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Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and the Arts is a forum for examining issues common to philosophy and critical disciplines that deal with the history of art, literature, film, music, and drama. In order to inform and advance both critical practice and philosophical approaches, the series analyzes the aims, procedures, language, and results of inquiry in the critical fields, and examines philosophical theories by reference to the needs of arts disciplines. This interaction of ideas and findings, and the ensuing discussion, bring into focus new perspectives and expand the terms in which the debate is conducted.

Aesthetics and ethics

Essays at the intersection

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 **CAMBRIDGE**
UNIVERSITY PRESS

1998

fly. Pride and shame, those postlapsarian feelings, define the morality of the situation once the objections to generic nakedness have been removed – if they have been removed.

Notes

1. Pat Barker, *The Ghost Road* (New York: Dutton, 1995), 86.
2. Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (London: Penguin English Library, 1979), p. 472.
3. See Michael Kimmelman, "Portraitist in the Halls of Her Artistic Ancestors," *New York Times*, May 19, 1995.
4. Edgard Wind, "The Maenad under the Cross: Comment on an Observation by Reynolds," in *Hume and the Heroic Portrait: Studies in Eighteenth Century Imagery* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 74–6.
5. Michael Byers, "Settled on the Cranberry Coast," *Prize Stories, 1995*, ed. William Abraham (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 166.
6. An instructive example is the recent work of photographer Philip-Lorca diCorcia. "DiCorcia, 43, hides several synchronized strobe lights on signs or buildings, places his camera on a tripod and steps aside. . . . This technique allows his subjects no warning that they're being photographed, which seems to rankle New Yorkers more than most. 'They think I'm violating their rights,' says diCorcia, a New Yorker himself. 'Maybe I am.'" *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, May 18, 1997, 69.
7. In David Sellin, *The First Pose* (New York: Norton, 1976), 58.
8. *Ibid.*, 47.
9. Meyer Schapiro, "The Apples of Cézanne: An Essay on the Meaning of Still-Life," *Art News Annual* 34 (1968). Reprinted in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: Braziller, 1978).

Aesthetic derogation: hate speech, pornography, and aesthetic contexts

LYNNE TIRRELL

I felt a mental censor – product of the fears which a Negro feels from living in America – standing over me, draped in white, warning me not to write. . . . "What will the white people think if I draw the picture of such a Negro boy? Will they not at once say: 'See, didn't we tell you all long the niggers are like that? Now, look, one of their own kind has come along and drawn the picture for us!'" . . . I knew that I could not write of Bigger convincingly if I did not depict him as he was: that is, resentful toward whites, sullen, angry, ignorant, emotionally unstable, depressed and unaccountably elated at times, and unable even, because of his own lack of inner organization which American oppression had fostered in him, to unite with the members of his own race. . . . There was another constricting thought that kept me from work. . . . I asked myself: "What will Negro doctors, lawyers, dentists, bankers, school teachers, social workers, and business men think of me if I draw such a picture of Bigger?" . . . But Bigger won over all these claims; . . . I felt with all my being that he was more important than what any person, white or black, would say or try to make of him, more important than any political analysis designed to explain or deny him, more important, even, than my own sense of fear, shame, and diffidence.

Richard Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born"¹

Nathan McCall, author of *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, credits Wright's *Native Son* with inspiring his love of reading and in turn his love of learning. McCall found Bigger Thomas's story familiar and frightening; he read Wright while in prison, sentenced to twelve years for robbing a McDonald's. Enthralled by Wright's writing, and "surprised that somebody had written a book that so closely reflected my experiences and feelings," McCall began a personal journey from convict to journalist to social critic. Nathan McCall is an example of a reader who identified first with the protagonist, partly because the

protagonist's life emulated his own, but who made his subsequent life imitate not the art but the artist. Nathan McCall learned more from the writing than from what was written: he became fascinated with "the power of words."²

This is an essay about the power of words. In particular, I am concerned with the power of derogatory terms in aesthetic contexts. I am also concerned with the power of aesthetic contexts to legitimate or to undermine their own contents. Derogatory terms have long played various roles and achieved diverse ends in works of art, appearing in works by artists as different as William Faulkner and Ice-T. Recent discussions of these terms have been narrowly focused in their argumentation and yet quite sweeping in their application. The arguments against the use of such terms and images have not focused on aesthetic contexts, but have instead addressed racist epithets, on the one hand, and sexist images in pornography, on the other. Most of this essay is devoted to explaining the position of Absolutists, who would impose legal sanctions on the use of such terms, and Reclaimers, who would not.³ Focusing on basic aspects of an aesthetic object or work, I look at the interpretive relation between point of view and content, asking how the method of presentation makes a difference to the nature of what exactly is presented. What does aesthetic context do to change our interpretation of these terms, if anything? Does aesthetic context serve as giant quotation marks, as it were, which thereby wipe away the author's commitment to the terms and which undermine the harm they would otherwise do? Even the assumption that quotation has this power to limit speaker endorsement is suspect, as we shall see. If aesthetic contextualization can do what quotation often cannot, then derogations in art could work for the Reclaimer rather than the Absolutist. If not, the Absolutist's position gains ground.

The debate about the viability and value of these terms is a debate about public morality, couched in terms of law or in terms of government funding. A common core unites such apparently diverse public issues as the protests about the 1993 staging of *Showboat* in Toronto, the debates about circumscribing funding for the National Endowment for the Arts on the basis of the content of proposed works, the efforts of Critical Race Theorists to enact anti-hate speech legislation, and the efforts of some feminist groups, aided by Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, to enact legislation prohibiting the sale and distribution of pornographic materials or opening the door to lawsuits against purveyors for damages. All concern the power of expression – words and images – to create or to reinforce a

social reality that is morally contested. At stake in these debates is the range of permissible expressive commitments within our culture. This discussion will, I hope, make clear what I mean by that claim, and will help to clarify the cognitive and moral force of these terms and the debate surrounding them.

Further complicating matters when these issues are raised in aesthetic contexts is the fact that our society operates with a confused and internally incoherent conception of the nature of art. On the one hand, we often think that art is extremely powerful, that it has an immense capacity to control our perceptions and beliefs, and that there is little corrective once this power is exercised. Proponents of this view often hold that art is a cultural staple that ought to serve the social, political, or moral needs of the people. This view harks back at least to Plato, and probably motivates most discussions that take seriously the power of images to shape our lives. This view gives art great metaphysical and epistemological powers, while paradoxically condemning it to use those powers to no good. The other view of art that runs through our everyday thinking about the subject as well as some of our theories is the view that art is not a cultural staple, something with which everyone is or should be familiar and for which everyone is responsible, but rather that it is an expendable, superfluous aspect of human life, to be sequestered in museums and out-of-the-way corners of our lives, encountered on Saturday or Sunday afternoons and at some expense. On this view, artists are not revered cultural leaders or dangerous charlatans, but are rather part of an eccentric fringe making luxuries that are dispensable and largely irrelevant to the rest of life. On this view, art is decoration and window dressing; it has no real metaphysical or epistemological significance. On this view, restricting what artists can say or do has only symbolic import. The artist is made an example of, and others in the society learn their own boundaries from this example. I will not attempt to sort through these competing conceptions of art here, but this essay should lend some support to those who are engaged in such a project. In closing, I will sketch a picture of art that may help in thinking about these issues.

THE ABSOLUTIST AND THE RECLAIMER: WORDS

It has become commonplace to treat the aesthetic as a subspecies of the linguistic, to treat artistic acts and creations as species of expression, and to treat declarative speech as the paradigmatic form of

expression. While maintaining some skepticism about the ease of such analogies between speech and aesthetic expression, it is also important to respect their power. So let us begin with a look at two approaches to derogatory terms such as racist, sexist, and ethnic epithets. The Absolutist argues that certain derogatory terms and subordinating images should be erased from our available repertoires, or at least that those who use such terms or images should be held liable in civil or criminal court.⁴ In contrast, the Reclaimer holds that such terms, as terms of subordination, have a history that must be remembered and argues that these terms can be reclaimed by those against whom they are used. Attempting a sort of linguistic aikido, some members of the groups against which these terms have been used have been trying, with various degrees of success, to reclaim the derogatory terms and turn them into terms of endearment, or at least terms of in-group reference that differ significantly in their semantic content (or inferential role) from the original terms used by the dominant group. The reclaimer wants to disarm the power of these terms and images by internal reorganization – by effecting semantic change – rather than by imposing external sanctions. Making terms taboo grants them a certain power, so the Reclaimer does not want to strengthen the taboos against these terms. In contrast, the Absolutist sees the Reclamation project as doomed by the entrenchment of these terms and by the power of discursive practice to resist change.

Social practices and harms

Current discussions of derogatory terms (usually labeled *hate speech*) tend to focus on cases in which one person hurls a racist epithet as if it were a weapon inflicting pain and injury on its target. Such second-person cases surely are important, and just as surely such linguistic behavior is morally inappropriate. Critical Race Theorists like Mari Matsuda argue that such individual actions have the power they do only in the context of a society that sanctions these acts and offers no recourse to their victims. Derogatory terms and subordinating images gain their power from their coherence with other social practices. Racist language, for example, matters primarily in a context that sanctions the disparate treatment of members of races counted less valuable. Without the cultural and material “back-up” of discriminatory practices, such as social isolation, economic discrimination, harassment, and violence, such derogatory terms would not have the force they do.⁵ We have the power, through our

laws, to stop the linguistic behavior or at least to punish it; we have the responsibility, Matsuda and others argue, to stop the harm.

This epithet-hurling model is unfortunate, however, for it obscures the larger social dimension of these terms and makes it seem as if the real problem were individual cruelty or individual attempts to subordinate. The epithet-hurling case is attractive as a focus because it seems like a performative – an utterance that gets something done – in this case performing the act of subordinating the target. What force it has will depend on other aspects of the speech act. Further, this focus makes it seem as if the racism were a matter of the term’s being used, but the logician’s distinction between use and mention does not really work here to erase the associated derogatory commitments of the term. I will say more about this later.

Racist discourse has social force in all sorts of contexts and in most sorts of speech act. Just as important are the casual third-person uses of these terms – very different sorts of speech acts – which reinforce the mode of discourse and with it the conceptual framework and its social ontology. An exclusive focus on cases in which one person says to another “You so-and-so!” will yield a very different account than one that also attends to speech acts of the form “You know Fred, the so-and-so.” Such third-person uses ultimately may be more insidious and more powerful. If the Absolutist is right that these terms cannot be rehabilitated, then even in third-person uses the terms carry a derogation. The derogatory force of the term does not depend on the term’s being used in an explicitly derogating speech act such as shouting an epithet in someone’s face; if the Absolutist is right, then the term is derogatory in *all* contexts.

The Absolutist sees derogatory terms as inextricably tied to stereotypes, which are themselves notoriously resistant to correction. Voicing a key tenet of Absolutism, one team of social scientists claims that derogatory terms “come to symbolize *all* the negative stereotypic beliefs associated with the group,” adding that this comprehensiveness makes them “extremely potent communicative devices.”⁶ Just as important, the Absolutist believes in the potency of discourse:

*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.*⁷

Derogatory terms have the power to shape our social ontology because they are broadly prescriptive, giving people a proclaimed

reality to live down to. Because that “reality” is constituted by rigid stereotypes, the person labeled by the term cannot simply shake off certain aspects of the stereotype: what doesn’t fit remains and rubs. The Absolutist advocates eliminating the terms used in racial epithets in order to break the language–culture cycle that keeps oppressive categories intact.

Both the Absolutist and the Reclaimer seek to break the power of oppressive category terms, but they have different strategies for doing so. Most of what I say in this essay about these approaches focuses on discrete terms or expressions – individual words and images. Lest we not settle for too benign a notion of what Reclamation would take, consider William Faulkner’s attempt to depict racism in the United States. James Baldwin has said that “in the work of Faulkner . . . one sees the beginnings – at least – of a more genuinely penetrating search” for the way racism is woven into the patterns of our lives.⁸ In a study of Faulkner’s major novels, James Snead portrays Faulkner as a novelist who is actively engaged in a reclamation project that goes way beyond the mere reclamation of a particular word here or there. Taking very seriously the Absolutist’s concern about the way that language shapes ontology, Faulkner set about to reshape both. Snead writes:

The stylistic strangeness of Faulkner’s novels is not purely post-Joycean experimentalism, as often suggested, nor even a residue of his infatuation with Romanticism and French symbolism. Instead Faulkner’s narratives are accurate reconstructions and dismantlings of linguistic and social classifications, proving that some extraordinary human beings struggle, against overwhelming odds, to reverse a separation that rhetoric has tried to make into permanent reality.⁹

Again we see the ontological power of language taken seriously, so seriously that Faulkner must wrestle with the structure of his prose to convey the restructuring he sees or sometimes only hopes for.

More recently, director Hal Prince revised some of the racist language in the Toronto production of *Showboat*, which premiered there in October 1993, because it had been described by critics as a trivialization of slavery. In response to such charges of racism, Prince cut all but two utterances of the word ‘nigger’, and those were uttered by a villain. Prince has been described as “reluctant to make more substantial changes to the language, adding ‘You don’t clean it up for the sake of rewriting history.’”¹⁰ Protesters find this appeal to historical veracity rather disingenuous, given that the show is a musical depicting “blacks of the late 1800s and early part of this century as

easygoing people who, despite unspeakable cruelties, will spontaneously burst into song and dance.”¹¹ Cutting the racist terms is a beginning, but the protesters are right that it is not enough to render the play benign. The subordinating discourse is but one factor, the subordinating images are another; together, they are a very potent, very volatile combination. Prince’s willingness to clean up the language is a willingness to do half the job. Doing the rest of the job would literally deconstruct the play.

The inferential role theory of meaning

To understand the social problems reflected in and the linguistic problems created by derogatory terms, it is helpful to use an inferential role theory of meaning.¹² Such a view makes good sense of the social and political dimensions of the discourse while making clear their connection to its basic linguistic and cognitive structure. The inferential theory, like the views of the Absolutist and the Reclaimer, is holistic; 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). Accordingly, the meaning of a sentence is a matter of its place in a pattern of inferences, and 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. Social, cultural, and linguistic contexts govern which commitments a speaker may make. Communities license certain kinds of basic linguistic commitments, such as “It is raining” or “If this is College Park, we must be in Maryland,” for nearly all community members. Some licenses require specific training or social positioning; specialization of labor and discretely distributed authority tend to yield parallel restrictions on linguistic licenses. So, in the United States, only some members of society can effectively say “Thirty days or thirty dollars” or “Take two Prozac daily.” Most linguistic licenses tend to be less explicit, but similarly effective. When the Absolutist says that certain words should be expunged from the language or that speakers should be held liable for uttering them, she is urging that we, as a community, take *explicit* control over certain inference licenses – that we unlicense certain inferences across the board.

Whenever one speaks, one simultaneously undertakes commitments (of one’s own) and issues licenses to one’s audience. There are

three basic kinds of commitments: assertional, identificatory, and expressive. When Jane says, "Mary is the dyke who went to the meeting," Jane's *assertional commitment* issues an inference license to her audience. That license allows her audience to use the claim as a premise in arguments of their own while deferring justification for the claim back to Jane. It also requires Jane to justify the claim if it should be challenged.¹³ Suppose Jane outed Mary by using this term. Then Jane would have to justify two parts of her claim: that Mary went to the meeting and that Mary is a lesbian. Jane's *identificatory commitment* requires her to identify which Mary and which meeting, if her audience asks. Jane's *expressive commitment* here is complex, but it includes a commitment to the viability and value of dyke-talk.

As these descriptions suggest, linguistic commitments, like other commitments, are defined largely by their associated responsibilities. Identificatory and assertional commitments each carry an associated *task responsibility*. Assertional commitments, for example, are defined by the inferences they license and their supporting justifications – again inferences. Since an expressive commitment is a commitment to the viability and value of a particular way of talking, its task responsibility requires showing that this way of talking really is viable and valuable.¹⁴ Showing viability requires showing that the expression is part of an inferential network that makes sense; showing value takes showing that the expression serves the goals of the discourse.¹⁵ What one takes the expressive commitment of words and images used in works of art to be will depend upon both what one takes the goal of artistic practice to be and what one takes to be the goal or function of the particular artwork in which the terms or images abide. If one thinks that art is a practice or set of practices for the exploration of human subjectivity or for the development of our expressive powers (or both), then one is not likely to restrict its contents in the way that Jesse Helms would have us do.

Ordinarily, an expressive commitment is supported 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. To illustrate the assertional commitments of perhaps the most derogatory of derogatory terms commonly used in the United States, we may turn to Jerry Farber's 1970 book, *The Student as Nigger*.¹⁶ To make the as-claim stick, Farber tried to show that the inferential role of the term fits the lives of students. Farber contrasts students with faculty, citing segregated dining facilities, segregated lavatory facilities, segregated sleeping facilities, and anti-miscegenation

rules as partial evidence of his analogy. Each of these features represents one assertional commitment of the term. Spelling it out, we would get a series of conditionals: "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 feature. Farber provides 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.

Sketching out the inferential role of the term by way of its assertional commitments shows viability. Sometimes viability alone shows value, since there is at least some value in the term's power to communicate so effectively. Both the Absolutist and the Reclaimer agree that the viability of a derogatory 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 undermine the value of the term; she holds that there is only one inferential role for all tokens of the term and that this role is morally and politically unacceptable. The Reclaimer holds that there are enough variations on the inferential role of the term that we are not really talking about one term with one expressive commitment, but rather several related terms with common pasts and overlapping but nonidentical presents and branching futures.

What is at stake between the Absolutist and the Reclaimer is the *expressive commitment* of the term. An expressive commitment is a commitment to the viability and value of a particular way of talking; it is a commitment to the inferential role of an expression. They agree about what the expressive commitment has been and perhaps even agree about what it currently is. Where the two camps always part company is over the future of the term. The Absolutist denies the possibility of there ever being a positive (nonderogatory) use of the term, while the Reclaimer urges that the subcommunity against which the term has been used can effect meaning change through the careful manipulation of context.

Some implications and applications

The Absolutist argument begins with the empirical claim that derogatory terms cause harm to those they label, and adds the normative claim that these harms are unjust and unnecessary. Since the assertional commitments of the term largely represent stereotypically assigned traits and relations, and since stereotypes are notori-

ously rigid, prescriptive, and difficult or impossible to undermine, the Absolutist holds that the assertional commitments of the derogatory terms are nondetachable. 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.”¹⁷ 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.

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.” Fictional discourse has great flexibility concerning what is asserted within the context and by the author, and this makes thorny the question of the status of racist language within fictional contexts. The current example shows that assertion in nonfictional cases may cement the speaker’s expressive commitment, but nonassertion does not waive it. So if we take fiction to be a huge nonassertion marker, that still does not necessarily get us off the moral hook.

Similarly, the logician’s distinction between use and mention does not help. Imagine a white supremacist linguist saying, “‘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 the mentioning does not seem to wipe it away. The claim is racist, and the mentioned term helps make it so. Although the term’s status as mentioned raises the question of whether the speaker endorses it, the question is settled by the content of the rest of the sentence. Now consider a liberal saying, “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. Although the term is *used*, the sentential context condemns its derogatory aspect and its onto-

logical presupposition. The claim is not racist, and the *used* term does not by itself render the claim racist. Of course, we would justly complain about the infelicity 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.

The Absolutist would commend Hal Prince for dropping the many utterances of ‘nigger’ from *Showboat*, but would renounce him for keeping the two that remain, no matter that they are uttered by villains. Extending this position beyond language and into images, the Absolutist would reject the depiction of the cheerful slave as if it were historical reality and would challenge the value of re-presenting that image even if it were historically accurate. To depict the subordination is to impose it again, at least symbolically, according to this view. It is to libel and demean the group so depicted.

The Reclaimer would not wholeheartedly defend the restaging of *Showboat*. The terms in the play are not reclaimed, and the community against which the terms have been used does not provide the context in which the terms are used. Although the Reclaimer argues that sometimes derogatory terms recognize an important history of degradation without endorsing its continuation, in this case the question of endorsement is not made clear. Further, the question must arise concerning the point of restaging the show. To whom is it playing? About whom is it speaking? The fact of the derogatory terms will not settle these questions, but looking at the patrons of the theaters, the class implications of ticket costs, and so on yields a clearer picture. The 1990s *Showboat* plays to largely white, largely affluent audiences, people who can afford the \$60+ per ticket and who take pleasure in seeing depictions of happy slaves. In this context, Prince’s appeal to history seems outlandish. The Reclaimer would not attack the musical simply because its derogatory terms are unreclaimed, but would join the Absolutist in arguing that it subordinates the target community.

The Reclaimer wants the target community to have jurisdiction over the expressive commitments of its own self-referring labels. The Reclaimer would roundly deny Delgado’s claim that derogatory terms are always “badges of degradation even when used between friends.” Some African-Americans use ‘nigger’ as a term of endearment, and some lesbians use ‘dyke’ as a term of pride. When so used, such reclamations may in fact change the meanings of these terms through subversive uses within the subcommunity. By giving the

subcommunity this power, the Reclaimer hopes to change the norms that settle the assertional commitments of the term, and thus hopes to change the very meaning of the term.

Reclamation depends upon the possibility of somehow severing the derogation from the term, although not upon the possibility of severing the history of derogation *via* the term.¹⁸ Here the Reclaimer directly contradicts the Absolutist's nondetachability thesis; she argues that in such contexts, some specific assertional commitments are dropped, others are relocated within the inferential network, and some stay the same but have different justifications or consequences. Generally, the Reclaimer's argument depends upon the claim that the derogation is a pragmatic effect, not a semantic aspect of the term. If the derogation *were* a semantic aspect, then there could be no nonderogatory use of the term. But there *is* a nonderogatory use: since some African-Americans use 'nigger' as an in-group term of endearment, we can see that 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.¹⁹ 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 nonderogatory uses of the term, and pragmatic factors are the means by which the derogation is detached.

The spirit of this argument is commendable and it captures our common folklore about who is entitled to try to reclaim the term, but it is unfortunately marred by confusions about the relations between semantics and pragmatics, interpretive methods and interpretations themselves, and similar issues.²⁰ Both inquiries into meaning-change in general and inquiries into the power of aesthetic contexts to facilitate deviant interpretations should find significant that group membership is crucial to determining whether a particular occurrence of a term is reclaimed. The question "Who speaks?" must be asked and answered in order to know what has been said. The Absolutist says that such terms have only one purpose – the subjugation of the person to whom they are applied – and that makes the terms uniformly morally inappropriate. The Reclaimer says that the story is not so simple. Sometimes a term is used within the oppressed group as a form of *accommodation* to the difficulty of their situation; we see this in

some of Faulkner's black characters, like Nancy in "That Evening Sun," who says again and again, "I ain't nothin' but a nigger, it ain't none of my fault."²¹ Sometimes the term is used within the target group as a way of establishing class difference within the group. And then, in a completely opposite move, it is sometimes used as a term of endearment, as in "My main nigger' becomes 'my best friend.'"²² The Reclaimer points out how context-sensitive the term is – it matters who says it, to whom, when, where, and why. An Absolutist position overlooks all this subtlety, and in the process overlooks the power of the community to allow or disallow very specific sorts of licenses.

The Reclaimer points out that to know what the sign-design 'nigger' means, one must place it in a linguistic context. The sign-design has its meaning in relation to a language and a context. The Absolutist ignores the importance of the many differences between the term's coming out of the mouths of white people as they harass black children on their way to school in South Boston, its coming out of my white middle-class mouth in the context of academic discourse like this, its coming out of Lenny Bruce's mouth along with a lot of other derogatory terms for a lot of other groups, its coming out of Richard Pryor's mouth (which it doesn't anymore), and its coming out of Ice-T's gangsta-rappin' mouth. Each of these contexts exists within a set of linguistic and social practices that shape the inferential role and the pragmatic function of the term in that context.

The Reclaimer also notes that the rehabilitation of a term or expression 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 oppressive entrenchment, and who is committed to new linguistic and social practices. Sometimes knowing is a matter of comfort or ease, and sometimes it is a matter of safety. *We need to know who speaks*. Since the unreclaimed term 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 reclaimed term is appropriate. Since there is so much at stake for those who have been targeted, in the absence of community-wide consensus and clear markers for community membership, the default interpretation will probably always be the unreclaimed term. Thus, the old bad word stays ever active.

Both Absolutists and Reclaimers 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 completely. 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, control which elements of the term operate within the context and what interpretive role they play. If so, then the Absolutist is out of business.

Even if one doubts that the Reclamation project can succeed, it is clear that the Absolutist's 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 become 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." One might think that aesthetic contexts, providing a protected space in which the question "Who speaks?" and the issue of interpretation are ever-present, would be helpful to the project of making expressive commitment explicit and would be helpful in creating a starter culture from which a new world can rise. Art may just be able to facilitate the deviant interpretations that the Reclaimer needs.

CONTENT AND POINT OF VIEW: IMAGE ABSOLUTISM

Art is a complex set of context-dependent practices. These contexts include historical, art historical, and linguistic aspects, as well as genre constraints. Each of these aspects involves complex sets of interpretive practices. The arts are also wondrously expressively innovative. Sometimes they push the limits of an established form of

expression; sometimes they create new forms, new practices. In art, the expressive medium is always an issue, at least to the artist. Further, the arts are remarkable in their consistent and often explicit development of authorial point of view. Whatever the medium or genre, the question "Who speaks?" arises whenever a work is interpreted. "Who speaks?" may ask about the poet, the novelist, the director, the painter, the sculptor, the choreographer, and so on. This question is also raised in philosophical inquiries into language used in nonaesthetic contexts, but it is obscured in modes of discourse, like science, that presume the objectivity of participating voices. In the arts, the authorial voice is rarely presumed objective; instead, the arts are often seen as practices through which we are encouraged to explore our subjectivity.

The Absolutist generally emphasizes that derogatory terms and pornography embody an objectionable point of view, and then argues that their restriction is not justified solely on grounds of the content of the expression, but primarily because of the point of view expressed. That point of view is one that advocates or *endorses* the subordination of one group of people to another. Anti-hate speech activists have tended to emphasize the content, while suggesting that the content and the point of view actually cannot be separated (they treat them as "thick terms"). On the other hand, until very recently, antiporn activists have tended to emphasize point of view, as we shall see. In her latest book, Catherine MacKinnon runs these together in the case of pornography, arguing that an image depicting subordination *just is* a subordinating image. She says that "elevation and denigration are all accomplished through meaningful symbols and communicative acts in which saying it is doing it."²³ Her arguments have strong rhetorical force – they ring out with self-proclaimed political correctness. There is a general point to be made that the Absolutist's arguments and political agendas are not really true to the goals she espouses, but here I will settle for suggesting that when such a discussion turns to aesthetic contexts these arguments especially do not make sense. The distinction between content and point of view will rarely be firm, for it is through the subtle manipulation of content that the nuances of point of view are conveyed. Even if we grant that neither the content nor the point of view represented by hate speech and pornography has aesthetic value, that is no reason to hold that there is no distinction between content and point of view, either generally or in particular. This is also no reason

to deny the distinction between content and context, or to dispute the distinction between what is said and what is done in the saying of it.

Keep in mind Foucault's point that the author was created so that some speakers could be praised and others could be blamed. The author function is a responsibility function. To be an author, to have a byline, is to be accountable for what one says. MacKinnon, echoing a long line of speech act theorists, is right that saying is a kind of doing, but the *content* of what we say does not necessarily determine *the nature of the correlated action*. Context has a big hand here. If Foucault is right, and I think he is, then ever since there have been authors, words have been recognized as deeds. An author's words are her deeds, or at least a subset of them. These words/deeds embody a certain perspective or point of view, which is more or less coherent, more or less novel, more or less socially acceptable. What deed the words constitute depends on their associated identificatory, assertional, and expressive commitments, and these must be taken in light of the broader social and linguistic practices of the author's community. What deed the words constitute, what the author is responsible for, depends almost entirely on the social and linguistic context in which they appear.

Context, content, and point of view have long played a role in feminist definitions of pornography. Helen Longino has suggested a very useful tripartite distinction between pornography and erotica, on the one hand, and moral (or political) realism, on the other. Longino defines pornography as

verbal or pictorial material which represents or describes sexual behavior that is degrading or abusive to one or more of the participants in such a way as to endorse the degradation.²⁴

This definition takes it to be *crucial* that pornography involves power relations, with a victim and a victor, a dominator and a subordinate. Gloria Steinem says of pornography that

its message is violence, dominance, and conquest. It is sex being used to reinforce some inequality, or to create one, or to tell us that pain and humiliation (ours or someone else's) are really the same as pleasure.²⁵

Erotica, on the other hand, may be sexually explicit but does not depict and endorse the degradation or abuse of anyone. Its message and purpose are not domination. Erotica tends to be characterized by loving and caring gestures between peers; erotica is nice. Erotic images may be *powerful* but they are not *about* power.

On this picture, developed and endorsed by many U.S. feminists since the 1970s, the distinction between pornography and erotica is a content-based distinction. Pornography contains acts of subordination and humiliation, erotica does not.²⁶ The distinction between pornography and moral or political realism is, on the other hand, what jurists would call a point-of-view-based distinction. Both moral realism and pornography contain depictions of degradation and abuse, but pornography *endorses* the abuse, whereas moral realism makes no such endorsement. A film like *The Accused* counts as moral realism and not porn because although it graphically depicts the abuse and degradation of a woman being gang-raped, it does not glorify the rapists. It does not portray rape as providing pleasure to the woman or as something she sought or deserved. Presenting the woman *as a person*, as a person who has been harmed and violated by what has been done to her, is already a radical step away from most pornographic images. The image of the rape scene is colored by a perspective, which is reinforced by the overall context of the film. Any film portrays a perspective, which may endorse or protest what it depicts; the less a film or image *seems* to have a perspective, the more likely it is that the perspective matches the dominant cultural ideology. The perspective of *The Accused* is noticeable largely because of its opposition to common sexist views of women's sexuality; the film clearly protests rape, and its re-presenting the rape serves that end. The difference between pornography and moral realism lies in its endorsement, in whether it advocates or protests what it represents. Such a distinction can be countenanced only within an account that respects distinctions between content and context, and between content and point of view.

This feminist taxonomy is not far from standard views of representation in art. In his classic *Languages of Art*, Nelson Goodman points out that "with a picture as with any other label, there are always two questions: what it represents (or describes) and what sort of representation (or description) it is."²⁷ In Goodman's terms, the "what it represents" of both pornography and moral realism would be "acts of sexual subordination," and the key question is "what kind of representation it is." We might join MacKinnon in calling pornography's kind "subordinating image," but part from her by still reserving a category of moral realism, for which the kind-of-representation-it-is might be described as "liberating image" or "educating image."

Consider the performances of Italian playwright and actress Franca Rame, whose radical presentations have reached many outside the

safe confines of high culture. Margaret Spillane describes Rame in this way:

In her "Tutta Casa, Letto e Chiesa," for example, Rame presents a serious, hilarious, and sometimes devastating look into the minute-to-minute limitations, responsibilities, and exasperations of a working-class woman. Her character must maintain heroic stamina to deal with the endless incursions of boss, husband, men in the street, children, and appliances upon her life. Rame has also made theater out of a horrific event; the night she was abducted from the street by far-right-wing thugs and brutally gang-raped. She spares nothing of the humiliation, the sexual slurs, the cigarette burns to her thighs. Rame has forged her own agony into a passionate social declaration: Those unspeakable details of a woman's brutalization, which a censorious society would quickly close the lid upon and bury, Rame propels into the spotlight of the stage.²⁸

If Longino is right, then we must ask *why* Rame propels these brutal facts into the spotlight. What point of view is represented here? Again, Goodman's now-standard terminology helps. Goodman distinguishes between a representation of a man (as when that gray spot in the photo is my brother), a man-picture (which may be of no one in particular but is a man-type image), and a representation of someone or something *as* a man (e.g., a sketch of my dog wearing a necktie and suit jacket, smoking a pipe). Content and point of view intermingle here. When Rame presents these brutal details, she presents them *as* brutal, *as* violations; in doing this, she presents the victim, herself, as a person, which is something that is not done in most pornography. Moral realism respects and represents the agency of the victim, even when it is thwarted agency, whereas pornography tends to lie about the agency of those subordinated, usually presenting them as thoroughly complicit in the crimes against them while overlooking the forces that generate such complicity as exists.

Recently, MacKinnon has been roundly criticized for arguing that pornography is not just a picture of a particular act that subordinates a particular woman, but that *pornography itself subordinates*. On her view, pornography is pernicious because it does more than just depict sexual subordination – it is itself a subordinating image. MacKinnon is an Absolutist about pornographic images in the same way that Critical Race Theorists are Absolutists about derogatory terms. MacKinnon calls an image *subordinating* in order to convey that there is no neutral use of the image or expression – every moment of its production and viewing promotes violence to women. It should be clear from what I have just said that one problem with MacKinnon's view is that all depictions of the sexual subordination of women are thereby

pornography, because she does not make the distinction Longino makes between porn and realism. It sounds like an ad hominem to say that if MacKinnon is right, then her own books and law review articles are or contain pornography, since she often recounts rather sordid pornographic practices and their associated images in her own texts. This is worth mentioning not in the hope of silencing MacKinnon, as some have tried to do, but to make explicit one problem that the Absolutist has in virtue of ignoring Longino's distinctions and in obfuscating the distinction between point of view and content. If there can be no nonsubordinating uses of the images or expressions, then to discuss them is to endorse them or to be saddled with at least some of their filthy residue. MacKinnon's practice shows her practical, if not theoretical, adherence to the distinction between pornography and moral realism. (This consideration may ground an argument for the collapse of Absolutism into Reclamation.)

Pornography is worth discussing at so much length in considering the relation between ethics and aesthetics because pornographic images, while generally not art, are images that many diverse members of our society take to be worth fighting against; they are images that many say should be controlled or eradicated. Pornography raises the question of the power of images. It is obvious that pornographic images can be powerful. The question is, what is it in their power to do? An image is generally taken to have power if it somehow affects our behavior. When an advertisement makes you want whiter wash or gets you to buy one brand instead of another, the images in that ad are considered powerful. If the image makes you change your attitude toward someone or something, and so alters your behavior in that regard, the image has power. Pornographic images have been said to have such effective power – they are said to *cause* violence against women.

There are two strategies for defending the claim that pornography causes violence against women. The strongest arguments against this claim maintain that no one can establish a direct link between pornography and, say, rape. Such a direct one-to-one link would require documenting many particular cases of many individual men viewing pornography and then raping. The critic argues that such a link has not been established, saying that studies that have sought to show this have been methodologically flawed or inconclusive. Without such evidence, we cannot establish that the images have the presumed causal power, and this shows that pornography is not a sufficient condition for rape. So, they would like us to conclude, we need

not fear or control these images. Without a direct link between particular viewings and particular crimes, the antiporn feminists don't seem to have a case.

Now if we cannot establish the power of images in this kind of case, in what case can we establish it? How could such a claim be shown? This question is relevant to all the visual arts – not just the lowest forms; high art offers no safe haven from the power of the image. Having forgotten about some of the more gruesome of Rubens's paintings until I was in the midst of an exhibit at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts with my three-and-a-half-year-old son, I found myself concerned about the effect of his seeing Rubens's brilliant and yet horrible *Medusa*. The image is gripping, and given its effect on me I had to wonder what its effect on my young son would be. What he said was "Wow! Look at all those snakes coming out of her head! Mommy, her eyes look kind of green – I don't think she is okay. . . . Why are all those snakes there like her hair? And how come her head is cut off? Is she awake? . . . She looks mad!" These are good questions, and their unsettling answers attest to the power of the image to disturb. *Of course* images have power to shape and reshape our thoughts, our attitudes, our deeds, but given the complexity of the human mind, the complexity of our many social, psychological, and intellectual situations, capacities, and practices, there really is little hope of finding a simple formula for what picture *X* has the power to do to viewer *Y*. What a word or image has the power to do depends both on its role in the interpreted object (or sentence) and on various features of the interpreting agent. With pornographic images, this possible multiple effect is amply illustrated by the remarkable galvanizing effect that Women Against Pornography's slide shows have had over the years. Those who see these slide shows do not usually respond with violence against women. The effects powerful images have on us depend a great deal on who we are when we see them and the context in which they are presented.

In an early work, Catherine MacKinnon emphasizes an indirect rather than a direct link between pornography and violence against women with her proclamation that "fantasy expresses ideology."²⁹ Holding that pornography is a practical tool of the ideology of sexism, the early MacKinnon argues that the images, taken in the context of the ideology of sexism, cause violence against women. Pornography is about power over women via their sexuality; it mystifies and eroticizes male dominance and female submission. Pornography promul-

gates images of women and men that fuel practices that are damaging to women.³⁰ MacKinnon's point is to establish this more indirect link between pornography and harm to women by appeal to pornography's role in supporting sexism as a force that oppresses women. She puts the images back into their broader context and then argues that, in that context, they operate as efficient causes of violence against women. In her more recent work, she builds the oppressive social structure right into the images. (The structure would be captured within whatever serves as assertional commitments in the case of images. Simply moving it from context to content begs many questions.)

Oppression is a matter of there being systematic barriers and penalties that keep one group subordinate to another; oppression is about power. It is about the power of the social system and how that system grants power to members of one group because they are members of that group and denies it to those who are not members of that group. In the United States in the late twentieth century it is fairly easy to document the systematically interrelated ways in which women are oppressed. This is not a conspiracy theory of sexism, for it neither claims nor requires any intentional establishment or explicitly intentional perpetuation of the system. The virtue of this way of thinking about oppression is that it captures the fact that when considered individually many of the forces of oppression may be trivial or innocuous, but they gain force through their connection with similar actions and practices.³¹ This account of oppression was developed by Marilyn Frye, who uses the analogy of a birdcage to illustrate her point, saying that of course if one looks only at one bar of the cage one will ask incredulously why the bird doesn't just fly away. It takes seeing the interrelated barriers – all of the bars and how they are joined – to see the bird's real situation. To see oppression, one must move from a microscopic perspective to a macroscopic one. A particular behavior counts as oppressive only against the background of a set of social practices; similar behavior in other contexts may not be oppressive at all.

This appeal to oppression gives the Absolutist's position its punch. Those who are most harmed by hate speech and pornography are also those who are historically oppressed. On classic views of censorship, like Hobbes's, the censor's job is to enforce the standards of the majority, so it is the minority that is censored. The Absolutist seeks censorship that works the other way around. In explaining why "stopping

pornographers and pornography is not censorship," Andrea Dworkin claims that

pornographers are more like the police in police states than they are like the writers in police states. They are the instruments of terror, not its victims. Intervening in a system of terror where it is vulnerable to public scrutiny to stop it is not censorship; it is the system of terror that stops speech and creates abuse and despair.³²

At issue is who has power. Dworkin, MacKinnon, and others who would ban pornography, like other Absolutists, use the moral authority of the plight of the powerless to ground a grasping of expressive control. Since the contested social and linguistic practices have served the powerful at the expense of the powerless – in fact, have helped to create and maintain the two groups – they argue that we should not see the righting of this wrong as censorship but as a substantive corrective to injustice. Dworkin's *substantive* conception of censorship takes seriously the relative power of speakers' positions and could serve as a corrective to the injustices that slip by procedural approaches, but it fails to note that new practices would emerge from this corrective that would yield but a different set of procedural injustices. Neither Dworkin nor MacKinnon can explain how her envisioned system would protect artists like Franca Rame and the makers of films like *The Accused*. Absolutism, while generally springing from such lofty moral concerns as the liberation of the oppressed, has also been used to silence the oppressed and is today being used in less than lofty ways. Similarly, although Reclamation may get good press when we look at the way blacks have reclaimed 'nigger' and lesbians have reclaimed 'dyke', we should also keep in mind that the logic of Reclamation really doesn't change much when Italian-Americans reclaim 'guido' and 'guinea' as part of a white supremacist political agenda.³³

For MacKinnon, the question of the power of images is, at bottom, the question of the legitimation of ways of life. Acknowledging that part of the power of art is its power to legitimate, we can see that this power increases exponentially when it is combined with the dominant social ideology. Robert Mapplethorpe's work, for example, is both condemned and praised for its very artistic images of gay male sadomasochistic sexuality that seem through their artistry to legitimate the acts depicted and the lifestyles associated with them.³⁴ That legitimization is what gets Jesse Helms so worked up. But what Helms fails to see is that Mapplethorpe's images just cannot have the natu-

ralized force that heterosexual images have, as long as Mapplethorpe is presenting a minority view. To someone who accepts the dominant heterosexual ideology Helms seeks to protect, Mapplethorpe's images are unlegitimated and unnatural (because *unnaturalized*). What Helms fears is that Mapplethorpe's images, and others like them, will legitimate their contents, thereby moving them away from the margins.

I said earlier that Hal Prince's willingness to eliminate gratuitous utterances of the word 'nigger' in his production of *Showboat* is a willingness to do only half the job. He will clean up the subordinating discourse but not the subordinating images. The Absolutist and the Reclaimer would surely agree that the show's musical format is inappropriate to the subject matter, especially since it depicts enslaved and mistreated Africans in the United States as responding to the cruelties of slavery with happy faces and lilting songs. The Absolutist sees no value in maintaining such a play, and, as I suggested earlier, the Reclaimer sees a problem with the play's purpose and its relation to its own history and the period it depicts. The Reclaimer might see the potential for virtually the same content to be presented nonoppressively, with changes to the context that would provide an assertion of authorial or directorial point of view. If the play were staged as a play-within-a-play, with the internal play represented as a relic of our racist past, then a condemnation of that past might help mitigate the racist content. That is, the Reclaimer can accept some racist content if the point of view expressed is opposed to that content. One obvious way to preserve content while expressing a variant point of view is through the manipulation of context; in this case the framing play does that job.

This external-frame approach to the problem is ultimately unsatisfying. Although there are good reasons for maintaining the distinction between content and point of view, some of which I have rehearsed here, the distinction is not a firm one generally and it is especially infirm in aesthetic contexts. Think, for example, about Arthur Danto's theory of artworks, according to which interpretation *makes* an object *into* an artwork.³⁵ Of course, an interpretation is not the same as a point of view, but they are kin, linked by the practices that constitute them. On Danto's view, even what is an element of an artwork is settled by the interpretation that constitutes the object as art. Danto adds that "if interpretations are what constitute artworks, there are no works without them and works are misconstituted when the interpretation is wrong. . . . The interpretation is not something

that arises outside the work: work and interpretation arise together in aesthetic consciousness."³⁶

The interpretive aspect of the ontological status of artworks, in part shown by their history of innovation, may be why artworks and aesthetic contexts have enjoyed a certain level of privilege – a degree of freedom not always extended to other expressions and situations. Mary Devereaux calls this “protected space” for artists, and argues that art deserves protected space because it

has a high social value. It makes us think twice, think differently, relive the past, imagine the future. . . . In allowing art the independence to function in these ways, we seek to protect a political good.³⁷

That political good is complex. All the features of the political good that Devereaux cites involve interpreting our lives and our situations, which we do as part of our project of self-development and political action. Art has the power to fuel our efforts at self-transformation and the transformation of the world. Such protection of aesthetic contexts would amount to refusing to abridge or restrict art on the basis of objectionable content or on the basis of objectionable point of view. That's because at least part of the point of art is to explore points of view, perspectives on content.

While few people are really willing to embrace Romanticism, at least not wholly and not publicly, this is the position that best motivates an absolute expressivist freedom. The Romantic argues that art makes new things – it opens new ontological possibilities – and it has the power to change existing things in significant ways. Refusing content-based abridgments allows us to explore all the aspects of our lives, even the ugly and the trivial, with the media we have developed. Refusing point-of-view abridgments safeguards our subjectivity, which is on some views the core of our identity. Protecting point of view protects us as we develop our subjectivity – as we become who we are. Developing a point of view is part and parcel of what it is to be a person, and we do it through the manipulation and interpretation of our words and deeds, and through the restructuring of the patterns of significance that govern our lives. Sometimes we try to appropriate a ready-made point of view – something another person has set out for us through her words and deeds. Even in this case, however, the act of appropriation involves undertaking a commitment to the basic structures of the interpretive patterns that constitute that point of view. That undertaking of the commitment makes the point of view one's own, whether one created it or not. The gift

that those who develop new interpretive models and new points of view give to others is just this potential for eclecticism – for being able to appropriate, recombine, and put together an interpretive structure and a point of view without having to start from scratch.

Consider the unsettling image of Bigger Thomas. Wright felt censored by two opposite social forces denying the value of the image. Against the background of white culture, Wright felt that writing Bigger would be a reinforcement of whites' claims of supremacy. So he ought not do it on social justice grounds. Against the background of black middle-class culture, writing Bigger would be a denial of black middle-class achievement and a reinforcement of the claim of black inferiority. So, again, he ought not do it, this time on grounds of honesty and race solidarity. A different kind of honesty – an honesty to a different black experience – prevailed for Wright. Remember what Wright says about why he ultimately wrote about the politically dangerous Bigger Thomas:

But Bigger won over all these claims; . . . I felt with all my being that he was more important than what any person, white or black, would say or try to make of him, more important than any political analysis designed to explain or deny him, more important even, than my own sense of fear, shame, and diffidence.³⁸

How could this fictional character win out over all the very real needs of these very real people? Well, Bigger is really only partly fictional. Writing Bigger was an act of creation but it was also an act of re-presentation that could be called “faithful portrayal” in Goodman's sense. In describing faithful portrayal as the conveying of “a person known and distilled from a variety of experiences,”³⁹ Goodman acknowledges the possibility of the faithful portrayal of someone who does not actually exist; he allows for the possibility of *creative* faithful portrayal. That is just what Wright saw himself doing in writing Bigger Thomas. That is also why James Baldwin, like Nathan McCall, was grateful to Wright. Baldwin said, “Growing up in a certain kind of poverty is growing up in a certain kind of silence”; the basic elements of your life are unnamable because “no one corroborates it. Reality becomes unreal because no one experiences it but you.” Wright's *Native Son* was a faithful portrayal of a way of life, a condition of life, that had been invisible to and invalidated by the world, especially the reading world, until he wrote. Writing Bigger Thomas was a brave and radical act, which Baldwin did not see as retarding the chances for black liberation despite the disdain of the black middle class and the joys of the white racists. Baldwin says:

"Life was made bearable by Richard Wright's testimony. When circumstances are made real by another's testimony, it becomes possible to envision change."⁴⁰

If the Absolutist is right that there is no way for an artist to distance herself from the derogation carried by these terms and images, and yet if these terms and images are somehow necessary to convey the form of life and the artistic message she seeks to convey, as they are to Franca Rame, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Grace Paley, William Faulkner, Alice Walker, and many, many others, then the radical artist is stuck with a double bind. She is stuck with the double bind of being forced by her sense of aesthetic honesty to portray the form of life faithfully (using the derogatory terms, portraying the derogation and degradation) while undermining her condemnatory point of view through her inclusion of these terms. She must choose between portraying faithfully and silencing herself.

If the Reclaimer is right, then the condemnatory point of view and the manipulation of context can undermine the derogatory expressive commitments of these terms and images. That these derogations have occurred would not be contested, but that the author/artist questions or condemns them would be on the record, and what their expressive and assertional structure and force are would be disclosed in a new light.

The power of our words and images to make things real by naming them is the heart of the issue. Wright's point about Bigger's importance is kin to William Gass's claim that works of art are socially important because "they insist more than most on their own reality; because of the absolute way in which they exist."⁴¹ For Gass, a work of art has a lasting social value not because of its interpretations, but because of what it is: works of art are originals, like we are, and should be lived with and loved for their own sakes. Gass writes:

We live, most of us, amidst lies, deceits, and confusions. A work of art may not utter the truth, but it must be honest. It may champion a cause we deplore, but unlike Milton's Satan, it must in itself be noble; it must be *all there*. Works of art confront us the way few people dare to: completely, openly, at once. They construct, they comprise, our experience; they do not deny or destroy it; and they shame us, we fall so short of the quality of their Being.

Here we see Gass at his most unabashedly aestheticist. Gass may be right about the "utterness" of art (at least great art); what he is wrong about is us. We are more like art and art is more like us than Gass allows. We do live "amidst lies, deceits, and confusions," but it is

also true that most people are much more transparent than they think. Like artworks, we are complex, but not inscrutable. Even if some works of art do have a higher quality of being than some or even many people, it does not follow that art by its very nature is superior in being to people by their nature. At bottom, works of art and people are very much alike: a few great, a few terrible, and most in between. As David Luban has pointed out, this analogy goes further: just as we may forgive but not forget or ignore the serious moral faults of people we love, we may also require a measure of forgiveness with respect to morally flawed works of art.

Stravinsky, speaking of *Monostatos* and the Moor, refers to "their absurdity *apart from their music*." Their music is the virtue that we love, and while it cannot and must not lead us to excuse racism, the possibility remains of forgiveness. I suspect that our appreciation of a great deal more art depends on forgiveness than we might like to think.⁴²

Luban suggests that we should condone nothing but forgive much. The Absolutist thinks there is no room for forgiveness when it comes to either intentional or inadvertent promulgation of racist, sexist, and other forms of hate. There is a substantive issue here: what is forgivable and what is not?

Words and images do have the power to make something *seem* real, and sometimes seeming is the first step toward *being*. The words and images alone do not carry or convey the danger to our lives; ignoring context is something we do at our own peril. Social practices, including our linguistic (inferential) practices, practices of aesthetic interpretation, practices of respect and disrespect toward others, are what make the terms and images subordinating. Change these practices and you change the power of the expressions. This power to create is why art deserves special expressivist freedoms. Why should art be so special? What makes it deserve such expressive freedoms, when other arenas of our lives are losing them more and more? Here we must face our conflicting conceptions of art's extreme power and its utter uselessness. Consider the fact that the most widespread and effective legal intervention in the United States during this century has been in our schools and our workplaces; these are arenas in which opportunities must be protected, because they have an impact on the individual's long- and short-term prospects for survival and success. Does art have such an impact? It would be a stretch to put art and education or art and employment on equal footing, even though it is no stretch to argue that a sound education includes solid arts programs or that the best forms of employment allow the worker

creative growth through her work. Considering consequences, it may in fact be art's initial ineffectiveness that makes it a great candidate for expressivist protection. It takes a confluence of factors for the interpretations artists create to actually catch on, to actually have an influence. Let artists create, and let a lot of art fall fallow, but protect the failures as well as the successes. Given the role of art in our culture, we need not constrain art the way we need to constrain employers and school systems. The artist is our model of a human creator and, in making new things, teaches us our own power. So in the end, I suggest that it is absolutely crucial to safeguard the power to create new things and, with them, new forms of interpretation. That is what art is and does for us.

The Absolutist does us a favor by challenging the expressive commitments of some of the terms in our collective repertoires, demanding that we defend them or eliminate them. The Absolutist's challenge spurs us to consider just what is at stake when we create new works, to make explicit our expressive commitments and think of ways to change them. Radical writers and artists do this all the time, without the help of the theory I have articulated. Against the Absolutist, I am suggesting that we listen to these voices and think about their images, so that we can see the power of their creative recasting of these terms and images. At issue is whether a politically just social ontology should be achieved by controlling the expressive process and product, or by other means. The analysis presented here suggests we look to other means. The Absolutist's challenge should help us see more clearly what is at stake in our forms of expression; she goads us into making the politics of discourse and the politics of imagery explicit. Such explicitation can help us to make our own decisions about what is acceptable and what is not, what is forgivable, and what is not. She makes it clear that we need to take responsibility for our expressive commitments. Let us thank her for that, while not acceding to her demand that we silence even those who try to overcome by other means.

Notes

This essay was first presented at the University of Maryland Philosophy Department's 1994 D. C. Williams conference entitled "Aesthetics and Ethics." My thanks to the audience on that occasion, and especially to David Luban for his insightful comments. My warmest thanks to Chico D. Colvard for his enthusiastic and reliable research assistance.

1. Richard Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," in *Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature*, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: Penguin, 1968), 551-3.
2. Nathan McCall, *Makes Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man in America* (New York: Random House, 1994), 157, 158.
3. This account has been developed more fully in my "Derogatory Terms: Racism, Sexism, and the Inferential Role Theory of Meaning," in *Language and Liberation: Feminism, Philosophy and Language*, ed. Kelly Oliver and Christina Hendricks (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1997).
4. This position is held by Critical Race Theorists like Delgado, Matsuda, Lawrence, and Crenshaw, in *Words That Wound*, ed. Richard Delgado et al. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993), and it is also held by antipornography activists like Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. See MacKinnon's *Only Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), and, with Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography and Civil Rights: A New Day for Women's Equality* (Minneapolis: Organizing Against Pornography, 1988), and Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979, 1980, 1981).
5. 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 does not. For more on the importance of social backup, see Lynne Tirrell, "Definition and Power," *Hypatia* 8, no. 4 (1993): 1-34.
6. 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; emphasis added.
7. *Ibid.*, 77.
8. James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," in *Black Voices*, ed. Chapman, 320.
9. James Snead, *Figures of Division: William Faulkner's Major Novels* (London: Methuen, 1986), xiv.
10. Tom Fennel, "Navigating Troubled Waters," *MacLeans*, November 1993, 72.
11. *Ibid.*
12. This sort of view is played out on many different fields: it is seen in Hempel's discussion of the importance of nonblack nonravens 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* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992). For a development of an inferential role theory of meaning, see Robert B. Brandom's "Asserting," *Nous* 4 (November 1983): 637-50. This account is clearest in the case of assertion, although

- it can easily accommodate other sorts of speech acts. Portions of the next two sections are condensed from my "Derogatory Terms."
13. 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 as with all social practices there are normally a few free riders and general noncooperators. When someone generally shirks her linguistic responsibilities, we tend to treat her as an unreliable interlocutor.
 14. 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. When Romeo says, "But soft, what light through yonder windows 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. See Lynne Tirrell, "Extending: The Structure of Metaphor," *Nous* 23 (March 1989): 17–34.
 15. Sometimes that goal is seeking truth, sometimes it is seeking power, and often it is a combination of these. 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.
 16. Jerry Farber, "The Student as Nigger," in *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).
 17. Richard Delgado, "Words That Wound: A Tort Action for Racial Insults, Epithets, and Name-Calling," in *Words That Wound*, 107; see also 94 and 109–110. Delgado uses 'connotation' here and elsewhere in his article colloquially rather than technically; 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 usual sort of dictionary meaning, while 'denotation' refers to the objects of reference for the term.) For more about this argument, see my "Derogatory Terms."
 18. 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," forthcoming).
 19. Not all uses of the term by African-Americans will effect the detachment.
 20. For a more detailed account of the weaknesses of this argument, see my "Derogatory Terms."
 21. William Faulkner, "That Evening Sun," in *Major American Short Stories*, ed. A. Walton Litz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 576–90. 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.)
 22. Johnetta Cole to Mary Catherine Bateson, in Bateson, *Composing a Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), 44.
 23. MacKinnon, *Only Words*, 13. She lists all performatives: signs saying "Whites Only" or "Help Wanted – Male" or speech acts like "You're fired."
 24. Helen E. Longino, "Pornography, Oppression and Freedom: A Closer Look," in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: Morrow, 1980), 40–54. Even though this definition leaves room for depictions of victims who are not women, it is important to note that in most pornography the actual victim depicted is a woman, and in many cases the victim is functionally a woman.
 25. Gloria Steinem, "Erotica and Pornography: A Clear and Present Difference," in *Take Back the Night*, ed. Lederer, 37.
 26. The obvious question is: what is an act of subordination and humiliation? There are many clear-cut cases, but critics tend to focus on the more difficult ones to urge us to think that the determination of content is itself the product of a point of view, and thus they urge us to abandon this distinction. The distinction may not be precise, and it may not be exclusive and exhaustive, but it serves an important heuristic purpose.
 27. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 31.
 28. Margaret Spillane, "The Culture of Narcissism," *Nation*, December 10, 1990. Reprinted in *Culture Wars*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: Free Press, 1992), 305–6.
 29. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, 149.
 30. We may add that it damages men too, by perverting their sexuality in a way that makes whole healthy relationships impossible. Such damage pales beside the damage to women, but it is real nonetheless and helps explain why men should resist and undermine pornography as well.
 31. Marilyn Frye, "Oppression" and other papers, in *The Politics of Reality* (Trumansberg, NY: Crossing Press, 1983).
 32. Andrea Dworkin, "After the Male Flood: Censorship, Pornography, and Equality," in *Letters from a War Zone* (New York: Dutton, 1989), 264.

33. Maria Lugones pointed this out to me in conversation at the Midwest Society for Women in Philosophy, Minneapolis, 1994.
34. Obviously not all gay men are sadomasochistic, and one must worry that the talk of lifestyles here, even pluralized, involves stereotyping.
35. Danto says, for example, that "an object is an artwork at all only in relation to an interpretation." Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 44.
36. *Ibid.*, 45.
37. Mary Devereaux, "Protected Space: Politics, Censorship, and the Arts," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51, No. 2 (1993): 214.
38. Richard Wright, *Black Voices*, ed. Chapman, 553.
39. Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 20.
40. Spillane, "Culture of Narcissism," 304.
41. William Gass, "The Artist and Society," in *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (Boston: Godine, 1958), 276–88.
42. David Luban, unpublished comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

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