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1

Derogatory Terms

Racism, Sexism, and the
Inferential Role Theory of Meaning

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."¹

Mary Catherine Bateson recounts a conversation with Johnetta Cole, president of Spelman College, who said "I found out about race very early. I have a recollection from when I was three or four years old of a kid calling me nigger." I asked her how she knew 'nigger' was a bad word. 'The tone of voice,' she retorted, provoked by the question, 'and the rocks that are being thrown—they tell you that "nigger" is an insult.'²

In the familiar debate between Humpty Dumpty and Alice, most of us side with Alice, maintaining that speakers have little or no power to change socially recognized meanings of words on our own. This paper about derogatory terms is also about speaker meaning, the role of community norms in establishing meaning, and more generally, the question of which is to be master. An analysis of derogatory terms helps show why individual speakers cannot escape

the socially established meaning of their utterances, except occasionally by the grace of the communities in which they live and speak. Derogatory terms are rich with their own history and reflect (in some sense) the history of the community in which they have meaning, and they are profoundly normative. This chapter introduces a richer way of thinking about what is wrong with derogatory terms than simply labelling them as biased (citing problems with connotation, as some do) or saying they fail to refer (citing problems with denotation). Neither approach is satisfactory, for much more is at issue than bad attitudes and referential misfires. What is at issue between those who use the terms and those who attack their use is the legitimacy of the expressive commitment of the terms; what is at issue is a commitment to the viability and value of a particular mode of discourse or way of talking. Such modes of discourse are themselves social practices, and they are closely tied to other, nondiscursive social practices that give them their force. So, at issue is the legitimacy of a set of linguistic practices as well as the legitimacy of the social practices they support and by which they are supported.

After briefly presenting the framework of my analysis in terms of linguistic commitments, I shall offer a characterization of two opposing positions on the problem of derogatory terms. Both the Absolutist and the Reclaimer hold that such terms are undesirable, and both engage in active attempts to change the social practices in which these terms are embedded. The Absolutist thinks that the terms we are considering are ineradicably derogatory, and hence thinks that to undermine the social practices behind them (racism, sexism, homophobia) we must eradicate the terms from our available repertoires. The Reclaimer, on the other hand, thinks that the terms mark important features of the target group's social history, and that reclaiming the term—making it non-derogatory—is both possible and desirable. It is possible, she argues, because we can detach the semantic content of the term from its pragmatic role of derogation, and it is desirable because doing so would take a weapon away from those who would wield it and would empower those who had formerly been victims. The struggle between the Absolutist and the Reclaimer illustrates the importance of a focus on linguistic commitments to developing a social practice approach to derogatory terms. This chapter represents such an approach.

The Problem

Consider two true stories:

While driving home from his office one evening, a dark-skinned African-American man, George, inadvertently irritates a neighboring car by staying within the speed limit despite the other driver's close tailgating and honking. Harry, the white man driving the other car, pulls up beside George and shouts, "GET OFF THE ROAD, NIGGER!"

Ethel, Fred, and Lucy are summer help at a seaside resort. Fred admires Ethel's independence and assertiveness, and, knowing that Ethel and Lucy are friends, he asks Lucy whether she thinks Ethel would go out with him on a date. Lucy knows that Ethel despises Fred, so she gives him an emphatic "no." Convinced of his own worthiness, Fred is perplexed, and after finding out from Lucy that Ethel is not involved with another man, Fred finally says, "Oh, I get it—she's a dyke!"

These stories are nasty and their language is meant to be hostile and rude. The first case involves an insult hurled directly at its target. Both involve reductive classification.³ Pragmatically, the perlocutionary effect of these utterances is clear: they are angry put-downs that attempt to reduce the person to one real or imagined feature of who they are. Sandra Bartky calls the catcalls men hurl at women on the street "rituals of subjugation"; something similar occurs in these stories.⁴ This inquiry, in the borderland between semantics and pragmatics, asks how the semantics of derogatory terms contribute to these pragmatic effects, and how these pragmatic effects contribute to the very meanings of the terms.⁵

My concern is with a particular kind of derogatory term used to refer to people. To call someone tall or short seems to be straightforward description, but to call someone "a runt" is to use a derogatory term. Using "runt" to describe a person invokes stereotypes associated with being small, adding the hostile implication that this is someone who should not have been allowed to grow up. Even when used without hostility, there is still the associated inferential consequence that runts should be killed soon after birth. The derogatory terms used in our opening stories are even worse than

“runt,” for they are tied to frameworks of sexist and racist oppression. They have a rich and twisted history within American culture, and that history created a network of nasty inferences now associated with the terms. On the other hand, these two terms are also the subject of political reclamation projects; they are sometimes adopted as positive in-group terms by those at whom they have been hurled as epithets. Such reclamation projects defy any attempt to simplify the pragmatics of these terms. Because of this rich embeddedness, and because their social roles prohibit oversimplification, I’m going to focus on these two deeply derogatory terms.

Philosophers may be inclined to think that I am adding another chapter to the discussion of the general significance of what have come to be called “thick” terms—terms or expressions that carry with them or convey an attitude, an approval or a disapproval. Thick terms are those in which the description and the attitude “form a compound or amalgam, rather than a mixture: the attitude and the description infuse each other, so that in the end, in the repertoire of the mature speaker, the two elements are no longer distinguishable.”⁶ Clearly derogatory terms are thick in an important sense, but the issue of attitude, the psychological states and stance of the actual speaker, is one that is best set aside. Attributions of attitude may be made on the basis of a speaker’s use of such terms, among other things, but it is not simply because this particular speaker has this particular attitude that the term is offensive, insulting, or harmful. A speaker’s attitude may be quite at odds with what he or she actually says on any given occasion, due to a variety of ways we can misfire, obfuscate, or dissimulate. The discussion that follows will have some significance for those who want a theory of thick terms in ethics, but I will not make such an application. Rather, I shall show that a proper understanding of derogatory terms illustrates the importance of a proper understanding of expressive and other linguistic commitments.

Contextualism: An Inferential Role Theory of Meaning

Trying to figure out what exactly “nigger” means, I turned to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which lists “nigger” as synonymous with “Negro,” “black,” “African-American,” and “third-world woman/man,”

noting that it is colloquial “and usually contemptuous.”⁷ The *OED* misses the mark here, for “nigger” is *not* synonymous with these terms. The racial designation is often taken to be central to the meaning of the term,⁸ but in fact the heart of the expression is its designating the person as subordinate. Expressions like “white nigger,” which was commonly used in the 1850s to denote “white workers in arduous unskilled jobs or subservient positions,”⁹ show that the subservience aspect of the term is crucial and that the racial element may be less central than one might think.¹⁰ The history of the term is tied to its consistent use against American blacks, but the term’s extension has broadened and its intension has shifted since then. Historically, slavery in the United States established a dominance/subordination relation between Americans of European descent and those of African descent, marked most prominently by darkness of skin. As the term took hold, the roots set out in the ante-bellum period grew to support the development and maintenance of a black underclass that still exists. To call someone “a nigger” today is at minimum to attribute a second-class status to him or her, usually on the basis of race and, arguably, to take that lower status to be deserved.

So why, then, does the *OED* say that the term is “usually contemptuous” and not “always”? Perhaps its editors were considering a case like the following: When my elderly white neighbor said that she needed to find a “yard nigger,” *she* did not think her words conveyed contempt for the black men in our North Carolina town who do yard work. (This was 1992.) What she intended was to let me know that she wanted someone to do her yard work who is, above all else, cheap labor. Her intention carried no explicit contempt, and when asked, she might reply that she sincerely shows respect to African Americans. What she does not think about, but what such words do convey and depend upon, is that the black man she seeks *is* cheap labor because of an oppressive racist social and economic structure that holds him in contempt. Her purportedly neutral intention in using the term is not sufficient for overcoming its socially and historically conferred derogatory power.¹¹ What both my former neighbor and the *OED* miss is that the term carries contempt even when the speaker does not.

Racism is often taken to be an attitude, a mental state, a matter of individuals harboring and acting upon prejudices. This characterization is consistent with racism’s being primarily a matter of

individual private judgments and preferences. In contrast, I take racism to be a structure of social practices that supports and enforces the subordination of the well-being of members of some races to the well-being of members other races.¹² Intentions, on this view, are derivative of these social practices.¹³ Racist language is significant only within a context that sanctions wide varieties of disparate treatment of members of races deemed lesser, including social and economic isolation, harassment, violence, and even genocide. These practices are the core—the threat and the reality—of racism. Without their cultural and material “back-up,” words like the derogatory terms we are considering would not have the force they do.¹⁴ Taking just such a contextualist position, legal scholar Richard Delgado argues that racial slurs “conjure up the entire history of racial discrimination in this country.”¹⁵ This claim is too sweeping and too mentalistic, but it is clear that derogatory terms for African Americans cannot be significantly distanced from the history of the enslavement of Africans in the United States and the mistreatment of blacks at the hands of whites since then. As Wittgensteinians are fond of reminding us: a language is a way of life. Without the way of life, the language is just so much wind.

This language/culture holism is nicely complemented by an inferential role theory of meaning, which offers a powerful conceptual framework for analyzing the social problems reflected in and the linguistic problems created by derogatory terms.¹⁶ According to this view, the meaning of a sentence is a matter of its place in a pattern of inferences. The meaning of a word or expression is a matter of its various actual and possible sentential roles. These patterns of inference are governed by commitments, which are a matter of speakers issuing licenses and undertaking responsibilities. Which commitments a speaker may make depends on the speaker’s social, cultural, and linguistic context. The speaker’s social and linguistic community *licenses* or *entitles* nearly all its members to make certain kinds of basic linguistic commitments, such as “it’s a sunny day today” or “if this is Roxbury, we must be in Boston.” Specialization of labor and discrete distribution of authority in many communities results in those communities licensing only certain speakers to make certain kinds of commitments. Sometimes we give explicit licenses, as we do in allowing only certain people to prescribe and dispense drugs. Most linguistic licenses tend to be less explicit, but similarly effective.

The sorts of very basic linguistic commitments made by any speaker making an assertion can be seen by considering Lucy’s assertion, “Ethel danced in the play but refused to dance at the party.” Applying Robert Brandom’s account of asserting, we find that Lucy undertakes two sorts of commitments in asserting this claim: an *identificatory* commitment and an *assertional* commitment.¹⁷ Each commitment carries an associated *task-responsibility*. Here Lucy’s identificatory commitment requires her to identify which Ethel, which play, or which party, if her audience is confused about them. Lucy’s assertional commitment carries a responsibility to justify the claim if it should be challenged, and issues an inference license to her audience. Lucy’s justification may be a matter of providing further claims that constitute evidence of her own (as in, “I saw Ethel dancing onstage, and I watched her the whole night at the party”) or it may be a matter of deferring to another speaker (as in, “Fred told me”). An inference license entitles the audience to use the claim as a premise in arguments of their own while deferring justification for the claim back to the person who issued the license. When Lucy defers her justification back to Fred, she relies on a license Fred issued in saying what he did about Ethel. Then the listener in search of evidence has to go to Fred. When Lucy makes the claim about Ethel, she (*qua* asserter) must supply the antecedent inferential links (in justifying) and license others to use consequent inferential links.¹⁸

In addition to assertional and identificatory commitments, speakers undertake expressive commitments as well. An expressive commitment is a commitment to the viability and value of a particular way of talking. This concept was first developed to account for the way that metaphorical interpretation involves not only what is said but also how it is said and how that method of presentation influences both the assertional and the identificatory commitments associated with the expression.¹⁹ When Romeo says, “But soft, what light through yonder window breaks/ It is the east, and Juliet is the sun,” he undertakes a commitment to the viability and value of using sun-talk to talk about Juliet. The task-responsibility incurred by an expressive commitment is a matter of showing to the audience, if asked, that this way of talking really is viable and valuable. In the case of metaphors, we do this by extending the metaphor. Showing viability requires showing that the metaphor can be extended; showing value takes much more. Value is usually

judged by assessing the utility of the extended metaphor to the goals of the discourse. In general, to judge whether a given mode of discourse is viable or valuable, one has to establish the goals of the discursive practice. Sometimes that goal will be seeking truth, sometimes it will be seeking power, and often it will be some species or combination of these.²⁰

Ordinarily, one supports one's expressive commitment by supporting enough of the assertional commitments of the expression to show that the way of talking in which the expression fits is indeed viable and valuable. The assertional commitments of "nigger" are illustrated by Jerry Farber's attempt to make the case that "students are niggers."²¹ Farber's contrast class is the faculty, and he cites segregated dining facilities, segregated lavatory facilities, segregated sleeping facilities, and anti-miscegenation rules between the classes as but partial evidence of his claim. He adds that "students . . . are politically disenfranchised" within the academic system and a good student, "like a good nigger," is "expected to know his place." Farber further suggests that students have "the slave mentality: obliging and ingratiating on the surface but hostile and resistant underneath." Each of these features represents one assertional commitment of the term. ("If X is a nigger, then there is a set of Ys such that Xs and Ys cannot sleep in the same facility"; similarly for each of the other features.) We now have a partial list of the elements in the inferential role of the term: the referent is a being defined in reference to others to whom she is considered subservient, from whom she must be kept separate, by whom she may be exploited, and so on.

Spelling out some of the assertional commitments here gives us a sketch of the inferential role of the term and shows its viability. Sometimes viability alone is enough to show value, since we may find some value in the term's power to communicate all that it does. In cases like this one, however, more needs to be said. Opponents to all uses of this term, Absolutists, would urge that simply showing us *some* of the semantic features of the term does not show *enough* value to overcome the devastating pragmatic force of the term. The Absolutist holds that the term's subordinating assertional commitments ultimately undermine the general value of the term. When expressive commitment is controversial, then a thorough exploration of the assertional commitments is in order.

While this example from Farber illustrates that the assertional commitments associated with the term supply what is usually called its semantic content, it also illustrates that this so-called "semantic" dimension cannot be separated from the pragmatic history and force of the term. Each specification of an associated trait here marks an inference licensed by the assertion of the term, and shows the central importance of the social practices in which the term took hold. The social, psychological, and economic practices of treating dark-skinned African Americans as less valuable than light-skinned European Americans give content and force to the term *nigger*. So, Harry's hurling this term at George on the highway *must* be considered in light of the social history of the term and the classes it has been used to maintain. Harry cannot hide behind the Humpty Dumpty defense: "When I use a term, . . . it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."²²

With respect to the politics of discourse, attention to different aspects of a speaker's linguistic commitments raises the question of what the speaker endorses, and what those endorsements mean to the listener. Referential commitments made possible by the term show the term's extensional range. Assertional commitments made possible by the term show what can be said about and done to those in the extension of the term. Since the expressive commitment carried by the term is a rather global commitment to the viability and value of the assertional and referential commitments that constitute the mode of discourse, the expressive commitment, independent of any special contextual limitations, shows a range of what speakers *can* endorse with that term.

If I say nothing about her words when my neighbor says "nigger," then although I haven't explicitly sanctioned the term and its expressive commitment, I have done nothing explicit to challenge it either. Challenges have three basic types. Some deny that the referential commitment can be fulfilled: "There aren't any such folk."²³ Others address the assertional commitment by making undesirable inferential consequences apparent. Finally, some challenges make explicit the structure and function of the expressive commitment; I can ask my neighbor whether she means to be participating in linguistic conventions that at least mirror and reinforce and at worst *create* social inequalities and injustices. These latter challenges—which demand that the speaker show that the way of talking is

viable and valuable on a very large scale—make most explicit what is at stake between those who engage in the mode of discourse and those who attack it.

It is worth noting that the derogatoriness of a term in its sentential context is not a function of whether the term is asserted. Embedding the term in the antecedent or consequent of a conditional does not take away the derogatoriness of the term. If my neighbor says, “If a nigger buys the house down the street I’ll sell mine,” she is as responsible for justifying the expressive commitment of the derogatory term (for justifying “nigger”-talk) as if she had said, “A nigger just bought the house down the street so I’m selling mine.” Similarly, the logician’s distinction between use and mention does not help us here. Consider a sentence that an academic David Dukes might utter: “‘Nigger’ is a great word, for it keeps us all aware of who belongs where in the social order.” The derogatory term is mentioned, not used, but the sentential context supports the derogatoriness of the term and so the mentioning does not wipe it away. Even though the term is not doing any specific referential work here, and even though its status as mentioned raises the question whether the speaker endorses its use, nevertheless the content of the rest of the sentence settles the question of speaker endorsement. Now consider, “Fred is wrong to call blacks ‘niggers’ because there are no niggers—only black citizens.” The first instance of the derogatory term is mentioned, and the second is used. Despite this use of the derogatory term, we would not ordinarily call the claim racist or derogatory since the sentential context condemns the derogatory aspect of the term. We would, however, justly wonder about the felicity of the second occurrence of the derogatory term, for the speaker could just as well have said “there aren’t any” without gratuitous repetition of the term.

Expressive commitment is neither attitude nor connotation, although it may enable us to make inferences about each.²⁴ Despite her self-described positive attitude toward African Americans, my neighbor’s use of the derogatory term carries with it a commitment to the derogation thus effected. This commitment is not *acceptance* of the derogation, for she need not even recognize the derogation, much less accept it. Her psychological states are distinct from what the language presupposes and entails about the world and about itself. So, for example, whether one uses “dyke” pejoratively or admiringly, one undertakes an expressive commitment to the vi-

ability and value of “dyke”-talk. As we shall soon see, the detractor and the admirer may differ in their accounts of what the expressive commitment is a commitment to, but both are committed to showing any challenger the viability and especially the value of such talk. The arguments offered by activists who seek to eliminate or rehabilitate these terms, are, on my view, struggles over whether we as a community want to sanction expressive commitments like those associated with these terms. Their arguments show that we would do well to take a social practice view of fights over words in our community.

*Social Context: An Absolutist Position
Concerning Groups, Labels, and Power*

The Absolutist begins with the empirical claim that derogatory terms are harmful to those whom they purport to denote. Motivated by a conviction that the harms done by derogatory terms are both avoidable and unjust, the Absolutist argues that such words should be eradicated from our available repertoire and often argues further that there should be sanctions against their use.²⁵ Richard Delgado claims, for example, that “words such as ‘nigger’ and ‘spick’ are badges of degradation even when used between friends; these words have no other connotation.”²⁶ Taking such an Absolutist position is taking a stance toward the expressive commitment of the terms. The Absolutist position depends on the sort of holism, or contextualism, discussed in the previous section. For the holist, a sign design is a word only in the context of a language, and a language has significance only in the rich context of culture. Social context is especially important in the case of derogatory terms, so it is important to attend to the social dynamics that lend derogatory terms their power. These social dynamics also constitute in part the assertional commitments that make up what philosophers usually identify as the semantic content of the term.

Recognizing that harms may be done even where the victim is unaware of any hurt, social scientists have catalogued a long list of harms resulting from racial stigmatization.²⁷ Clearly, racist derogatory terms contribute to racial stigmatization, so they have some power to harm their victims. A derogatory term labels a person *qua* member of a group, bringing the person under any stereotypes

associated with the group, and thus sanctions inferences about the person that ought not be so sanctioned.²⁸ So, one way that derogatory terms harm is through their association with stereotypes. Stereotypes oversimplify the diversity that exists within the group, they tend to concern behaviors or psychological traits, and, most importantly, they are difficult to empirically falsify.²⁹ Stereotypes are rigid, and their implication that the traits attributed are natural suggests that the possession of these traits by most members of the group is inevitable.³⁰ The assertional commitments associated with derogatory terms are *constituted* in large part by these stereotypes.

Articulating an important tenet of most versions of Absolutism, Greenberg, Kirkland and Pyszczynski claim that derogatory ethnic labels

*come to symbolize all the negative stereotypic beliefs associated with the group. Because DELs [derogatory ethnic labels] have the power to communicate all the negative beliefs about a given group in a single word, they are likely to be extremely potent communicative devices. Words have the power to make a concept seem like something that actually exists in the world. For example, there are negative beliefs about blacks in the United States, but the term "nigger" crystallizes these beliefs into a concept or prototype that has a sense of concrete reality to those who use the term. (my italics)*³¹

The claim that the derogatory term has "the power to communicate all the negative beliefs about a given group in a single word" may just amount to saying that the association of a term with a stereotype is an all-or-nothing matter.³² The Absolutist takes the assertional commitments of the derogatory term, which would be used to justify the expressive commitment, to be *nondetachable*. The Absolutist holds that a speaker who uses a derogatory term invokes the *entire* inferential role of the term and undertakes a global expressive commitment to that way of talking. That's a holist point. The Absolutist is a holist of a particular sort: she holds that specific inferential consequences are nondetachable from derogatory terms because of their social and historical embeddedness.³³

The nondetachability of the assertional commitments of these derogatory terms, if indeed they are nondetachable, is due in part to the fact that they are constituted largely by stereotypes, which

are notoriously rigid. This nondetachability may also be due to the covertly prescriptive nature of these concepts. The assertional commitments of these terms tell members of the target group how they *ought* to be, under the guise of describing how they *are*. Sarah Hoagland has argued that attributions of femininity to women function prescriptively rather than descriptively, since the claim that women are feminine is not, in practice, empirically falsified by the numerous unfeminine women among us. Instead, those women are labelled "deviant," "abnormal," or, even worse, it is said that they are "really men trapped in women's bodies."³⁴ When such conceptual and social gerrymandering goes on, one must ask what is at stake. Hoagland notes that the trappings of femininity are indeed traps, and argues that some of the behaviors classically labelled feminine are actually resistance to those traps. Similarly, Frantz Fanon argues that "the black man is supposed to be a good nigger; once this has been laid down the rest follows of itself."³⁵ Fanon's view, in my terms, is that the inferential role of the term *nigger* is prescriptive; its job is to prescribe a way of being for those to whom it is applied.

It is important to look at the function of the name calling on the level of social practices, not just on the level of what Fred is trying to do to Ethel. Fred's calling Ethel "a dyke" works between them only if there is a more general set of practices within which it fits. The rather obvious politics of name calling is neatly summed up by sociologist Irving Allen, who writes,

Words are weapons; and "hurling" epithets is a universal feature of hostile intergroup relations. *Outgroup nicknames are preeminently a political vocabulary.* Name calling is a technique by which outgroups are defined as legitimate targets of aggression and is an effort to control outgroups by neutralizing their efforts to gain resources and influence values. (my italics)³⁶

Pragmatically, a derogatory term: (1) may do the relatively external job of reminding the person of the social sanction of their status as lesser; (2) may do the more "internal" job of instilling psychological oppression, convincing the person that her socially sanctioned status is really deserved (as when it is suggested that it has biological roots, for instance); or (3) may accomplish both.³⁷

Against such an explicitly political interpretation of derogatory terms, Richard Delgado argues that a racial insult “is not political speech” since “its perpetrator intends not to discover truth or advocate social action but to injure the victim.”³⁸ Denying that the terms are political paves the way for the legal redress that Delgado seeks, but Delgado overlooks the fact that such terms serve to reinforce a political structure, a structure that settles who has power and who has resources. Although they may advocate no particular social action on a particular occasion, these terms advocate the division of society into separate and unequal classes according to skin color, sex, sexual preference, and the like. Only an excessively narrow construal of the political would rule these terms out. *These terms are enforcers of a system that keeps some people from full participation in their communities, that keeps some voices from being heard.*³⁹ Clearly, the derogatory terms under consideration are political speech. They don’t convince by rational argument, but they do bully us into adopting or maintaining certain broadly political commitments and they support the social practices that support these commitments.

Delgado further argues that “the characteristic most significant in determining the value of racial insults is that they are not intended to inform or convince the listener. Racial insults invite no discourse, and no speech in response can cure the inflicted harm.”⁴⁰ Although such expressions do not convince by rational argument, by giving and asking for reasons, we know that they do inform. As Johnetta Cole’s early experience shows, they teach the targeted person about the social hierarchy and her designated place in it; they inform about the power structure.⁴¹ Accordingly, I suggest that explicitly addressing particular uses of the term, making the expression itself the subject of rational discussion, goes some way toward ameliorating the harms of the term and toward weakening its potential to harm again. Making explicit the expressive commitment also makes explicit the political dimension of the term, both in its assertional commitments’ being rife with rigid—perhaps non-detachable—prescriptive stereotypic traits and in the social function of the distinctions made therein.

Once the Absolutist claims that (in our terms) the expressive commitment of “nigger” is unacceptable because it carries with it an nondetachable commitment to assertions that depend on all the horrible elements of the history of the culture in which the term

gained currency, he or she must explain and evaluate specific uses of the term and its associates. In a useful botanization of the philosophical literature, Simon Blackburn presents four different approaches relevant to questions about the meaning and value of areas of discourse, such as those being considered here. Against the background of the inferential role theory, these approaches can be seen as ways of challenging the expressive commitment of the term. Blackburn suggests that we could (1) reject the whole area of discourse “advocating that people no longer speak or think in the terms that seem problematic,” or (2) give a reductive analysis of the objectionable area of discourse to an unobjectionable discourse, or (3) see the beliefs associated with that discourse as not carrying truth values at all but simply as expressions of attitude,⁴² or (4) see them as “mind-dependent—not really describing a mind-independent reality at all, but as in some sense creating the reality they describe.”⁴³ The Absolutist combines these strategies, for she seeks to reject the whole area of discourse on the grounds that there is no adequate reduction of the objectionable area of discourse to an unobjectionable area, and on the grounds that the beliefs do not carry truth values although they may be perceived as doing so. What the derogatory terms and their inferentially linked practices do is to create a social and material reality that oppresses those targeted by the terms.

Blackburn’s characterization of the philosophical positions generally embraced is fair, but it, like the strategies it botanizes, is importantly incomplete. The social and material reality created by commitment to and practice of the modes of discourse in which these derogatory terms gain their purchase is not captured here. That social reality is in some sense dependent (at least during some parts of its history) on the beliefs and attitudes of at least some of the members of the society. But the social reality outstrips the particular beliefs of particular individuals, and so cannot be considered mind-dependent in Blackburn’s sense. Redlining neighborhoods may begin with perceptions on the parts of certain bank officers about property value depending on the racial makeup of the community, but it does not end there. The reality of the beliefs is cashed out in cold economic terms, which may then create policies that in turn are carried out by people who may not share the beliefs of those who instituted the policies. The fifth approach, missing from Blackburn’s list, takes beliefs as creating and being

created by social (and institutional) realities that can be evaluated independently of the intentions of those who participate in them. This fifth approach takes social practices seriously in its analysis of derogatory terms.

Challenges to the expressive commitments of these derogatory terms are challenges to the viability and value of the modes of discourse of which they are part. Such modes of discourse are specified in two ways: structurally by their inferential networks, and functionally by their goals and practices. Two major goals we adopt in our various social practices are the acquisition of truth and the acquisition of power. With derogatory terms, these goals clash, and the quest for power takes precedence over any pretense of seeking or speaking truth. The Absolutist demands that we make power serve truth, and not vice versa.

The Absolutist begins with the empirical claim that derogatory terms cause unjust and unnecessary harm to those they label. Since the assertional commitments of the term largely represent stereotypically assigned traits and relations, and since stereotypes are notoriously rigid, prescriptive, and difficult or impossible to undermine, the Absolutist holds that the assertional commitments of the derogatory terms are nondetachable. To stop the harms caused by the terms we would have to detach at least some of the stereotyped assertional commitments, but since these are nondetachable, there is no rehabilitating the term. Without rehabilitation, any use of the term is racist, sexist, heterosexist, or whatever, and so promotes injustice. So the Absolutist holds that since we cannot drop the derogation from the term, we should drop the term.

The Reclamation Project: Reclaiming Labels, Regaining Power

Proponents of reclamation projects would be quick to deny Delgado's claim that the derogatory terms we are considering are always "badges of degradation even when used between friends." They say that sometimes when used by members of the in-group the term is a badge of pride that recognizes an important history of degradation without endorsing its continuation. Some African Americans say that they can use "nigger" as a term of endearment, and some lesbians now use "dyke" as a term of pride. Such reclamations are self-conscious attempts to change the meanings of these terms

through subversive uses within the sub-community. The strategy is straightforward although far from simple: give the subcommunity jurisdiction over the expressive commitments of its own self-referring labels. Change the norms that settle the assertional commitments of the term within the subcommunity, and ultimately within the larger community, and in so doing you change the very meaning of the term.

Even within one linguistic and social community, even without reclamation, the pragmatic function of a derogatory term may vary depending on the speaker's relation to the target group. Irving Allen suggests that for members of the dominant group the use of derogatory terms helps to maintain their privilege and "justifies inequality and discrimination by sanctioning invidious cultural comparisons." On the other hand, for those derogated by the terms, their own use of such terms often redresses "social injustices and dignifies an imposed minority status and thus is sometimes," Allen writes, "a form of accommodation to conflict."⁴⁴ When, in Faulkner's short story "That Evening Sun," Nancy says over and over again, "I ain't nothin' but a nigger," we should not hear this as an *endorsement* of her situation but as an *accommodation* to it, a resignation to her assigned status,⁴⁵ which is underscored by her adding, "It ain't none of my fault."⁴⁶ Nancy's utterances are unreclaimed, and yet their pragmatic function is different from the uses of the term by whites in the story. Resignation like Nancy's is nowhere present in Johnetta Cole's account of the reclamation project. Cole says "the reason for taking such a term and making it a term of endearment is to soften the intensity of that pain [of others using it against you], so that 'my main nigger' becomes 'my best friend.' It's compensatory because it is so very powerful."⁴⁷ The reclamation project is linguistic aikido; it tries to use the power of the term to benefit those who were formerly harmed by it.

Reclamation depends upon the possibility of somehow severing the derogation from the term, although not upon the possibility of severing the history of the derogation *via* the term.⁴⁸ This flies in the face of the Absolutist's nondetachability thesis; some specific assertional commitments are dropped, others are relocated within the inferential network, and some stay the same but have different justifications or consequences. Made explicit, the Reclaimer's argument goes as follows: The *OED* is right—"Nigger" is just a word synonymous with "Negro," "colored person," "person of color," etc.

except that “nigger” captures a history of derogation that the others miss. When it is used to derogate, the derogation is a pragmatic effect, not a semantic aspect of the term. If the derogation were a semantic aspect of the term, then there could be no non-derogatory use of it. But there *is* a non-derogatory use: some African Americans use the term as an in-group term of endearment. So, the derogation is not built into the semantics. The pragmatic effect is a matter of the relation between the speaker’s in-group and the referent’s in-group, at least. When African Americans use the term among themselves it is *possible* for the term not to carry derogation, and this shows that group membership can enable disaffiliation from the common derogation.⁴⁹ Further, it may be that when others besides African Americans use the term it is *impossible* for the term *not* to carry derogation. If so, then if one is not a member of the group targeted by the term, one’s use cannot disaffiliate. So, there are non-derogatory uses of the term, and pragmatic factors are the means by which the derogation is detached.

There is much that is right in the *spirit* of this argument, but it has several important weaknesses.⁵⁰ I will mention just three. The first two weaknesses work together: first, the argument treats the difference between the reclaimed and the unreclaimed term as merely pragmatic, and second, it erroneously takes this point to be shown by the presence of pragmatic triggers for detachment. Surely there are contextual features that trigger the audience to interpret the term as reclaimed or not, but these triggers do not *constitute* the difference between the terms. That difference is in the assertional commitments—in the inferential relations between claims made with this term and other claims. Writers on this topic like to think of the project as one of changing the connotation, but it is important to recognize that reclaiming the term results in changed assertional commitments, which bring with them changes in denotation.⁵¹ Consider just one point: if it is a consequent of both reclaimed terms that the persons so labelled be resistant to the social system that defines them with the unreclaimed terms, then this changes who is included in the extension of each term. Unreclaimed “nigger↓” implies a kind of subservience, a recognized and resigned lower status, which reclaimed “nigger↑” overturns. So while pragmatic factors may trigger such detachments, we must ask what those detachments change in the assertional and referential commitments associated with the term.⁵²

In addition, the argument depends upon, but does not argue for, the claim that the derogation has been successfully detached within the sub-group. Significantly, not all members of these sub-groups agree about the power of the sub-group to detach the derogation. There is considerable controversy among African Americans about which terms are appropriate group labels, and “nigger” is usually not even considered as a viable alternative. One might think that “dyke” has been more successfully reclaimed within its sub-group, but this is probably also false.⁵³ Consider a typical exchange from the pages of the journal *Lesbian Tide*, where a letter to the editors begins “I am not a dyke . . .”⁵⁴ The writer, Ginny Ray, does not deny being a lesbian but takes issue with the appropriateness of this term, even when uttered by lesbians. She continues,

To me, the term “dyke,” because of its common or street meaning, (which is that a dyke is a woman who is trying to act tough like a man) is on the consciousness level of “chick” or “nigger.” People in the hippy [*sic*] and black subcultures told us that it was “correct” to use these terms and that we all knew that they were our words now. I never got it. I still don’t. When Richard Pryor says nigger I don’t laugh. When the hippy [*sic*] up the street calls her friend a chick I don’t say cool. . . . I fought since 1969 to be called a woman and you are not going to stick some other dumb label on me in the name of politics.⁵⁵

Ginny Ray joins the Absolutist in suggesting that the stereotype associated with the derogatory term is too powerful (perhaps too central) to be detached. Rejecting the stereotype, she rejects the term.

In response, the editors invoke the long history of using “dyke” to derogate mannish women—citing Radclyffe Hall and Gertrude Stein as but two examples—and they say that as a term of derogation there is more than an element of truth to it. Not only do they grant the term a truth-value, but they enlarge its scope beyond women who engage in lesbian sexual practices or who look unfeminine. Calling the term “a badge of honor” for women, to be “used for someone who refuses to be beaten down,” the editors write that they “are proud to use the word ‘dyke,’ in loyalty and love for all the women who, in so many different and difficult ways, held strong.”⁵⁶ They write,

The very power and destructiveness of the word “dyke” as men use it comes from its connotations of aggressiveness and independence—qualities men have always found ugly or threatening in women though highly valued in themselves. What men have meant when they call us dykes is true: we ARE uncompromising (where loving women is concerned), we ARE ugly (when beauty is measured in rigid stereotypes or in passivity), we ARE frightening (to those who fear independent women), we ARE unpleasant (when silence and smiles are pleasing).⁵⁷

The editors’ response shows that the reclamation project need not deny the core assertional commitments of the term in order to change the justifiability of the expressive commitment. The core assertional commitments are the same, but the next layer out is different. The first set of inferences licensed by “dyke” is still licensed: a dyke is aggressive, independent, uncompromising, ugly, frightening, and unpleasant. The editors’ parenthetical remarks show that the next layer of assertional commitments, those that support these stereotypical traits, has changed. Those second-layer assertional commitments show the difference between the word’s role in the discursive practices of one community and its role in the discursive practices of another community, the difference between “dyke↓” and “dyke↑.” Ultimately, “dyke↑,” reclaimed, would no longer sanction many of the inferences of “dyke↓.” For instance, because it is considered good to be a dyke, and because she is uncompromising—with respect to loving women—then in the reclaimed scheme we would lose the inference, commonly associated with “dyke↓,” that somebody better find the dyke a good man so that he can convert her to heterosexuality. We would not, however, lose the inference that the dyke is a woman who does not serve men.

Successful reclamation requires a reorganization of the inferential structure associated with the term. Some inferences will be eliminated, some antecedents will be changed, and some consequents will be changed.⁵⁸ This results in the rehabilitation of the expressive commitment of the term; now, with the rehabilitated term, what the expressive commitment is a commitment *to* has changed. It is the same word, with the same history, but with a new future. If, as I’ve been suggesting, the inferential role is what

marks the term’s identity, then when a subcommunity reclaims a word, like “dyke,” the new word “dyke↑” makes it clear that the old one must be recast explicitly as “dyke↓.” Both “dyke↓” and “dyke↑” have the same past, but their present and their futures are significantly different. Their meanings overlap, but are not the same.

I said earlier that individual speakers cannot escape the socially established meaning of their utterances, except occasionally by the grace of the communities in which they live and speak. If it takes the grace of the community to let Humpty Dumpty mean “a nice knock-down argument” by “glory,” then it would seem that Humpty Dumpty still hasn’t escaped the social conferral of meaning, but has only been granted a temporary reprieve. In the cases of the derogatory terms we are considering, the truth of this caveat depends on marking a distinction between the broadly socially established meanings of expressions (which we may think of as *inter-communal*) and more narrowly socially established meanings (which we may think of as *intra-communal*). In American English generally the derogatory terms we have been considering are inescapably derogatory; that is, the social norms and practices that render them so are so prevalent across all our sub-communities that variations in contextual features usually do not and often cannot overturn the derogation. One speaker at one time cannot play the Humpty Dumpty game of making up a nonderogatory meaning and have it stick.

The rehabilitation of a term is not achieved by one speaker by fiat in an instant; it is a community-wide achievement that takes time to occur. For the reclaimed term to prevail, there must be community-wide agreement about the bulk of the assertional commitments. The problem for the members of a community as it moves from a derogatory inferential role to a laudatory one is epistemic. As interpreters of each other, we want, and sometimes need, to know who is committed to the old term, with its racist or heterosexist entrenchment, and who is committed to the new linguistic and social practices. Sometimes knowing is a matter of comfort or ease, and sometimes it is a matter of safety. Since “dyke↓” as we now understand it represents the common past of the two versions of the term, its inferential role serves as the default when there are no clear markers that the less common and more recent “dyke↑” is appropriate. Since there is so much at stake for those who have been

targets, the default interpretation, in the absence of community-wide consensus and clear markers for community membership, will probably always be the unreclaimed term. Thus, the old bad word stays ever active.

Lesbianfeminist linguist Julia Penelope says that “dyke” is only acceptable if it is rehabilitated. This apparently sensible claim creates a problem. Either it condemns utterances of the term made during the process of rehabilitation, putting those who work to bring about the reclamation in an awkward Humpty Dumpty-like position, or it grants to speakers the power Humpty Dumpty claims to have, of changing word meaning almost by fiat. Usually in discussions about the reclamation project, “dyke↓” and “dyke↑” are treated as absolutes, but really these terms represent poles of a changing continuum. During the process of reclamation the assertional commitments of the new term, “dyke↑”, undergo continual transformation as the community examines its inferential role.

Conclusion

There are many negative things we can say about someone that are virtually always negative but which do not play the categorizing and oppressive social function of the terms we’ve been considering. There is an important difference between the terms considered here and the wide range of more generic derogatory terms, such as “jerk,” which also insult and belittle, but have none of the complexity of “nigger” and “dyke.” They also have none of their power. The terms we have been considering are *deeply* derogatory; their power to derogate is not simply a matter of frequent and customary use as insults hurled at their targets.⁶⁹ Unreclaimed, “nigger” and “dyke” are deeply derogatory because of their complex sets of assertional commitments. “Jerk,” like many other derogatory terms, is nearly purely derogatory, in that its semantic content is little more than “stupid” or “foolish person” (*Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*). Calling someone “a jerk” is not tied to a rich structure of other social practices in the way that calling her “a whore” or labeling her with a racial or ethnic slur is. “Jerk” has little entrenched semantic content: from the fact that Jones called Smith “a jerk” we can’t infer much, except that Jones has a bad attitude toward Smith’s

current behavior or perhaps toward Smith generally. Think, in contrast to “jerk,” how much we can infer from Smith’s calling Jones “nigger” or “dyke.” The reductive categorization achieved by these terms and their service in support of the oppression of their targets is a significant part of their ontological force and is a source of their pragmatic force.

Absolutists and Reclaimers agree that the assertional commitments of the unreclaimed term are unacceptable. Absolutists want to reject the whole mode of discourse. Reclaimers think we can reject some (the bad stuff) while keeping some (good stuff), while Absolutists argue that either it is not really clear how to sort them out (an epistemic problem) or it is impossible to detach them (a metaphysical problem). In this case, it is pretty clear how to sort them out: the bad stuff tends to the detriment of the people derogated. Calling blacks “niggers↓” is different in kind from celebrating Kwanzaa, even though both are tied to a history of racial difference and discrimination. One serves to maintain the discrimination; the other serves to empower those who have suffered the discrimination to overcome it. Solving the epistemic problem, in this case, helps set the metaphysical solution in motion. The Absolutist’s claim that there is no way to detach the undesirable commitments from those that are acceptable is usually grounded on the strength of the stereotype that partially constitutes the inferential role and on the power of the social practices in which the term is embedded. What the practical failures of actual reclamation projects emphasize is that their success requires concomitant changes in the social practices that support the undesirable linguistic practices. Otherwise, the (old bad) default kicks in. Perhaps ironically, when the Absolutist argues for sanctions against the use of such terms, she is arguing for at least some of the kinds of social changes that would back up the goals of the reclamation project.

Absolutists and Reclaimers both tend to be holists, but they differ about how to break the particular language/culture cycle that both want broken. Absolutists think that with terms like these, the expressive commitment, ranging as it does over the whole mode of discourse, is so powerful that it cannot be dismantled piecemeal but must be jettisoned. Reclaimers, on the other hand, think that we can change the structure of the assertional commitments and so change the very nature of the expressive commitment. Perhaps the

most important issue between them is whether the speaker who uses the derogatory term may, through creative use of context, narrow down the elements of the term that are operative in that context. If so, then the reclamation project is underway. Unfortunately, the social norms and practices that generate the assertional commitments of these terms are so prevalent across all our sub-communities that variations in contextual features have had little success in overturning the derogation. That does not prove that the reclamation project is doomed; it just suggests that it is not easy.

Even if one doubts that the reclamation project can succeed, it is clear that the Absolutist's brand of holism is too strong. Undertaking an expressive commitment does not require adhering to every possible element in the inferential role of the term. In general, we often quite carefully limit our endorsement of the inferential roles with which we work. We can narrow the scope of the endorsement, but if we reject something very central to the inferential role, then there is a real question about whether we are undertaking the expressive commitment at all. Without its central assertional commitments, the viability and value of the discursive practice that supports the term becomes questionable. Exploiting the metaphor of viability, the Reclaimer urges that just as careful pruning enhances the health of real trees, so too with "inferential trees." The Reclaimer's project shows us that we can reject Greenberg's claim that a derogatory term communicates *all* the negative beliefs a community endorses about its target, while still accepting the point that these expressions are "extremely potent communicative devices." They communicate more than they justify, and they invoke a system of nasty claims, which is embedded in a system of unjust behaviors.⁶⁰

The problem with derogatory terms is not primarily or exclusively a matter of their pragmatics. Not all uses of derogatory terms can be subsumed under what the courts have labelled "fighting words," i.e., words "which by their very utterance inflict injury or tend to incite an immediate breach of the peace."⁶¹ Fighting words are defined primarily by their pragmatic effects, not by their semantic content. Unreclaimed, "nigger↓" and "dyke↓" are not really fighting words as legally understood, simply because immediate breach of the peace is usually not forthcoming when these terms are used against their targets. Too much is at stake for the targeted person to be free to fight back. They tend not to provoke a

fight because the match is rigged and everyone knows it. Instead, we should think of these terms as *bully-words*. They depend for their force and for their content upon a system that favors those not taken to be denotable by the terms, and they use that force to threaten and control persons taken to be so denotable. "Nigger↓" is a bully-word, whether or not it is uttered in a speech act that we would ordinarily call bullying. "Dyke↓" is a bully-word used to keep lesbians in the closet and to keep heterosexual women from knowing their own strength. Bully-words are a degree stronger, a degree more effective than fighting words. Their strength is in the social and linguistic practices that back them up.

Seeing these terms as bully-words, whose enforcement power is so great that they tend not to provoke any response that would render them fighting words, enables me to agree with part of the Supreme Court's claim that "the reason why fighting words are categorically excluded from the protection of the First Amendment is not that their content communicates any particular idea, but that their content embodies a particularly intolerable (and socially unnecessary) mode of expressing whatever idea the speaker wishes to convey."⁶² The Absolutist argues that this sort of derogatory term ought not to be protected by the First Amendment, and the position set out here helps to keep the Absolutist safe from the typical slippery-slope worries that arise from content-based abridgments. The Absolutist shows, however, that one serious problem with these terms is that "their content communicates [a] particular idea," namely, the idea of dominance and subordination on the basis of race or sex or sexual preference (and more). Even more importantly, the Court blurs the distinction between content and mode of presentation, saying that "their content embodies a particularly intolerable . . . mode of expressing whatever idea the speaker wishes to convey." There is a significant difference between saying, "I think I'm better than you because I'm an Anglo and you're not," and saying, "You're just a nigger." The challenge is to articulate what is intolerable about the mode of expression, and the inferential role theory of meaning helps us with that task.

Derogatory terms are political discourse on three counts. First, they inform about the power structure; they tell both those who are their targets and those who are not where their place is in the social hierarchy. Second, they function prescriptively; their assertional commitments are constituted by inferences that set out

norms (parading as descriptions) by which the target group is supposed to live. And third, they are bully-words, which are significantly worse than fighting words. While fighting words may breach the public peace, bully-words corrupt the public morality. They do not convince by rational argument, by giving and asking for reasons; instead they bully their targets into compliance with the norms they represent. When those norms oppress and exploit, justifying untold abuses, there are grounds for addressing the very mode of discourse in which these terms occur.

Addressing the use of these terms explicitly, making the expressions themselves the subject of rational discussion, has the potential to help ameliorate some of the harms of the terms and may help weaken their potential to harm again. We need to call the bully out. Making explicit the expressive commitment of a derogatory term makes explicit the political dimension of the term, both in its assertional commitments being rife with expressions that depict rigidly ascribed stereotypic traits and in the social function of the distinctions made therein. Making explicit the structure of these commitments enables us to demand of those who would use these terms that they justify the expressive commitments undertaken in the process. It enables us to demand that they *show* us that the mode of discourse of which the term is part is both viable and valuable. That requires showing that the mode of discourse serves a valuable end—and that is the hard thing to do with these terms.

This chapter is the beginning of an exposition of the structure by which such words become what they are. An inferential role theory of meaning is helpful for moving us away from thinking about the harms of derogatory terms as being located in their connotation (representing the mere bias of the speaker) or in their denotation (saying that they fail to refer since the descriptive content of the terms is inaccurate). According to the inferential role theory developed here, these terms license inferences about those they are used to denote which we think ought not be licensed.

In the end, what's wrong with derogatory terms? Surely a simple answer is "the harm they cause." It is bad when they reflect the hate and the prejudice of the speaker, and it is bad that they serve to denote by way of prejudice, falsehood, and stereotype. Even worse, however, is their rigid codification of stereotypes into assertional commitments, licensing inferences that have no legitimate grounds.

The derogatory terms we have been considering are bully-words with ontological force: they serve to establish and maintain a corrupt social system fuelled by distinctions designed to justify relations of dominance and subordination. Despite their differences, both the Absolutist and the Reclaimer are fighting this phenomenon. Both show us that the central issue in fighting these words is undermining the viability and value of the particular mode of discourse, that is, undermining a meta-level commitment to a bulk of the assertional commitments associated with the term. What is wrong with derogatory terms is that they are part of a set of unjust discursive practices that support and are supported by a set of unjust social, economic, and legal practices. Derogatory terms such as those considered here may not be fighting words, but they set in bold relief the importance of fighting over words.

NOTES

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1. Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (New York: St. Martin's, 1977), 131.

2. Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 43.

3. A reductive classification is one that purports to reduce the person's rich and complex identity to the category that is applied.

4. Sandra Lee Bartky. "On Psychological Oppression," in her *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 27.

5. Here I am disagreeing sharply with Davidson, who in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" claims that "nothing should be allowed to obliterate or even blur the distinction between speaker's meaning and literal meaning," and that "we must pry apart what is literal in language from what is conventional or established" (in Ernest LePore, ed., *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson* [New York: Blackwell, 1986], 434.) In what follows, I hope it becomes clearer

that the literal is what it is by convention and that ignoring this is a distortion of literal meaning and meaning more generally.

6. Simon Blackburn, "Through Thick and Thin," ms p. 13.

7. Of its eight quotations listed at that entry, three make a distinction between "niggers" and "blacks" or "colored" persons.

8. The *OED* is separating the denotation of the term from its connotation (here, the attitudes one can "read off" it), not treating the term as an amalgam but as a mixture with separable elements. Distinguishing between the denotation and connotation can be helpful, but it is not helpful to take the connotation to be a matter of what the speaker's attitude is, or even what a reasonable person might take the speaker's attitude to be.

9. David Roediger, pp. 144–145. Roediger is concerned with explaining the relation between African Americans held as slaves and Irish immigrants whose lives also were considered of little social value.

10. Betty Rundle, an Irish Catholic woman who lives in Chicago, told Studs Terkel: "My Father's family came here to get away from the potato famine, 1840. They worked on the Erie Canal. So much Irish history suppressed. We were the niggers of the time." In Studs Terkel, *Race: How Blacks and Whites Think and Feel About the American Obsession* (New York: The New Press, 1992), 113. Similarly, Delgado cites *Johnson v. Hackett*, a case in which a police officer called a citizen "a Chinese nigger" (284 F. Supp 93 [E.D. Pa 1968]); *contra* Delgado's insistence, it seems that this case shows that to some extent the racial status of the object of reference can be divorced from the derogatory term. Richard Delgado, "A Tort Action for Racial Insults, Epithets, and Name-Calling," *Harvard Civil Rights—Civil Liberties Law Review* 17 (Spring 1982), and in Mari Matsuda, Charles R. Lawrence III, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, *Words that Wound* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 101–102. Also, sailors sometimes use the term "deck nigger" as a designation of position, not race.

11. Frantz Fanon argues that far from excusing whites, their use of such expressions *without* any intention to insult and degrade is worse than an intentional slight: "it is just this absence of wish, this lack of interest, this indifference, this automatic manner of classifying him, imprisoning him, primitivizing him, decivilizing him, that makes him angry," in *Black Skin White Masks*, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 32. The force behind our words is our social practices, which in turn make possible many of our affective states, so our analysis need not invoke intentions, although it can accommodate them. See Naomi Scheman, "Individualism and the Objects of Psychology," in *Discovering Reality*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983), 225–244.

12. There's a problem speaking about races as if they exist independently of these structures of subordination. See, for example, Anthony Appiah, "Racisms," in *Anatomy of Racism*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1990), 3–17; "The Uncompleted Argument: DuBois and the Illusion of Race," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985) (reprinted in Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Race," *Writing and Difference* [Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1986], 21–37); and " 'But Would that Still Be Me?': Notes on Gender, 'Race,' Ethnicity, as Sources of Identity," *The Journal of Philosophy* LXXXVII, No. 10 (Oct. 1990): 493–499. See also Ashley Montagu, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

13. Smith's intention to slur Jones with a particular racial epithet cannot be formulated, much less coherently understood prior to the onset of the practices that establish the subordination of the races and the linguistic practices that render this particular term a slur. A more complete argument would simply be a fairly straightforward application of the arguments given by Scheman, *op cit*.

14. Consider the difference between invoking the history of slavery by saying, "She is the great granddaughter of a freed slave," versus saying, "She's a nigger." Both invoke the history of slavery, but one carries a default endorsement of that history and the other doesn't. For more on the importance of social back-up, see Lynne Tirrell, "Definition and Power," *Hypatia* 8, no. 4 (Fall 1993): 1–34.

15. Delgado, in Matsuda *et al.*, p.100.

16. An inferential role theory of meaning is holistic, for it emphasizes the place of the expression in relation to its context and it emphasizes the significance of the relation of that context to other contexts (similar and dissimilar). This sort of view is played out on many different fields: it is seen in Hempel's discussion of the importance of non-black non-ravens for understanding verificationism, in Quine's holism, and in Saussure's structuralism, to name but a few variations. For more on holism, see Jerry Fodor and Ernest LePore, *Holism: A Shopper's Guide* (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1992).

17. Robert B. Brandom, "Asserting," *Nous* IV (November 1983): 637–650. This account is clearest in the case of assertion, although it can easily accommodate other sorts of speech acts.

18. This language of undertaking the commitment is not meant to preclude the possibility that someone might categorically refuse to ever justify anything she asserts, might never actually be forthcoming with an identification, and so on. These commitments represent a reconstruction of our social practices, and it is a well-known fact about all social practices

that there are normally a few free riders and general non-cooperators. When someone generally shirks her linguistic responsibilities, we tend to treat her as an unreliable interlocutor.

19. See Lynne Tirrell, "Extending: The Structure of Metaphor," *Nous* XXIII (March 1989): 17-34.

20. The Supreme Court has a history of deciding the value of modes of discourse, and particular bits of speech, almost exclusively in terms of their utility in promoting truth. I say "almost exclusively" because the tendency to decide on these grounds is very strong, but can be overridden by considerations of threats to the public peace.

21. Jerry Farber, "The Student as Nigger," from *The Student as Nigger* (New York: Pocket Books, 1969); all the quotes in this paragraph are from pages 90 and 91. Farber is not asserting that students are blacks, but rather that they are second-class citizens if citizens at all. I don't think this claim requires metaphorical interpretation, as the rest of the paragraph should illustrate. The claim is literally interpretable and literally supported (or not).

22. Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* (New York: Collier, 1962), 247.

23. In explaining what is wrong with the sentence, "The niggers and broads in this town will benefit from improvements in medicine," which she labels "(4)," Kriste Taylor maintains that "it is the use of the referring expression 'niggers and broads' that makes any utterance of (4) somehow sexist and racist." See K. Taylor, "Reference and Truth: The Case of Sexist and Racist Utterances," in *Sexist Language*, ed. Mary Vetterling-Bruggin (Totowa, N.J.: Littlefield Adams Inc., 1981), 311. Taylor says that such use fails because the derogatory terms fail to refer.

24. The expressive commitment of a derogatory term is independent of the psychological states of the person who utters it, and is independent of whether the term is used as a direct insult, hurled like a rock, or used as a casual term of reference. As an insult, it is irrelevant whether the term is directed against oneself or against others in one's presence; when a speaker utters the word, an endorsement of the expressive commitment is generally concomitantly undertaken, and that expressive commitment carries a general endorsement of the derogation. This point is nicely illustrated in the following story, told by Joseph Robinson, president of the Chicago local of the United Steel Workers of America, to social historian Studs Terkel. Robinson says: "Some of the guys on the picket line have his [the owner's] concept [of race hate], but I think they're growing up. They're learning who their enemy really is. It's not the black man, it's not the Hispanic. It's this guy, the owner. Some of these guys voted for me as

president. They treat me with respect. I can be standing there and they will forget that I am a black man. A black man will walk down the street and they holler, 'Hey nigger.' I'm standing right beside them. It's like I blend right in with them for a minute. [Laughs.] They forget I'm black. The other guy, passing by, is a nigger. When I hear these guys calling, 'Nigger,' my head roars up inside me but I can't let it defeat me. I've learned to live with it. Sure, it disturbs me when somebody calls a black man a nigger. It disturbs me when somebody calls an Italian a wop. Some of them will still be racists when this strike is over, but I feel good about a couple of them. They've been raised in that environment but they're growing out of it. If I can save one or two . . ." Robinson may be right that these men who yell at the passers-by intend no insult to him. Surely they are not hurling the term at him. Still, unless they can find a way to change the default extension of the term, they are derogating him just the same, no matter what their intentions. Studs Terkel, *op cit.*, p. 74.

25. I do not think that the Absolutist has in mind the burning of every book and essay and letter that uses or mentions the term, but simply that the term not be used and that it be scorned when it is. In fact, I have not seen any clarifications of this point by Absolutists.

26. Richard Delgado, in Matsuda et. al., p. 107; see also p. 94 and pp. 109-110. As we shall see below, expressive commitment of the term is at issue, not the connotation. Delgado's use of "connotation" here and elsewhere in his article is the ordinary language use, so I take him to mean something like "attitudes conveyed or associated with the expression." (In contrast, the logician's use of "connotation" refers to the sort of thing that has been collected in the dictionary, while "denotation" refers to the objects of reference for the term.)

27. See for example Ari Kiev, "Psychiatric Disorders in Minority Groups," in *Psychology and Race*, ed. Peter Watson, (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1974), 416-431. Summing up the literature, Richard Delgado lists: diminished sense of self-worth, lowered sense of dignity, sense of failing to meet social standards, mental illness, psychosomatic diseases, drug abuse, hypertension, diminished ability to form attachments, diminished ability to pursue a career, etc. See Delgado, *op cit.*, pp. 90-96.

28. Charles Lawrence argues, "Stereotypes are cultural symbols. They constitute our contemporary interpretation of past and present meaningful behavior." See Charles R. Lawrence III, "The Id, the Ego, and Equal Protection: Reckoning with Unconscious Racism" *Stanford Law Review*, 39, No. 2 (Jan. 1987): 372.

29. The fact that we all know fat people who aren't jolly, blacks who lack rhythm, Latinos who are not passionate, inarticulate Irish people,

and so on, doesn't undermine the power of those stereotypically assigned traits. Because stereotypes have this kind of power, members of the stereotyped group who do not fit the stereotype are seen as rare exceptions, and lose their power to undermine the force of the stereotype. Historian David Roediger points out, for example, that the stereotype of blacks as shiftless and lazy is incommensurate with another stereotype that blacks do all the hardest, lowest, dirtiest work our society needs. It is important to note that these stereotypes are commonly held by the same individuals, not just by different individuals within the same community. See David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991).

30. See Judith Andre, "Stereotypes: Conceptual and Normative Considerations" in *Racism and Sexism: An Integrated Study*, ed. Paula S. Rothenberg (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 256–262.

31. Jeff Greenberg, S. L. Kirkland, and Tom Pyszczynski, "Derogatory Ethnic Labels," in *Discourse and Discrimination*, ed. Geneva Smitherman-Donaldson and Teun A. van Dijk (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1988), 77.

32. Similarly, Joseph Hayes claims that "dyke is not just a label, but calls to mind all past stories about dykes: the label as a short, running narrative history." Joseph J. Hayes, "Lesbians, Gay Men, and their 'Languages,'" in *Gayspeak: Gay Male and Lesbian Communication*, ed. James W. Cheseboro (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1981), 33.

33. In general, simply undertaking the expressive commitment does not require adherence to *all* the elements of the term's inferential network—just most. See my "Extending: The Structure of Metaphor" for a discussion of the ways of restricting, augmenting, or even overturning expressive commitment (*Nous* XXIII [March 1989]).

34. John Money used this locution of one sex being trapped in the body of another during an interview on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and is cited by Jan Raymond for similar statements in *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979).

35. Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*, 35. See also Sarah L. Hoagland, "'Femininity,' Resistance, and Sabotage," in *Women and Values*, ed. Marilyn Pearsall (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth, 1986), 78–85.

36. Irving Lewis Allen. *The Language of Ethnic Conflict: Social Organization and Lexical Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 15. In many contexts, there is a distinction to be made between using derogatory terms as what our legal tradition calls "fighting words"—hurling them at a person who is targeted for linguistic (and perhaps other)

assault—on the one hand, and using such terms casually to denote, as my neighbor did. For the purposes of this inquiry, the difference between direct and indirect derogation is not at issue. What matters here are the grounds for the charges that such talk is undesirable and settling what is at issue between those who accept it and those who do not. Both direct and indirect derogation achieve the same political end of dividing insiders and outsiders, and seeing to it that members of one group have more access to power and resources than members of the other.

37. For more on psychological oppression, see Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, and Sandra Lee Bartky, "On Psychological Oppression," in *Femininity and Domination*, 22–32.

38. Delgado, in Matsuda et al., p. 107. Delgado's strategy here is to argue in a legal context that these terms and expressions are not political speech because political speech is so clearly protected by the First Amendment; this strategy is misguided. The expressions are political; what his considerations show is that not all political speech ought to be protected. In fact, the Court's maintaining a strict public space/captive audience criterion for application of restrictions of speech suggests that the political arena is precisely where the restrictions may apply. (Perhaps what matters just as much is its rhetorical mode, or that the expressions function as bullying tools.)

39. In fairness to Delgado, he recognizes this harm of racism, even as he argues that such speech is not political. At issue between us is the scope of what counts as political.

40. Delgado, in Matsuda et al., p. 108.

41. In his opinion on *R.A.V. v. City of St. Paul*, Justice White writes, "fighting words are not a means of exchanging views, rallying supporters, or registering a protest; they are directed against individuals to provoke violence or inflict injury" (Lexus, p.13). There is no conversation (speaking *with*) when fighting words are used, and racial epithets are of this sort. Just the same, there is a talking *to*, and that talking to is informative and political.

42. Within the community it is obvious that the beliefs have truth values (as Blackburn notes). What is important to see, however, is that claims made with derogatory terms carry their place in a social and historical context nearly on their sleeves. For an interesting discussion of this, see Simone de Beauvoir's introduction to *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1989).

43. Simon Blackburn. *Spreading the Word: Groundings in the Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 146.

44. Allen, p. 15.

45. William Faulkner. "That Evening Sun," in *Major American Short Stories*, ed. A. Walton Litz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 576–590. Also in *These 13* (1931) and *The Collected Stories of William Faulkner*. This story provides an interesting case of both blacks and whites using "nigger" clearly as a derogatory term but none seeming to mind the linguistic derogation. (It simply is not the case that any use of the term to one's face constitutes fighting words, in the legal sense.)

46. *Ibid.*, p. 578. Other instances: "I ain't nothin' but a nigger," Nancy said, "God knows. God knows." (p. 581); "I just a nigger. It ain't no fault of mine" (p. 590).

47. In Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life*, 44.

48. One argument for the possibility of reclaiming derogatory terms like "nigger" and "dyke" depends on *not* taking the terms to be what Blackburn, McDowell, Gibbard, Williams, and others call "thick." "Thick" terms are terms or expressions that carry with them or convey an attitude, an approval or a disapproval, in which the description and the attitude "form a compound or amalgam, rather than a mixture: the attitude and the description infuse each other, so that in the end, in the repertoire of the mature speaker, the two elements are no longer distinguishable" (Simon Blackburn, "Through Thick and Thin," ms p. 13).

49. Not all uses of the term by African Americans will effect the detachment.

50. One weakness I will not go into in the text: The argument relies on a false premise in its attempt to show that the derogation is not built into the semantics. Generally, many semantic features of our utterances can be overturned or cancelled by the pragmatic effects of particular uses, and so it would take a special argument to support the premise that claims that if the derogation were a semantic aspect of the term, then there could be no nonderogatory use of it. Certain kinds of pragmatic effects, like irony, for example, can cancel or overturn semantic meanings; what is less clear is that they can radically change semantic meanings. Would a continued ironic use of "he's a real prince," in a community that no longer spoke non-ironically about princes, ultimately change the meaning of "prince," losing the irony along the way while retaining the ironized meaning? Perhaps, but to assume so here is to beg the question. Thanks to Bob Brandom for pointing this out.

51. I'm using Blackburn's notation, in "Through Thick and Thin," for my own purposes here. As I am using them, "dyke↓" represents the unreclaimed derogatory term, in all its derogatoriness, while "dyke↑" rep-

resents the reclaimed term. What is missing from this denotation, and from discussion of the reclamation, is attention to the term-in-transition.

52. At this point it would be interesting to see whether the assertional commitments of "nigger↑" are the same as for the so-called synonymous terms.

53. According to Julia Penelope, a lesbianfeminist linguist who is concerned with this question in her *Call Me Lesbian: Lesbian Lives, Lesbian Theory* (Freedom, Cal.: The Crossing Press, 1992), 90. Penelope makes a point in her earlier book that may help to explain why "dyke" has generally been more widely accepted amongst lesbians than "nigger" has amongst African Americans. She argues that if an oppressed group is to reclaim a derogatory term, it must be one that results from a strength-building noncompliant stance. It must be a term with some assertional commitments worth saving: "I would argue, for example, that we can reclaim words like *dyke* and *bitch*, but not *slut* or *fuck*. The first two have been used as insults because the idea that we are out of our place inheres in their meaning. We can take the strength and defiance of such words for ourselves and be proud of our refusal to stay within the confines of behavior assigned to us by men. *Dyke* and *bitch* label things we do that break patriarchal rules and place us outside men's control. Slut, whore, slit, and gash all refer to us as objects of male predation and, like men's compliments, are fetters that hold us within their conceptual framework. They are names whose meanings and values exist only because we live in a patriarchy." For women, Penelope argues, "the words we decide to reclaim should be those that name a behavior or attitude that enables us to move outside the world as men have named it." (*Speaking Freely: Unlearning the Lies of the Father's Tongues* [New York: Pergamon Press, 1990], 215–216.) In spite of the heroic resistance of Africans brought to the United States in slavery and African Americans since, there is reason to doubt that "nigger↓" meets this condition, and this may be a factor in the only moderate success of the reclamation of that term, even within the subcommunity.

54. Ginny Ray, "Niggers,' 'chicks,' and 'dykes'" (letter), *The Lesbian Tide* 8, no.6 (May/June 1979), 20.

55. *Ibid.*

56. "Dyke: A History of Resistance" (Editorial), *The Lesbian Tide* 8, no. 6 (May/June 1979), 21.

57. *Ibid.*

58. Consider the difference between rehabilitating these derogatory terms and changing the so-called generic "man." What we did in the latter

case was substitution, not rehabilitation. We did not make “man” truly generic, but argued that it *never was* generic, and then offered alternative constructions, such as “person . . . he or she,” “person . . . she,” or “people . . . they.” Recognizing that “man” is not truly generic did not force a reorganization of the inferential role of the term, but it did diminish the number and scope of the inferences licensed by the term. In particular, it made explicit that the central inferences in its inferential role are about males and cut off broader application to women. Substituting generic for nongeneric terms left the inferential structures associated with these nongeneric expressions nearly intact.

59. In fact, it may not be true that this is the commonest use of these terms, for the terms may just as often be used as third-person terms of reference (as when one white man says to another, “that nigger over there,” or when heterosexuals say, “Let’s go to Provincetown and watch the dykes and faggots”). These terms do not depend on the form of the speech act in which they occur for their derogation, and their content not only specifies that the terms are derogatory, as “jerk” and “weirdo” do, but also conveys specific grounds for the derogation.

60. The issue is the speaker during the transition period (a sort of limbo, or perhaps purgatory). Once the reclamation is achieved within the subcommunity, then that subcommunity takes on the speaker role *vis-à-vis* the broader community and the same sort of problem arises.

61. *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire*, 315 U.S. 146 (1942).

62. Scalia for the majority (Lexus/Nexus, p. 9). I disagree with the parenthetical “socially unnecessary” claim in that I think these kinds of modes are necessary to maintaining certain kinds of societies. Of course, they are not necessary to the maintenance of society *per se*, but it is important to see how they are intertwined with certain social structures and it is important to consider the possibility that they may be inextricable from those particular social structures. If so, then changing or eradicating the mode would ultimately undermine the social order.

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