like Martin Luther King, Jr., Bayard Rustin, Desmond Tutu, Martin Buber, and so many others who sought to teach us about the recursive and debilitating nature of violence and vengeance? Were these persons all wrong about the nature of violence? Why are all these calls for violence from students, faculty, and administrators going unchallenged? Why must the words of Fyodor Tyutchev's ("It's not given us to foretell how our words will echo through the ages, but sympathy is given us as grace is given us.") mean nothing to us?

## Integration and Discussion

I share the view that violence begins in a monologic temperament—assuming that the world is singular rather than plural, such as believing that any use of the word “nigger” by a White person is always wrong, regardless of intent or context. Again, that many prominent Black professors oppose this position, reminds us that diversity is the order of things, regardless of how hard we try to pretend otherwise. However, when we believe that the world is singular rather than plural, then anything that is different becomes vulnerable to violence. It is why the enemy narrative is the most popular narrative in the western world (Marshall, 2014). In a singular world, there can only be one truth, one view, one meaning, one god, one true religion. In other words, in a world of a monologic temperament, diversity, in all its complexity, fecundity, and possibility, is impossible. That the world is plural rather than singular means that no truth is ever final and perfect. There is always moral, ideological, and epistemological space for a new truth or new version of a truth. This is the space that diversity represents and thrives on. So human beings will always be of different passions and convictions. Rather than with difference, our problem is with violence.

Our way out of violence resides in cultivating a dialogic, democratic, and pluralistic temperament that assumes that the world is plural rather than singular. Such a temperament would find support in an observation made by Physics Nobel Laureate Freeman Dyson (2000), “I do not claim any ability to read God's mind. I am sure of only one thing. When we look at the glory of stars and galaxies in the sky and the glory of forests and flowers in the living world around us, it is evident that God loves diversity. Perhaps the universe is constructed according to a principle of maximum diversity. The principle of maximum diversity says that the laws of nature, and the initial conditions at the beginning of time, are such as to make the universe as interesting as possible.” The goal of a dialogic, democratic, and pluralistic temperament is to save difference from violence. We do so by recognizing how we bring violence into the world by cultivating monologue, that is, by insisting that things lend for only one meaning, one truth, one perspective. In this way, violence comes from our determination to violate the natural rhythms of life and the universe. But as history makes plain again and again, our determination to do so will always end disastrously. What then to make of the fact that the new push to violently suppress human diversity is happening on college



campuses, places that are supposed to represent enlightenment and higher learning? How could these institutions be so complicit in bringing so much violence into the world, and especially under the pretext of promoting diversity?

No doubt, human diversity is about race, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability, and sexual orientation. But human diversity is also about our different temperaments, different backgrounds, different circumstances, different sentiments, different ambitions, different resources, different prejudices, different values, different belief systems, different fears, different ethics, different politics, different struggles/tribulations. It is also about our different rationalities, different sensibilities, different spiritualities, different modalities, different pedagogies, different ideologies, and different epistemologies. This is the problem with claiming that the word nigger is offensive and “directly harmful to all of the Black students on campus.” It obliterates human diversity. It promotes the illusion of uniformity for the sake of saving us from the hardwork that comes with reckoning with our diversity. That something is offensive to us is merely that, something that is offensive to us. The universe has no law mandating that because something is offensive to one person it should be offensive to others. Neither does the universe have any law mandating that we should all react similarly to the things one person or group finds offensive.

Diversity makes communication possible and valuable. Communication has meaning only to the extent that speaker and listener have different thoughts. Communication is about recognizing and engaging another perspective. These new bans on presumably offensive speech suppress and diminish diversity by demanding conformity under the threat of investigation, suspension, and termination, that is, under the threat of force and violence. In other words, in limiting and diminishing communication, these bans limit and diminish diversity. The flourishing of diversity is bound up with the flourishing of communication. Only through communication can our full diversity appear in all its fecundity, complexity, and possibility. This is why rules and regulations will always diminish diversity. Both do so by limiting and strangling communication. For with rules and regulations, nothing is open for negotiation and deliberation. There is only submission. Finally, that diversity is bound up with communication means that communication demands vulnerability—owning the limits of what we can understand. That we are physically incapable of understanding most things completely and absolutely means that we must always allow for the possibility of a view or position that is different to our own. These new bans end this possibility. We are to assume that there is only one course of action that is correct when dealing with certain words. There is supposedly no need to listen compassionately to others. In this way, the politics of banning words makes for less diversity by making for less communication.

## **Final Thoughts**

I understand well that “nigger” is no ordinary word. It is impossible to separate it from over 350 years of slavery, Black Codes, and Jim Crow. Thus, as much as I believe that no word or subject matter should ever be off limits in a classroom setting, I also believe that this particular word should always be handled carefully and sensitively. So when used or uttered in a classroom setting, especially by a person who is not Black, it should always be clear to all that the word is only being used for pedagogical reasons. In fact, even though I, in being of Black ancestry, have racial permission to use the word nigger outside of a classroom setting, I personally never do. It never comes out of my mouth well. In fact, I would prefer to live in a world devoid of the word. However, as a teacher I have devoted my life to the conviction that knowledge is our most viable path to a better world. So as much as I personally oppose this word, I believe we will only bring about its complete disuse when we arrive at that place when we are ready to so. I therefore believe that teaching is about embracing the notion that “the only way out is through”—we get pass things by confronting things in our classrooms honestly, courageously, and compassionately. This means modeling for my students modes of being that honor dialogue over monologue, knowledge over

violence. In other words, this means embodying teaching as a mode of being that promotes no kind of violence, as in I refusing to coercively or insidiously impose my view of anything on my students.

There are different ways to teach and discuss dialogue. We can teach and discuss dialogue in terms of deliberately refusing to harm and diminish others. This view is about cultivating awareness of the consequences of how we name, frame, and describe people and situations. The writings of Martin Buber figure prominently in this view. Buber contends that violence begins in our naming of things. How we name things will shape how we engage things. We can also teach and discuss dialogue in terms of the nature of language. This view is about showcasing how the nature of language is dialogic, meaning that there is no stable relationship between words and meaning. As such, our descriptions and explanations will never be complete and absolute. Our interactions thus demand a lot of grace and generosity. The writings of Mikhail Bakhtin figure prominently in this view. Bakhtin contends that because language is always shifting and changing, everything that language makes possible is also always shifting and changing. He also contends that language and meaning live between people. We can also teach and discuss dialogue in terms of perspective. We become dialogic by expanding what we are willing to understand. This involves, among other things, ridding ourselves of our egotism and narcissism. Our perspective becomes larger only when we become smaller. Persons who adopt this view will often refer to the writings of David Bohm, beginning with *On Dialogue*. Bohm contends that the most egregious error we make as human beings is assuming that we know things when in fact we can do no more than assume things. However, in believing that we know things, we become dogmatic and autocratic.

In my own classes, I draw upon all the different traditions on dialogue. However, in my dialogue class, *Dialogue and Experience*, I focus on dialogue as perspective (Bohm). The reason being that our perspectives reflect our minds, and, as Buddhism teaches, “mind is everything.” According to the Buddha, “What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind.” He also says, “What we think we become.”

We nearly always have the power to control how we respond to things by reclaiming our power to control how we view things. To change the way we view things is to change how we think about things. In my own teaching of dialogue, I am about demonstrating how we can always alter and expand how we view and understand things, and subsequently control how we respond to things. This involves learning how to detach ourselves from things, such as all those things we casually value and believe, like our believing that power resides in words and symbols. Our minds become open to new things through detachment. In Buddhism, detachment is the path to enlightenment. Conversely, attachment is the cause of our misery. According to the Buddha, being attached “to present views as if they were absolute truth will only prevent us from realizing the truth. Humility and open-mindedness are the two conditions necessary for making progress on the path. (Hanh, 1991, p. 451). Suffice it to say, the banning of words has no basis in Buddhism. Just as much as we make for our own suffering, we can also stop doing so. But first we must own the fact that we make for our suffering rather than our suffering coming from outside of us, such as hearing a person use a certain word in a classroom. For as the Buddha teaches, “When the mind exists undisturbed in the Way, nothing in the world can offend, and when a thing can no longer offend, it ceases to exist in the old way” (Kononenko & Kononenko, 2010, p. 146).

As for what I do about students in my classes who may find my teacherly use of the word “nigger” offensive in the classroom, I always begin with revealing how I personally feel about the word and why I would prefer to call a person “brother” rather than “nigger.” Then I discuss how language is political. We are always fighting over language, as in who can use what language, what language is appropriate in what context, what language belongs to whom, what language should govern the public square, what language best describes a situation, and so forth. Because language is always political, it is always about power—

as in, who decides whether to call a person a terrorist or a freedom fighter? So as I am working on this paper I am also now learning about a new movement in the Native American community to stop capitalizing words so as to undermine the hierarchy and oppression that the English language engenders and sustains (Manyguns, 2021).

The word “nigger” is about power. It is about Black folks, after 350 years of slavery, Black Codes, and Jim Crow, finally having any power to impact how White folks use language. For this reason, many Black folks have no intention of giving up this newfound power. However, is the struggle over this word ultimately valuable for Black students? Indeed, many of my own bright and beautiful Black students remain convinced that hearing a White person utter the word, even in a classroom setting, is hurtful. To this I often say, “If words have power, then what do you have? It means you have nothing. I now have power over you. I can do with you as I please. For if I can hurt you with my words, then I have power over you. I can hurt you at will. But why would you want to be in such a weak and powerless place? Why would you want to give this kind of enormous power over to someone? So when you give up your power to control what words mean and how they land on you, you are choosing to be powerless. But again, why would you want to be powerless? How can you transform the world for the better from such a position? The reality is that giving away your power robs you of mental strength and the ability to control your life (Morin, 2017). It is a very debilitating thing to do. So why do you want to do it?”

I also remind my students that becoming learned is about fostering a dialogic, democratic, and pluralistic temperament. It is something you become by enlarging what you can perceive, experience, and imagine. So today you want nigger to be banned because you find it offensive. You also want students and instructors who use the word in your classes to be punished. But what about those other students in your classes who find your support of abortion in the classroom to be just as offensive and hurtful? What about those students who also claim to be traumatized by the language of pro-choice? What also of those students who oppose any discussion of any reading that deals with abortion? What about those students who demand that any student or instructor who expresses support for abortion be punished, just like how the university punishes those who say nigger? Indeed, why should colleges that claim to be about making all students feel safe, welcome, and valued have no obligation to also make these students who oppose abortion feel safe, welcome, and valued? Why should these students have no claim over what words come out of your mouth in the classroom? Why should only your concerns matter? Why should only your feelings matter? How does any university justify defending only your concerns? Why should religious diversity be valued less than any other kind of diversity in the classroom, especially when there are religious denominations with long histories of discrimination and persecution? So let us always remember that human diversity means human diversity. Your truth is merely one truth. If you want us to respect your truth, you need to respect ours. In other words, if you believe it is wrong for others to impose their truths on you through force and violence, then recognize that it is wrong for you to do likewise.

Finally, I remind my students that there is a reason why I never define or frame anything only one way. The reason being that dialogue has no interest in how we define things. Instead, dialogue is about how we engage things. Are we doing so with empathy and compassion, sensitivity and vulnerability? Are we speaking to declare and announce, or to listen and understand? What implicit biases and prejudices are we harboring that can limit and distort our understanding of things? What will it take, as many Native Americans say, for the words of others to enter our hearts? That dialogue is about flow means that it is about the process. If we do the process well, meaning if we meet each other with open hearts and minds, the outcome will be fine.

Ultimately, I embody teaching from the standpoint that no human being can command a complete and absolute truth. There are always other versions of the truth that reflect our different experiences,

different circumstances, different tribulations, different ambitions, different values, different beliefs, and so forth. In a word, there is always diversity—diversity in description, diversity in interpretation, diversity in rationalization, diversity in conclusion. Moreover, there is always dark matter and dark energy, meaning that all truths have the potential to change and evolve in ways that are outside of our control. Thus, teaching, like learning, demands enormous humility and vulnerability. We must be willing to suspend all that we believe and value so we can be genuinely vulnerable to truths, experiences, and perspectives that are different to our own. We deliberate and meditate because the world will never allow us to have complete and absolute truths. Thus, of all the deeply troubling things about schools and colleges now investigating, suspending, and terminating instructors for using certain words in classes is the reifying and concretizing of the falsehood that human beings can possess a complete and absolute truth. Besides making diversity impossible, this falsehood makes communication impossible, and, in doing so, makes violence inevitable. Such is the threat that reifying and concretizing this falsehood poses to us. That schools and colleges are now complicit in deepening this threat is simply surreal.

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