

The Morality of Using “Nigger”*

Rodney C. Roberts

Abstract The black experience in what is now the United States of America has been one of perpetual racial injustice from the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in the early seventeenth century to the present day. Significant among the phenomena that have contributed to this perpetual state are cross-burning, lynching, and using “nigger” to refer to black folk. Since the word has been an integral part of lynching, cross-burning and other anti-black violence, it is understandable that it has come to be characterized as both the ultimate American insult and the ultimate expression of racism and white superiority. Although black folk have historically used the word amongst themselves with a number of different meanings, some, mostly younger, white folk, have taken to using the word to address black folk with the belief that doing so is morally benign. In this chapter I argue for a negative answer to the question: Are there good reasons for thinking that the use of “nigger” by white folk to address black folk is not morally objectionable?

Keywords Racial epithets • Use of “nigger” by whites • History of racial violence • Racial violence and hate speech

Use of the word ‘nigger’ by white folk to address black folk has, at least since the Civil Rights Movement, generally been viewed as morally objectionable. Recently some, mostly younger, white folk, have taken to using the word to address black folk with the belief that doing so is morally benign. I aim to challenge this belief. Specifically, I want to suggest a negative answer to the following question: Are there good reasons for thinking that the use of “nigger” by white folk to address black folk is not morally objectionable?

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I shall not be concerned with the mere reading of the word aloud or with quoting its usage by others. Rather, I shall be concerned with expressions that directly or indirectly address black folk. Expressions such as: "You niggers keep quiet," "Hey nigger, what's up?" "Nigger you must be kidding" and "Joe, you my nigger." Unlike some writers I understand 'nigger' and 'nigga' to be the same word.¹ The difference is that with white folk the word is "usually pronounced 'nigger,' not *nigga*."² Since any argument claiming to provide good reasons for thinking that use of "nigger" by white folk to address black folk is not morally objectionable must stand in the wake of the word's history and under the weight of extant moral objections to its use, I begin my analysis by taking up the history of the word, including its usage since slavery and its link to anti-black violence and oppression. In Section 2 I draw a moral distinction between use of the word by black folk to address each other and its use by white folk to address black folk, arguing that the former is merely offensive while the latter is morally objectionable. I then propose three arguments that I take to be the best candidates for supporting usage of the word by white folk and attempt to show that none of these arguments succeed.

1 History

According to the *OED*, a *nigger* is a dark-skinned person of sub-Saharan African origin or descent.³ The word may have its origin in the Latin *niger*, said to be the classical Latin adjective for black. However, the Latin word has been translated not only as black, but also as dark, dismal, ill-omened, and bad in character.⁴ Indeed, HarperCollins tells us that *negro* (also *nigro*), believed to be in use before *nigger*, means *Aethiops*, another word for Ethiopian and (figuratively) stupid.⁵ The word has been compounded to create a plethora of expressions (many of which can be found used with *negro* as well): *nigger boy*, *nigger child*, *nigger culture*, *nigger dialect*, *nigger land*, *nigger lips*, *nigger mouth*, and *nigger music*; *nigger lover*, *nigger driver*, *nigger breaker*, and *nigger killer*, to name only a few. It has been described as the "ultimate American insult" and the "ultimate expression of racism

¹Cf., e.g., Kenneth Einar Himma, "On the Definition of Unconscionable Racial and Sexual Slurs," *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Vol.33, No. 3 (Fall 2002): 516.

²Geneva Smitherman, *Black Talk: Words and Phrases From the Hood to the Amen Corner* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 168.

³*Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press, 2009) <http://dictionary.oed.com> (accessed July 27, 2009).

⁴*Latin Dictionary* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2003).

⁵*Ibid.* This is consistent with Kant's understanding of black folk, saying of a "Negro carpenter" that "this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid," in Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 113.

and white superiority."⁶ It is said to have "evolve[ed] into the paradigmatic slur." This evolution has seen the word become "the epithet that generates epithets. That is why Arabs are called sand niggers, Irish the niggers of Europe, and Palestinians the niggers of the Middle East."⁷

The black experience in what is now the United States of America has been one of perpetual racial injustice from the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in the early seventeenth century to the present day. Significant among the phenomena that have contributed to this perpetual state are cross-burning and lynching. These phenomena are important to our understanding of the history of "nigger" because they, like many other acts of anti-black violence, are perpetrated upon "niggers." The link between "nigger" and the brutality of slavery and its progeny, including cross burning and lynching, is long-standing. Of course, it was only after the end of slavery, when black folk could no longer be valued as property by white folk, and when they threatened to become a legitimate part of society, that they became the objects of these practices.⁸

"Burning a cross in the United States is inextricably intertwined with the history of the Ku Klux Klan," the activities of which included "whipping, threatening, and murdering" black folk throughout the South.⁹ "Although the Ku Klux Klan dates back to the nineteenth century, its well-known symbol of white resistance to racial equality, the burning cross, is a twentieth century invention." It has become "an integral part of the mass theater of the Ku Klux Klan," the membership of which "swelled into the millions by the mid-1920s."¹⁰ The contemporary significance of cross burning is its function as a means of intimidation. Its history, including a significant increase in the number of them in the last decade of the twentieth century, supports the belief that the practice typically has the desired effect.¹¹ After one black woman's experience with a cross burning, "she was crying on her knees in the living room. [She] felt feelings of frustration and intimidation and feared for her husband's life. She testified what the burning cross symbolized to her as a black American: 'Nothing good. Murder, hanging, rape, lynching. Just anything bad that

⁶David Pilgrim and Phillip Middleton. "Nigger and Caricatures." (Ferris State University Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, September 2001). <http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/caricature/homepage.htm> (accessed October 21, 2007).

⁷Randall Kennedy. *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), 27.

⁸As former slave Sarah Fitzpatrick recalls of her years in bondage, "we didn't have many lyn'chings den." in John W. Blassingame, ed. *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 648.

⁹*Virginia v. Black*, 538 U.S. 343, 343 (2003).

¹⁰Donald P. Green and Andrew Rich. "White Supremacist Activity and Crossburnings in North Carolina." *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (September 1998): 263.

¹¹There was an upswing in cross burnings in the late 1990's, with 30 documented cases in 1995 and over 45 cases in 1996: see "Number of Cross Burnings on Increase." *Greensboro News Record*, 29 December 1996, A6.

you can name. It is the worst thing that could happen to a person.’”¹² Such accounts give credence to Justice Thomas’s view of “violent and terroristic conduct” as “the Siamese twin of cross burning.”¹³

Evidence of the link between “nigger” and cross burning can be found in my home state. Three white men, Alfred and Eugene Smith and Martin King, were convicted and imprisoned for cross burnings they perpetrated near Asheville, North Carolina. The men wanted their neighbors, Gordon Cullins a black man and Hazel Sutton a white woman, out of the neighborhood. In furtherance of this desire they burned crosses on the couple’s lawn on New Year’s Eve 1992. Cullins and Sutton returned home, not only to smoldering crosses, but also to their neighbors’ shouts of “nigger” at them.¹⁴ In 1999 near Charlotte, North Carolina two white men burned a cross near the home of another interracial couple. Having already taunted the black member of the couple with “nigger,” both verbally and by way of a sign placed on a tree, the men were said to have sat in lawn chairs drinking beer as the cross burned.¹⁵

Fire has also played a role in lynching. Indeed, the public burning of black people came to be known as a “Negro Barbecue.”¹⁶

The story of lynching, then, is more than the simple fact of a black man or woman hanged by the neck. It is the story of slow, methodical, sadistic, often highly inventive forms of torture and mutilation. If executed by fire, it is the red-hot poker applied to the eyes and genitals and the stench of burning flesh, as the body slowly roasts over the flames and the blood sizzles in the heat. If executed by hanging, it is the convulsive movement of the limbs. Whether by fire or rope, it is the dismemberment and distribution of severed bodily parts as favors and souvenirs to participants and the crowd: teeth, ears, toes, fingers, nails, kneecaps, bits of charred shin and bones. Such human trophies might reappear as watch fobs or be displayed conspicuously for public viewing.¹⁷

“Between 1882 and 1968, an estimated 4,742 blacks met their deaths at the hands of lynch mobs. As many if not more blacks were victims of legal lynchings (speedy trials and executions), private white violence, and ‘nigger hunts,’ murdered by a variety of means in isolated rural sections and dumped into rivers and creeks.”¹⁸

¹² *Virginia v. Black*, 538 U.S. 343, 390 (2003) (Thomas, J., dissenting), quoting *United States v. Skillman*, 922 F. 2d 1370, 1378 (9th Cir. 1991).

¹³ *Virginia v. Black* 538 U.S. 343, 394 (2003) (Thomas, J., dissenting).

¹⁴ “Arson Charge Stands in N.C. Cross Burning,” *Morning Star*, 2 March 1999, B5; “4 Face Charges in Cross-Burning Case,” *Morning Star*, 1 November 1996, B4. Although both articles report that Cullins and Sutton “heard racial slurs yelled by the three men,” it seems almost impossible that they did not use some version of “nigger.”

¹⁵ “Cross-Burning Penalty Appealed,” *Washington Post*, 24 January 2004, A6. Again, while this article reports that the men used “a racial epithet that they also wrote on a sign tacked to a tree,” it seems almost impossible that this epithet was not “nigger” or some version thereof.

¹⁶ Leon F. Litwack, “Hellhounds,” in *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, eds. James Allen, Hilton Als, John Lewis, and Leon F. Litwack (Santa Fe: Twin Palms Publishing, 2000), 10, emphasis deleted.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12, emphasis deleted.

As one federal official in Wilkinson County, Mississippi put it: "When a nigger gets ideas, the best thing to do is to get him under ground as quick as possible."¹⁹ Hence, niggers are "naturally" the ones who are to be hunted down and lynched.²⁰

One of the most horrific lynchings in recent memory occurred when James Byrd Jr. was lynched by John King, Shawn Berry and Lawrence Russell in Jasper, Texas on June 7, 1998. Byrd's body was found decapitated and missing its right arm. His head and arm were discovered in a ditch about a mile away from his torso. After being beaten, chained by his ankles and dragged over several miles by a pickup truck, Byrd's facial features were so badly distorted that investigators were unable to positively identify him from the identification card they found in his wallet. King and Russell were purported to be members of a racist prison gang and had "tattoos of Black Men hanging from a tree with a duck in a Klan uniform nearby."²¹ King also had a "triangular symbol" representing the Klu Klux Klan on his cigarette lighter. When Russell was asked about his bruised big toe, he replied: "I kicked the shit out of that fucking nigger."²²

Fortunately, it appears that, at least for the most part, the hanging of a noose has replaced the actual lynching of black folk.²³ Nevertheless, other sorts of anti-black violence continue, as the recent case of 21 year old Megan Williams well illustrates. Although not much publicized in the main-stream media, Ms. Williams was rescued by the Logan County, West Virginia Sheriff from a broken down mobile home trailer where she had been held captive by six white people. She "told authorities how she was allegedly stabbed, strangled, raped, fed dog and rat feces, and threatened with death." Ms. Williams said her captors told her "This is what we do to niggers around here."²⁴

¹⁹Ibid., 26, emphasis deleted.

²⁰As one self-described "colored man" sees it, people have used "nigger" as a "metaphorical lynching before the real one." See Hilton Als, "GWTW [Gone With The Wind]," in *Without Sanctuary*, 39.

²¹Roy Bragg, "Jasper trial defendant says Byrd's throat was cut." *San Antonio Express-News*, 17 September 1999, and Region VI NAACP Emergency Resolution to Support Jasper, Texas. <http://www.texasnaacp.org/archive/jasper.htm> (accessed July 6, 2009).

²²James Gunter, Affidavit of Probable Cause, State of Texas, County of Jasper, June 9, 1998. <http://www.texasnaacp.org/archive/jasper1.gif> (accessed July 23, 2009).

²³The most highly publicized noose hangings in recent memory occurred in Jena, Louisiana in the summer of 2006. See Mark Potok, et al., "The Geography of Hate." *New York Times*, 25 November 2007, Op-Ed, 11. In response to a surge in noose hangings, the state of New York made it a hate crime of felony first degree aggravated harassment. Cyril Josh Barker, "Hanging Nooses Now a Hate Crime." *New York Amsterdam News*, 22-28 May 2008, 3. Other states, like Louisiana and North Carolina, are considering similar legislation. Whitney Woodward, "Bill Would Make Noose Displays a Felony Crime." *Daily Reflector*, 24 June 2008, B1: "Outlawing the Noose." *Jet*, 7 July 2008, 22.

²⁴Cash Michaels, "Rev. Al Sharpton Calls Megan Williams Case 'National Disgrace.'" *Chicago Defender*, 28-30 December 2007, 6.

1.1 *Nigga Callin*

Throughout this history many black folk have used nigga amongst themselves. This phenomenon, known as “nigga-callin” (hereafter NC), has always included other than strictly negative understandings of the word.²⁵ Indeed, the history of NC is a part of African American culture. Among the things that make African American English (AAE) or Black Talk unique, are “verbal rituals from the Oral Tradition and the continued importance of the Word, as in African cultures[.]” “The African American Oral Tradition is rooted in a belief in the power of the Word. The African concept of *Nommo*, the Word, is believed to be the force of life itself.” Also unique to AAE is its “lexicon, or vocabulary, usually developed by giving special meanings to regular English words, a practice that goes back to enslavement and the need for a system of communication that only those in the enslaved community could understand.”²⁶

The absorption of African American English into Eurocentric culture masks its true origin and reason for being. It is a language born from a culture of struggle, a way of talking that has taken surviving African language elements as the base for self-expression in an alien tongue. Through various processes such as ‘Semantic Inversion’ (taking words and turning them into their opposites), African Americans stake our claim to the English language, and at the same time, reflect distinct Black values that are often at odds with Eurocentric standards.²⁷

“Words like nigga reinforce Blackness since, whether used positively, generically, or negatively, the term can refer only to people of African descent.” Nigga is one of the “constant reminders of race and the Black Struggle.”²⁸

Of the meanings given to nigga at least two were in use during slavery. The first is the most generic or neutral and may refer to black folk generally or black men in particular. Expressions like “it was wall-to-wall niggas at the party last night,” and “she got rid of his triflin ass, she got herself a new nigga now.” Or, as former slave Sarah Fitzpatrick said of one man, “dat [nigga] wuz gone.”²⁹ Also present during slavery was nigga as the rebellious and/or fearless black man, the “bad” nigga. According to Fitzpatrick, “Some [niggas] so mean dat white fo’ks didn’t bodder’em much.” As she recalls, a man named “Will Marks wuz a bad [nigga].” “Ma’ Marster use’ta talk ‘bout killin’im an’ Miss Ann, tell’im ‘You bedder not put your hands on dat [nigga], he kill ‘ya’” (note that this meaning is negative for the enslaver but

²⁵While it has been clear to me for some time that there are black folk who use “nigga” in conversation with other black folk and those who do not, I first heard this expression when Michael Eric Dyson used it in the course of interviewing a black author on C-Span in 2008. In contrast to his interviewee, Dyson characterized himself as a “nigga-callin black man.”

²⁶Smitherman, 5, 7.

²⁷Ibid., 17–18.

²⁸Ibid., 20, small caps deleted.

²⁹Blassingame, 641. It is important to note that Fitzpatrick’s liberal use of “nigga” was almost certainly facilitated by her having been interviewed by a black interviewer, in this case Thomas Campbell, a co-worker of George Washington Carver (xliv–xlviii, 605). Quoted below is another former slave, Henry Baker, who was also interviewed by Campbell.

positive for the enslaved).³⁰ Another meaning is that of acting out the loud vulgar stereotype of a nigger, as in "Y'all be cool and stop acting like niggas up in here." Still another is no doubt due in large part to the African liberation struggles and the Black Power Movement in the second half of the last century. This meaning refers to someone rooted in blackness, especially black culture, black politics and the black social condition. But it is "nigga" as close friend, brother, or sister, that is perhaps most associated with white-to-black NC. When employed by black folk, expressions like "J. T. is my nigga" are a radical change from the original meaning when the expression was used by slaveowners. When a slave mistress moved to a new home it was not uncommon for her to have "brung all o' her [nigga] property wid her." As Fitzpatrick recalls, Miss Ann said regarding one slave: "'You know he'se my [nigga] an' don'cha tech'im ag'in, less I say so.'"³¹ Miss Ann was asserting her title to ownership of another human being.³² NC black folk took a claim of chattel ownership and turned it into something familial.

2 Moral Considerations

The moral distinction between NC and white-to-black NC is that the former is merely offensive while the latter is morally objectionable.³³ Who says what often matters; indeed, it often matters a great deal. Whether it is a parent versus an acquaintance, or a head of state versus a college student, who the speaker is and the speaker's position in society can make a significant difference in the ways in which, and the extent to which, words impact the hearer. In NC, where the speaker and hearer share the black experience, they are likely to share the commonality of "Black Talk... that takes us across boundaries. Regardless of job or social position, most African Americans experience some degree of participation in the life of the community.... This creates in-group crossover lingo that is understood and shared by various social

³⁰Ibid., 641–642.

³¹Ibid., 639, 640.

³²If Bill Lawson is correct, "ownership was the defining feature of oppression for slaves." Howard McGary and Bill E. Lawson. *Between Slavery and Freedom: Philosophy and American Slavery* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 2.

³³This analysis responds to the concern expressed in Randall Kennedy's claim that "[t]here is no compelling justification for presuming that black usage of nigger is permissible while white usage is objectionable." See Randall L. Kennedy, "Who Can Say 'Nigger'? ... and Other Considerations," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 26 (Winter 1999/2000): 92. As Geneva Smitherman sees the problem, "the frequent use of *nigga* in Rap Music... and throughout Black Culture generally, where the word takes on meanings other than the historical negative, has created a linguistic dilemma in the crossover world and in the African American community. Widespread controversy rages about the use of *nigga* among Blacks – especially the pervasive public use of the term – and about whether or not whites can have license to use [the word] with the many different meanings that Blacks give to it." See Smitherman 167–168.

groups within the race" including "a ready understanding of the different meanings of [nigga]." ³⁴ It would seem that at worst, non-NC black folk might take being addressed as "nigga" as a case in which the speaker "called them out by name," that is, the speaker was insulting or characterized the hearer in a negative way. "[T]he direct and indirect harms of subordinating speech are only possible in the case of members of groups that are socially subordinated." ³⁵ Since "[s]kin color, or to be more exact, skin shade, or lightness or darkness of skin color, has seemed to be the primary common sense criterion for racial membership and identification," thus making at least prima facie subordinate status readily determinable, only cases of white (superior)-to-black (subordinate) NC can produce morally objectionable injury. ³⁶

White-to-black NC can be injurious in a number of morally objectionable ways. Face-to-face it can have an immediate and injurious impact on the hearer. It does so by "remind[ing] the world that you are fair game for physical attack," by "evok[ing] in you all of the millions of cultural lessons regarding your inferiority that you have so painstakingly repressed," and by "imprint[ing] upon you a badge of servitude and subservience for all the world to see." ³⁷ "The experience of being called 'nigger'... is like receiving a slap in the face. The injury is instantaneous. There is neither an opportunity for intermediary reflection on the idea conveyed nor an opportunity for responsive speech. The harm to be avoided is both clear and present." For Charles Lawrence, "the visceral emotional response to personal attack precludes speech. Attack produces an instinctive, defensive psychological reaction. Fear, rage, shock, and flight all interfere with any reasoned response." "Nigger" produces physical symptoms that are temporarily disabling to the hearer. ³⁸

As a racial insult it relies on "the unalterable fact of the victim's race and on the history of slavery and race discrimination in this country." Indeed, it does so paradigmatically. As Richard Delgado reminds us, "a racial insult is always a dignitary affront, a direct violation of the victim's right to be treated respectfully." "Our moral and legal systems recognize the principle that individuals are entitled to treatment that does not denigrate their humanity through disrespect for their privacy or moral worth." Hence, "[t]he wrong of this dignitary affront consists of the expression of a judgment that the victim of the racial slur is entitled to less than that to which all other citizens are entitled." "Nigger" can also inflict psychological harm on the victim. Because it "draw[s] upon and intensif[ies] the effects of the stigmatization,

³⁴Ibid., 25, small caps deleted.

³⁵Joan C. Callahan, "Speech That Harms: The Case of Lesbian Families," in *On Feminist Ethics and Politics*, ed. Claudia Card (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 250.

³⁶Naomi Zack, *Philosophy of Science and Race* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 42.

³⁷Charles R. Lawrence III, "If He Hollers Let Him Go: Regulating Racist Speech on Campus," in *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment*, ed. Mari J. Matsuda, Charles R. Lawrence III, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlè Williams Crenshaw (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 74.

³⁸Ibid., 67-68.

labeling, and disrespectful treatment that the victim has previously undergone," it may cause long-term emotional pain.³⁹

Diana Meyers also thinks that being called "nigger" constitutes a violation of one's rights. For her, the effects are such that they threaten a person's self-esteem and introduce "an element of wariness or defensive belligerence into one's relations with other people, and ske[w] one's life choices."⁴⁰ On Meyers's view,

[b]road empathic understanding of such harms discloses that they undermine people's agentic capacities. It would seem, then, that the negative impact of hate speech on subjectivity is a paradigm case of moral significance. Since agentic capacities are the very capacities that basic rights secure, it seems that empathic understanding of people who belong to historically despised and currently excluded social groups supports the claim that they have a right not to be subjected to verbal or pictorial abuse based on their membership in one or more of these groups.⁴¹

"Nigger" can be oppressive. "[I]t works in concert with other racist tools to keep victim groups in an inferior position."⁴² Moreover, if Mary McGowan is correct, it "not only causes racial oppression, it often *is* racial oppression."⁴³

It is in the wake of the word's history and under the weight of these moral objections that any argument claiming to give reasons for thinking that the use of "nigger" by white folk to address black folk is not morally objectionable must stand. As near as I can tell, the following three arguments are the best candidates.

2.1 *The Depictions Argument*

Although there have been a number of factors involved in accounting for white-to-black NC, gangster rap may have been the most influential. "From 1979, when 'Rapper's Delight' was released, until 1988, when 'Straight Outta Compton' went gold, [nigga] was seldom uttered on hip-hop recordings. All that changed when N.W.A. (short for Niggas Wit Attitude) became a national sensation with 'Straight Outta Compton.'⁴⁴ When we add music-video and film depictions to those found in music, it presents an enormous potential for influencing white folk, the majority

³⁹Richard Delgado, "Words That Wound: A Tort Action for Racial Insults, Epithets, and Name Calling," in *Words That Wound*, 94.

⁴⁰Diana Tietjens Meyers, "Rights in Collision: A Non-Punitive, Compensatory Remedy for Abusive Speech," *Law and Philosophy*, Vol.14, No. 2 (May, 1995): 215.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 215.

⁴²Mari J. Matsuda, "Public Response to Racist Speech: Considering the Victim's Story," in *Words That Wound*, 39.

⁴³Mary Kate McGowan, "Oppressive Speech," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 87, No. 3 (September, 2009): 406.

⁴⁴Jabari Asim, *The N Word: Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn't, and Why* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 220.

consumers of the hip-hop music industry. Given the proliferation of depictions of NC, many may be inclined to endorse the *Depictions Argument*: given the proliferation of depictions of NC in music, music-video, and film, white-to-black NC is not morally objectionable.

The first thing to notice about this argument is the sort of depictions upon which it relies. Depictions in the media are rarely depictions of white-to-black NC. Moreover, there are a host of depictions that undermine or contra-indicate white-to-black NC. White rap artist Eminem may be the quintessential example of this. Eminem rocketed to stardom after he was spotlighted by rapper Dr. Dre, who began his career as a member of N.W.A. Eminem does not, however, use the word in his lyrics. It is a word he does not feel comfortable using. "It wouldn't sound right coming out of my mouth" he says. While he is quite alright with a black man saying "Eminem is my nigga," "[i]f a white kid came up to [him] and said it, [he] probably would look at him funny. And if given the time to sit down with him [Eminem would] say, 'Look, just don't say the word. It's not meant to be used by us.' Specially if you want something to do with hip-hop."⁴⁵

White-to-black NC is also contra-indicated in film. Take *Bulworth* for example.⁴⁶ In the movie, Jay Bulworth, a white U.S. Senator from California campaigning for reelection, follows the suggestion of some of his young black female volunteers and they all go to a night club in a predominately black neighborhood after a campaign stop. Bulworth has been attracted to one of his volunteers, a girl named Nina, since first seeing her at the campaign stop. Nina's brother Donelle objects to this attraction. While in the club Donelle asks Bulworth: "You lost massa?" He then says to Nina: "Its about homies and shit, the real niggas. He ain't no real nigga is he?" Bulworth interjects: "I ain't no what?" Donelle responds: "I said you ain't no real nigga, is you?" Bulworth then says: "Is *you* a real nigga?" Donelle immediately takes on a much more aggressive demeanor, the kind of response one has to fighting words. He says to Bulworth: "What, you callin me a nigga motherfucker? Don't be callin me a nigga motherfucker!" Of course, strictly speaking, Bulworth has not called Donelle anything, he has only asked a question. Be this as it may, the reaction is the same.

It may be right to say that hip-hop culture is largely the source of most of the depictions of NC. However, since these depictions are overwhelmingly of black folk engaging in NC, and since they include a host of depictions that contra-indicate white-to-black NC, the Depictions Argument fails – the recent proliferation of depictions of NC in music, music-video, and film fail to support the inference that white-to-black NC is not morally objectionable.

⁴⁵Toure, "The Serious Side of Eminem: The Rolling Stone Interview," *Rolling Stone*, November 25, 2004, http://www.rollingstone.com/news/coverstory/serious_side_of_eminem/page (accessed August 15, 2008). As Michael Eric Dyson observes, "Whites who possess intimate knowledge of black culture are the very people who know the tortured history of the term and thus refrain from using it, at least publicly." See Michael Eric Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2001), 148.

⁴⁶*Bulworth*, prod. Warren Beatty and Peter Jan Brugge, dir. Warren Beatty, 108 min., Twentieth Century Fox, 1998, videocassette.

2.2 *The Endearment Argument*

The next argument arises from the contemporary sense of the word in NC as a "term of endearment." According to the *Endearment Argument*: since "nigger" has been used in NC by black folk as a term of endearment, white-to-black NC is not morally objectionable.

The first difficulty with this argument is the assumed familiarity that it entails. Because the prima facie familial relation that often exists among black folk is absent in white-to-black NC, the argument assumes that something like a kinship relation exists between the white speaker and the black hearer. An example at the low end of the spectrum of assumed familiarity can be found in the media. One often heard Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice referred to as "Condi" Rice in the media. Not surprisingly, when Janet Reno was U. S. Attorney General I never heard her referred to as "Jan," nor did I ever hear Madeline Albright referred to as "Madie" when she was Secretary of State. A more serious expression is the centuries-old practice, fortunately not much in vogue today, of calling grown black men "boy." This is a relatively minor but effective way to negate African names, culture etc., and indeed the very personhood of black folk. The black experience in America provides the genesis for this white-on-black familiarity. It began with the sort of familiarity that enabled and made normal the inspection of naked Africans on the auction block before bidding on them as one would cattle at a livestock auction.⁴⁷ When spoken by someone of the dominant group, assumption can turn to assertion. In cases of NC there is often a prima facie sense of something like a sibling-to-sibling relation. The message in expressions like "Joe, you my nigga," is "You are my brother (sister):" at the very least "I think of you as a brother (sister)." In white-to-black NC, the message might be "*I am to be thought of as your brother (sister).*" A relationship is thus merely being asserted without any ground in a shared culture and shared social experience. This seems to suggest something closer to the ownership expressed by Miss Ann than the kinship relation expressed in NC. It also suggests another difficulty with the Endearment Argument – it relies on a co-opting of black culture.

Cultural co-opting can take many forms. For example, when white folk attend a revered Native American ceremony and take souvenir photographs, even after being asked not to do so. In such cases they are simply co-opting Native American culture for their own entertainment. In so doing they disrespect the culture and the people. Such practices are consistent with the Lockean idea that the "new world" (as well as in Africa, of course) exists for the use and benefit

⁴⁷The treatment of a pregnant runaway slave in Missouri who bit the finger of a perspective purchaser after being captured and confined to a "nigger pen" is paradigmatic of the genesis of this sort of familiarity: "Martha received a kick that ended the life of her child and nearly her own. When she had sufficiently recovered to be salable another would be purchaser demanded that she strip for inspection, and upon her refusal to do so her clothing was torn from her and she was given thirty lashes, well laid on." See Blassingame, 507.

of white folk.⁴⁸ Another example of co-opting black culture occurs when, after failing to comb their hair for a considerable period of time, white folk declare that they have "dreadlocks." However, by appropriating the look of the Rastafari, they take for their own something with a meaning that is far more significant than a fashion statement.

The Jamaican Rastafari movement resonates with "the worldview of the Jamaican peasantry, the direct descendants of 'those who came' after Columbus, the Africans forced into slavery." "[T]he driving force in [the] formation [of their worldview] was their determination to make the best of this new situation *on their own terms*, which meant resistance to European slavery and colonialism, both physical and mental."⁴⁹ The dreadlock hairstyle was institutionalized by the Youth Black Faith, an organization of young male activists founded in Jamaica in 1949.⁵⁰ It emerged from an internal debate over the question of whether or not one ought to comb one's hair. The Dreadful won. Of course, "[t]he appearance to the people when you step out of the form is a outcast." But while the locks certainly had shock value, they were also "a way of witnessing to faith with the same kind of fanaticism for which the prophets and saints of old were famous, men gone mad with religion."⁵¹ "One who earned that name inspired dread in other brethren by the forthrightness and frankness of his critical remarks and the defense of the principles essential to the Youth Black Faith. 'Dreadful' or 'Dread' was therefore synonymous with 'upright.'"⁵² Dreadlocks are a positive symbol of religious faith, uprightness, and black resistance to white oppression.

⁴⁸Locke took it as a command of God that white men should "subdue the Earth" for their benefit. On his view, "the *Earth it self*" is "the *chief matter of Property*" and the "chief end" of civil society is "the preservation of Property." See John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 290, 291 (bk. II chap. V), 323 (bk. II chap. VII). As Charles Mills puts it, "Locke's unenlightened Native Americans are not sufficiently 'industrious and rational' to appropriate and add value to the land God has given them, unlike hardworking day laborers in England." See Charles W. Mills, "Whose Fourth of July? Frederick Douglass and 'Original Intent,'" in *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader*, ed. Bill E. Lawson and Frank M. Kirkland (Malden: Blackwell, 1999), 122. According to Locke's theory of property, "a relatively small number of people have justly appropriated or acquired the world's wealth, leaving the majority with no property but only with their talents and persons." See Bernard R. Boxill, "Radical Implications of Locke's Moral Theory: The Views of Frederick Douglass," in *Subjugation and Bondage: Critical Essays on Slavery and Social Philosophy*, ed. Tommy L. Lott (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 36.

⁴⁹Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), ix.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, x, 154, 157.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 158. "[T]he title 'Warrior' or 'Dreadful' was conferred on those who distinguished themselves with ascetic discipline." "In earning the name 'warrior,' members were motivated not by a sense of office, for warrior was not an office as such [...] but by a sense of deep religious conviction. In time, the designation gave way to a more appropriate biblical one, 'Bonogee' [Boanerges], or 'Sons of thunder,' the name Jesus gave to the brothers James and John." 156 (the third set of brackets are Chevannes's).

⁵²*Ibid.*, 156.

"By the 1950s and early 1960s, when the Dreadlocks became normative, many people were actually *afraid* of the Rastafari."⁵³ People are not afraid of white males, although given their history of enslavement, domination and colonization perhaps they should be. With control to a large extent of what the populous sees in the media, at most a white male with uncombed hair who sees himself as wearing "dreadlocks" will be perceived as "rebellious" or "anti-social." He will never be the object of fear in America that a black man is, even when the black man is wearing the most conservative of hair styles.⁵⁴ A white person's claim of wearing "dreadlocks" co-opts black culture by taking a positive symbol of religious faith, uprightness, and black resistance to white oppression and reducing it to a source of entertainment. As white journalist James Ledbetter observes:

Whites have been riffing off – or ripping off – black cultural forms for more than a century and making a lot more money from them.... [Whites] cavalierly adopt... the black mantle without having to experience life-long racism, restricted economic opportunity, or any of the thousand insults that characterize black American life.... It's a curious spectacle⁵⁵

Given the sense of assumed familiarity and the co-opting of black culture entailed in the Endearment Argument, it fails to be the case that the use of "nigger" as a term of endearment by black folk supports the inference that white-to-black NC is not morally objectionable. The Endearment Argument fails.

2.3 *The Intent Argument*

The final argument to be considered is grounded in the intent of the speaker. Intent is an important part of social life. In everything from gift giving ("it's the thought that counts") to answering questions in the law about appropriate punishments, what a person intends can carry a great deal of weight. Take for example the recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the cross burning case of *Virginia v. Black*. According to the Court, "[i]ntimidation in the constitutionally proscribable sense of the word is a type of true threat, where a speaker directs a threat to a person or group of persons with the intent of placing the victim in fear of bodily harm or death." Since "burning a cross is a particularly virulent form of intimidation," "cross burnings done with the intent to intimidate" may be outlawed.⁵⁶ Analogously, some think that when there is a lack of racist intent in white-to-black NC it is not morally objectionable. According to the *Intent Argument*: when white folk engage in white-to-black NC with good intentions, it is not morally objectionable.

⁵³Ibid., 132.

⁵⁴On white fear see Rodney C. Roberts, "The American Value of Fear and the Indefinite Detention of Terrorist Suspects," *Public Affairs Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (October, 2007): 412–414, and "Criminalization and Compensation," *Legal Theory*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (June, 2005): 156–158.

⁵⁵James Ledbetter, "Imitation of Life," *VIBE*, Special Preview Issue, September 1992, quoted in Smitherman, 16.

⁵⁶*Virginia v. Black* 538 U.S. 343, 344 (2003).

If J. Angelo Corlett and Robert Francescotti are correct, “[w]hether a sentence has hateful content ultimately depends on the typical intentions of those who use that sentence. It would be inappropriate (if not false) to say that a sentence has hateful content if speakers seldom have hateful intentions when uttering the sentence.”⁵⁷ Analogs to this include congratulatory speech. One can offer congratulatory words without having any real desire to congratulate. Cases where speakers unknowingly utter hateful expressions in a language that is foreign to them is another example. For the hearer, a statement can express hatefulness whether or not the speaker actually holds any hateful feelings. Since hate speech only requires “intensely antipathetic content,” it does not require... hateful emotions.”⁵⁸ Consequently, when the speaker is a member of the dominant group, “use of the word by even ‘hip’ whites evokes an unspoken history of racial terror.”⁵⁹

The prevalence of this connotation is underscored by the provocative fighting words response that white-to-black NC can evoke in spite of the speaker’s intent. Recall the scene in *Bulworth*. In spite of his intent and the fact that his sentence was only a question, use of the word evoked an immediate fighting words response. As one man put it: “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.’”⁶⁰ Since the connotation of “nigger” as derogatory can reasonably be maintained in white-to-black NC regardless of the speaker’s intent, the speaker’s good intentions fail to support the view that the use of “nigger” by white folk to address black folk is not morally objectionable. The Intention Argument fails.

If my analysis holds, and if the arguments I proposed do indeed give the best reasons for thinking that white-to-black NC is not morally objectionable, then there are no good reasons for accepting this position. Michael Eric Dyson is right, “Nigger has never been cool when spit from white lips.”⁶¹

⁵⁷J. Angelo Corlett and Robert Francescotti, “Foundations of a Theory of Hate Speech.” *Wayne Law Review*, Vol. 48 (2002): 1086–1087.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 1087.

⁵⁹Dyson, 145.

⁶⁰Stan Simpson, “In Defining the N-word, Let Meaning Be Very Clear.” *Hartford Courant*, 3 November 1997, quoted in Kennedy, *Nigger*, 201 n. 27.

⁶¹Michael Eric Dyson, “Nigger Gotta Stop.” *The Source*, June 1999, quoted in Kennedy, *Nigger*, 51.

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