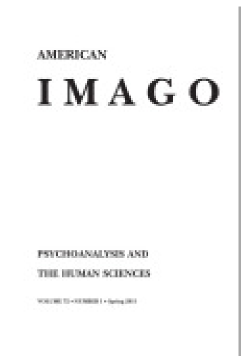
View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk
brought to you by CORE
provided by UT Digital Repository

PROJECT MUSE®

The Secret Joys of Antiracist Pedagogy: Huckleberry Finn in the Classroom

Phillip Barrish



American Imago, Volume 59, Number 2, Summer 2002, pp. 117-139 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/aim.2002.0008

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/aim/summary/v059/59.2barrish.html

Access provided by The University Of Texas at Austin, General Libraries (18 Jun 2015 18:35 GMT)

PHILLIP BARRISH

The Secret Joys of Antiracist Pedagogy: *Huckleberry Finn* in the Classroom

> "Never say 'nigger' again. *Never* have I heard this word spoken by a white person—or a black one, for that matter—without feeling terribly angry and uncomfortable. Too much history and hostility are conjured up by this word. . . . I don't care how you use it. I don't care if you're quoting some horrible white racist you abhor—*do not say it,* and confront those white people who do."
>
> —M. Garlinda Burton, *Never Say Nigger Again!*

> "Before change is possible, that is, we need to recognize how we get our enjoyment."
>
> —Dennis Foster, *Sublime Enjoyment*

This essay explores what I believe to be an unavoidable paradox encountered by white liberal professors who set out to practice antiracist pedagogy in mostly, but not entirely, white classrooms. The paradox derives from the inevitability of the professors' (and, often, their students') citing, and thus in a sense performing, the blatantly racist past—most emblematically, the racist past compressed within the word "nigger"—even while trying to move beyond its influence. This performative citing of the past occurs within a purportedly antiracist psychic and socioinstitutional "present," but one that retains its identity *as* antiracist by turning away from its own dependence upon racial hierarchies and exclusions.

Among other aims, I hope here to offer a new purchase on certain oft-recognized dilemmas involved in teaching Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), a brilliant and seminal American novel in which the word "nigger" appears over 200 times. To do so, I investigate several implications of a rupture between the nonracist space usually presumed within *Huck Finn* classrooms and the realities that both undergird and

American Imago, Vol. 59, No. 2, 117–139. © 2002 by The Johns Hopkins University Press

permeate that educational space. At moments, this break comes perilously close to dissolving the presumed reasons for being of a liberal arts classroom. I will suggest, however, that the moments in which such a dissolution most immediately impends—often when the word "nigger" is spoken by a white person—can also produce an inarticulate, even unconscious excitement, at least for the professor who is supposed to guarantee the meaning and validity of the educational process. Drawing on the Lacanian concept of *jouissance*, I argue that this excitement is experienced by the psyche as overwhelming and unmanageable. In the latter portions of this essay, I analyze some of my own "symptomatic" experiences teaching *Huck Finn*, as well as other evidence, to suggest that one way this excitement can be channeled is through fantasied scenarios of domination and victimization.

Impossible Antiracism

I will begin exploring the paradoxical inevitability of white liberal teachers' citing the racist past even while trying to move beyond it through a consideration of M. Garlinda Burton's *Never Say Nigger Again! An Antiracism Guide for White Liberals* (1994). Burton, who is regional director of the United Methodist News Service, identifies herself as an African-American working in a very liberal but predominantly white environment. Characterizing her text as a "handbook, a question-and-answer book, a guidebook," Burton addresses an audience of "white people who think they don't need a book on racism" (2). She offers many cogent insights about liberal white racism, but I will focus here on her title as well as the genre of her work.

First, how is Burton's title, with its exclamation point, to be understood? Should it be construed as an injunction? "*Never* say nigger again!" Or should it, rather, be taken as a promise of self-help? "Buy this book, follow its guided steps, and you will never say nigger again—*guaranteed*!" The latter reading would cast saying "nigger" as an unfortunate addiction or compulsion, parallel to, say, overeating or falling in love

with unsuitable partners. In this therapeutic paradigm, the addictive practices in question may provide acute enjoyment in response to a deeply felt need in the short term, but they can never lead to satisfaction. Reading the title as a Franklinesque promise of the self-improvement to be achieved if one has the necessary discipline is supported not only by Burton's description of the book as a "guide" but also by its bulleted and numbered lists. These provide questions to ask oneself, do's and don'ts, and strategies for various social situations (how to handle an older relative who uses racial slurs, for instance).

On the other hand, the discursive passage inside the book from which the title's main phrase is drawn supports the other possible interpretation—that is, as a strict Thou Shalt Not commandment, which firmly, even angrily, underlines that never means *never*, no matter what. The phrase appears, in bolded type, as number four on a list of rules that Burton asks white people to remember "When You're Talking about *Us*":

> **4 Never say "nigger" again.** *Never* have I heard this word spoken by a white person—or a black one, for that matter—without feeling terribly angry and uncomfortable. Too much history and hostility are conjured up by this word. . . . I don't care how you use it. I don't care if you're quoting some horrible white racist you abhor—*do not say it*, and confront those white people who do. Say "the n-word" or "a racial slur" if you have to; it may sound silly or stilted, but you may save a relationship with an African-American friend or colleague. If a black friend says she doesn't mind you saying it, she's lying. (33–34; italics in original)

Although it may seem to be an overly easy deconstructive point, it is nonetheless worth noting the irony that Burton's very articulation of this rule entails breaking her own prohibition. Despite her insistence that no one, white or black, should *ever* say "this word," Burton's book repeats it at least five times.

Indeed, "nigger" appears as the bolded heading of the quoted paragraph, in the table of contents, on the title page, on the back cover, and in a large, prominent typeface on the

front cover. Any potential purchaser or reader must voice the word to him- or herself when encountering the book. In requesting it through Inter-Library Loan, I myself had to cite the title on a form; and had I wanted to obtain the book immediately, I would have had to call area bookstores, requiring me to speak the forbidden word into the phone.

This double bind—one should never say the "n-word," yet articulating this "never" involves citing and reciting the word both to oneself and to others—is more than an inconsequential language game. Like an evil incantation that always works, no matter where, how, or by whom it is spoken, it performatively "conjure[s] up" a "history and hostility" that are "too much," overwhelming any and all local contexts.[1] Moreover, Burton herself is sufficiently concerned about the citation paradox to try to head it off when she italicizes "*do not say it*" even if quoting "some horrible white racist" with abhorrence. Yet, as we have seen, she finds it impossible not to repeat the word herself, and her book's very presence requires her target audience to repeat it as well.[2]

Thus, the necessity of citing the word "nigger" inserts the antiracist white speaker into an aporia, which toes the breaking point of a fundamental fracture.[3] One is caught between spaces (psychic as well as socio-institutional) that nurture a notion of progress in American race relations and the pervasive and persistent realities that still inform and even help to shape those same spaces. The liberal ideal of progress holds that America's racial problems are not yet (and may never be) fully resolved, but they have historically improved and will continue to do so, even if progress is always halting and uneven. In this view, despite the continuing inequalities of the 1990s, race relations in that decade were much closer to American ideals of democracy and justice than they were a century earlier, when systemic lynchings, Jim Crow segregation, and myriad other forms of economic and political oppression were directed against African-Americans.

I am not arguing against this balanced and commonsense idea of progress, which I largely share. But I do maintain that this idea must strive to exclude—even though it finds itself constitutively unable to do so—certain psychic and material

realities that threaten to deconstruct it. Moreover, to walk the knife's edge of this unresolvable tension can yield a vertiginous enjoyment, or *jouissance*, to white liberals.

Jouissance and the Real

Although sometimes associated with sexual ecstasy, the elusive Lacanian term *jouissance* has been suggestively explicated by Joan Copjec (1994, 122–23) as "a pleasure in the real." In Lacanian theory, the "real" is by no means synonymous with "reality." The "real" comprises that which cannot be assimilated within—but also can never fully be *denied* or *excluded* by—a given system of "reality," a structured "symbolic order." Although the real cannot "fit" within our symbolic (articulable) reality, neither does it have a free-standing existence outside of or beyond the order of reality. Rather, the "real" marks the *internal* limit of a given system of reality and prevents it from ever achieving full consistency and transparency.

As a "pleasure in the real," *jouissance* does not connote the joy of discovering or comprehending some aspect of reality. Rather than marking knowledge or understanding, *jouissance* for Copjec arises "precisely there where we do *not* know. . . . *Jouissance* is a kind of 'secondary gain' obtained where knowledge fails" (1994, 123). The intensity of *jouissance* is stimulated when a not quite comprehensible or assimilable "real" and the normal reality that we *can* comprehend and symbolize collide. The sensation of *jouissance* at once registers that we have reached an internal seam where language and understanding fail, and compensates us for that failure. Dennis Foster (1997) differentiates the "sublime enjoyment" of *jouissance* from garden-variety pleasures: "I use the term to distinguish an experience of intensity, of a loss of ego control and boundaries (which may be felt as horror or delight), from those 'pleasures' of satisfaction, of ego gratification" (161).

Two recent news events, one local to the University of Texas at Austin (where I teach) and the other a story that received national coverage, serve to illustrate my contention

that within the symbolic reality of white liberalism the word "nigger" often functions as the trigger for just the kind of "intensity" that Foster describes. Together, these two events suggest that within white liberal culture the word acts as a do-not-touch button that nonetheless keeps getting pressed. Its activation releases sensations of "horror or delight" due to a loss of control and breaking of bounds. The *jouissance* provoked by white liberal speakings of "nigger," however, is quickly repackaged by the media into a more readily consumable masochistic scene of fantasied white male suffering.

"Diversity" Events

During the "diversity" portion of a new-employee orientation in 1999, the University of Texas's white Director of Housing and Food Services commented, "When I worked up North, I heard 'nigger' as often or more than I do down here." An assistant later explained that her boss had used the word as an "example." Several offended employees, however, took the word to have been uttered in retaliation against an African-American cook whom, just moments before, the administrator had noticed reading a newspaper while he was speaking. The majority of lower-ranking housing and food-service workers at the University are African-American or Latino. The administrator apologized the next day for any unintended offense caused by his having spoken the word, emphasizing his personal and professional stand against racism as shown by a "10-Point Organizational Diversity Plan" implemented under his supervision. He conceded in somewhat frustrated disappointment that, in future, "I won't be as strong with my message" (Grisales 1999, 1A).

Barely a week before the above incident, the District of Columbia's African-American mayor made national headlines by accepting the resignation under pressure of a white city official who had used the word "niggardly" during a budget discussion with a black aide. This white official, the director of the Office of the Public Advocate, had very strong liberal credentials and was the only openly gay person in the District

administration. He was later rehired. Here, the incident did not revolve around whether a racial slur had been spoken with hostile intent, as at the University of Texas event. Instead, the conflict was over whether a racial slur had been uttered at all. As many commentators hastened to point out, the Old English derivation of "niggardly" appears to be entirely separate from the etymology of "nigger," which goes back to the Latin "*niger*," or black. If the two words are unrelated both etymologically and semantically, can the very sound of "niggardly" nonetheless function as a performative speaking of the racial slur?

It is impossible at this distance to judge what conscious or unconscious intentions may have motivated the white aide's choice of words in Washington, just as we cannot be certain whether the administrator in Austin intended his use of the epithet "nigger" to serve antiracist or racist purposes. (Of course, there is always the possibility that the administrator "intended" both meanings at the same time, with one intention being more conscious than the other.) In both of these incidents, however, a white speaker was at some level failing to grasp that the liberal space in which he presumably *thought* he was using a particular word was surrounded and permeated by a "real" that rendered that space incoherent.

At the University of Texas's "diversity" event, the white administrator—by articulating his ten-point organizational plan, by sponsoring the session at which he spoke, and perhaps even by choosing the "example" that he did—was operating within a commitment to keep moving forward on racial matters. Those African-American listeners who were offended by his language no doubt recognized these laudable intentions. Yet the listeners also attended to another structure traversing, even propping up, this progressive framework—that is, the historically familiar scene of a white boss disciplining workers of color (here an African-American male for *reading*, no less).[4] The administrator's utterance of "nigger" marked the moment at which the listeners became unable or unwilling any longer to cooperate in overlooking the disjunction between the official context and the event's "real" racial structure.

This "real" ensured that, at least from one vantage point, the word performatively "meant" racist insult. One might

think that the administrator should have been more aware of the asymmetries of power that complicated (to say the least) his intentions to symbolize and enact the Division of Housing and Food Service's opposition to racism. Yet no matter how hard he tried, it was not possible for this speaker fully to take the permeating racial real into account—to fit its constraints successfully into his liberal vision of how we must all work together to overcome the evil of racism.

The incidents at the University of Texas and in the District of Columbia together underscore the almost uncanny inescapability in white liberal discourse of the word "nigger" and all that it conjures up. In a further definition of the "real," Foster (1997) says that it "names some stain, an obscurity in every representation. . . . It is what can be neither understood nor ignored and therefore is never a source of satisfaction" (12). America's continuing history of racist violence and injustice constitutes an ever-present real (see Spillers 1997; Lane 1998a). At unpredictable moments, this real will "stain," clog, or implode liberal representation in ways that do not yield the "satisfaction" of understanding, let alone resolution.

But did the speakers in either of these incidents derive *jouissance*—a "surplus of enjoyment"—from uttering the words that revealed an incoherence in the positions from which they spoke? Who can say? Rather than speculate about private sensations, I think it is more instructive to ponder the national press response to the forced resignation of David Howard, the D.C. official. This will enable us to elucidate the social and psychological dynamics at play in texts by several commentators who took avowedly "antiracist" positions on the eruption that stained the liberal space inside Howard's office.

Howard reportedly said, "I will have to be *niggardly* with this fund because it's not going to be a lot of money," during a budgeting dispute with an African-American aide. The latter heard him as having said "nigger" and angrily left the meeting. After the aide complained to Mayor Anthony Williams, Williams met with Howard and accepted his resignation. Several days later, Howard was rehired. Many journalists and public figures disagreed with the mayor's initial termination of Howard's employment. ("Seems to me the mayor has been

niggardly in his judgment on this issue," then NAACP chair Julian Bond wryly told the Associated Press.) By contrast, others concurred with Howard himself, who admitted that he had "used poor judgment in using that word" and who told the *Washington Post* that he hoped his own mistake would serve as "a signal flag to all of us" (Weeks 1999, C1). But I have not come upon even one mainstream editorial page that echoes Howard's own assessment. On the contrary, most editorials and columnists blame the black mayor for having accepted Howard's resignation.

Interestingly, outrage has been expressed (Parker 1999) not only on behalf of David Howard but on behalf of the word "niggardly" itself, which has a "long-honored" history of usage by canonical British writers from Shakespeare to Dickens. The editors of the *Boston Globe*, for example, found it "sad to think that a brave word could die from disuse because of ignorance compounded by hair-trigger sensitivities" (Editorial 1999b, A18) In a syndicated column from the same paper, conservative libertarian white columnist Jeff Jacoby saw the need to defend both Howard and the "venerable English word" against "other people's ignorance of English" (1999, A15). For Jacoby, Howard had been "thrown to the wolves." Reporting that one of Howard's "black friends" had described him to the *Washington Post* as "the most gentle, purest guy you'd ever want to meet," Jacoby emphasized that "the victims of mindless racial resentment so often are." In his final paragraph, Jacoby admonished his readers that "people everywhere are laughing about this incident. But at the heart of it is the trashing of a decent man, and there's nothing funny about his pain."

The racist and colonialist fantasy into which Jacoby inserts the District of Columbia incident is not difficult to recognize. The "purest" white "gentle" man and the "venerable English" language have both been mindlessly attacked by dark-skinned "wolves" aligned with "ignorance" and, as Jacoby adds, "idiocy." An editorial in the *Atlanta Constitution* summons the same imagery of a bestial attack when it says that those responsible for Howard's resignation were engaged in "a peculiar and predatory form of race-baiting" (Editorial 1999a). Jacoby himself identifies with the "victim." Immediately prior to bringing

forward Howard's black friend as a character witness on his behalf, Jacoby recounts a time when he was himself "denounce[d] as a racist" because he revealed that "the Jacoby family cat" is named Jemima ("—because the cat is named Jemima," he repeats in exaggerated disbelief).

The *Jouissance* of White Male Victimhood

Jacoby's vision of the D.C. event—the essentials of which are shared (albeit in less vivid language) by several other newspaper columns and editorials (Editorial 1999c; Feagler 1999; Neuharth 1999)—demeans the offended African-American listener as both subhuman and murderously dangerous. (The S.A.T. strikes again: David Howard told a *New York Times* reporter that he learned the word "niggardly" as a junior in high school when preparing for the exam.) Yet interwoven with racist aggressivity, a powerful masochistic impulse also animates Jacoby's vision of the event. His column moves with increasing fervor towards the "pain" that is its last word and in which Jacoby himself, identifying with the wounded Howard, seems to luxuriate. Moreover, the public humiliation involved in "trashing" a decent man is amplified by a large circle of imagined laughing spectators.

In *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture,* David Savran (1998) has traced the postwar "ascendancy of a new and powerful figure in U.S. culture: the white male as victim" (4). Savran's analysis ranges from hipsters of the 1950s to far-right militias of the 1990s. Prominent throughout this terrain, Savran demonstrates, are "masochistic fantasies" of white masculinity. These fantasies have arisen, he argues, largely in response to relatively modest economic and political advances achieved by white women and minorities since World War II and to the decline since the 1970s in the real wages of working-class and lower middle-class white men. For Savran, white men who imagine themselves as suffering victims ultimately do so as part of a strategy by which they seek to retain their "cultural hegemony" and their "enormous economic, political, and social power" (37).

Savran's description of white-male-as-victim fantasies provides an explanatory context for the mainstream reactions to Howard's losing his job for having said "niggardly." To defend the "venerable" English language against the "ignorance" of racial others is also to defend a cultural hegemony. To emphasize the tragedy of Howard's resignation and, moreover, to position the D.C. mayor as the stupidly culpable agent is implicitly to undercut African-Americans who supervise white professionals. Yet what about the perverse *pleasure* of masochism? Is it connected to *jouissance*? Do the scenarios of white male pain provoked by the D.C. event derive their energy from the overwhelming excitement that, as I have argued, can arise in the disjunction between liberal reality and an underlying racist real?

When recalling his own experience as a "decent man" victimized by "mindless" charges of racism, Jacoby mentions that the name of his cat, for which he was attacked as a racist, came up in a column that he wrote criticizing the motor voter law. Trying to show the potential for abuse in a system that allows people to register to vote when renewing their driver's licenses, Jacoby claimed that he had succeeded in registering his cat Jemima as a voter in three states. Angry readers, Jacoby relates in a tone of injured innocence, "called and wrote to denounce me as a racist—because the cat is named Jemima."

Although Jacoby does not say so, the motor voter law aimed to make voter registration more accessible to working-class and especially minority citizens. So Jacoby's attempt to ridicule this law was also an indirect attack on an attempt to increase African-Americans' access to the franchise. The "real" structure of Jacoby's registering "Jemima" to vote included the racial dynamics of the debate about the motor voter law. It also included the history, going back to Reconstruction, of the deployment of scorn and demeaning animal imagery against African-Americans' civic aspirations. (See, for example, *The Birth of a Nation.*) Now, whatever conscious awareness Jacoby may have had about the real context in which he first disclosed his cat's name (and in this case I suspect a relatively high degree of consciousness), that context could not be acknowledged in a column bemoaning the fate of a "pure" white man,

whether David Howard or Jacoby himself, trashed by mindless resentment.

Jacoby's column is thus necessarily fractured between its representations of white male innocence and its participation in a continuing history of white racist disenfranchisement of African-Americans. The friction between these two aspects of the column—between its would-be "symbolic" meanings and its unacknowledged "real"—generates an explosive charge or *jouissance* that is, I suggest, displaced into the masochistic fantasy of white male "pain" with which Jacoby concludes. Fantasies of pain and humiliation can be disturbing. But as scenes that are freestanding and coherent, and possess the virtue of psychic familiarity, they are easier to manage than the more traumatic dissolutions adumbrated by *jouissance*.[5]

Huck Finn and the Antiracist Teacher's Enjoyment

An ever-growing body of secondary literature focuses on the pedagogical challenges posed by the more than 200 appearances of the word "nigger" in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Mark Twain's novel "is generally acknowledged as the literary work most frequently taught in U.S. colleges and high schools," but struggles continue over how best to deal with the racial epithet that appears on almost every page (Leonard 1999, 1). In contrast to the aversion evinced by some students, parents, and secondary-school teachers, the currently dominant approach to the problem among literary scholars is to treat the word as an especially loaded focal point for a more general question about Twain's text: "Does *Huckleberry Finn* Combat or Reinforce Racist Attitudes?" (see Graff and Phelan 1995). However, this seemingly even-handed question is something of a set-up, since the great majority of critics will answer that, taken as a whole, *Huck Finn* does indeed "combat racist attitudes." Those who argue that Twain's novel serves primarily to "reinforce racist attitudes" are far fewer and tend not to consider themselves primarily as academics (see Smiley 1996; Lester 1992; Wallace 1992).

Many scholars (Smith 1992; Kaplan 1995; Fishkin 1993, 1996) go so far as to view Twain's novel as an unambiguous

and uniquely powerful indictment of a racist culture. They see Twain's use of "nigger" as always occurring, in effect, within ironic quotation marks. They argue that he revels in the word not merely out of historical verisimilitude but because he wishes to undercut or hollow out late-nineteenth-century stereotypes. The task of the teacher of *Huckleberry Finn* then becomes to help students recognize the implicit quotation marks around the offensive word and to understand the subversive work that they perform. As Jonathan Arac (1997) has pointed out, however, there is no guarantee that readers will "get" Twain's supposed irony (33). Nor is there any certainty that the appearances of "nigger" in the text will, or even *should*, be taken as synecdoches for Twain's larger "message" regarding race and racism.

Arac traces the fascinating process by which *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* achieved "hypercanonicity" in the contexts of the Cold War and the Civil Rights movement. In the 1950s and '60s, Twain's novel came to be revered as *the* literary expression of America's democratic spirit both in the academy and in liberal culture generally. From the 1950s on, Arac shows, *Huck Finn* has been vigorously defended by scholars and editorialists alike against any charges that it might function to support racism or racist values, in the classroom or anywhere else.

Among other effects of *Huck Finn*'s hypercanonization, Arac (1997) believes that the widespread "idolatry" of the book "has served, and—remarkably—continues to serve, as an excuse for well-meaning white people to use the term *nigger* with the good conscience that comes from believing that their usage is sanctioned by their idol . . . and is made safe by the technique of irony" (16). Thus, "even though *Huckleberry Finn* is claimed as a talisman of racially progressive thought and action, one of its major effects is actually to license and authorize the continued honored circulation of a term that is both explosive and degrading" (28). Arac documents, for example, how many writers have praised the humanity Twain gives to "Nigger Jim" despite the fact that this offensive sobriquet nowhere appears in the novel itself (24–28).

As a teacher, I hope that my own approach to the novel has stopped short of idolatry. But when it comes to the word

"nigger" I have tended to resort to the Twain-uses-it-in-ironic-quotation-marks approach. I have drawn students' attention, for instance, to the famous moment in Chapter 32 when, in response to Huck's fib about a steamboat and an explosion, Aunt Sally Phelps asks him if anybody was hurt and he answers, "No'm. Killed a nigger." Here, it is relatively easy to argue that Huck's literally dehumanizing use of the word is part of his clever attempt to play into Aunt Sally's assumptions about an expected visitor (whom Huck is pretending to be). Especially because of its slightly overdone neatness —Huck's response can be felt as a punch line in patter that continues with Aunt Sally's saying, "well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt"—it makes sense to see the moment as showing Huck's canny reading of Aunt Sally's likely prejudices, and thus to read his use of the epithet under the sign of irony.

I have not given up raising pedagogical questions about how "nigger" may function ironically in Twain's novel. After 1996, however, when *Hopwood v. Texas* eliminated affirmative action at the University of Texas, teaching *Huck Finn* in my very largely white American literature classes has become increasingly fraught for me. Since *Hopwood*, I have tried to devote a full class session to having a "metadiscussion" about the word "nigger." Because I often focus on close textual analysis, I regularly find myself reading the word aloud or asking a student to do so. In addition, the word will sometimes be used in paraphrases of or references to Twain's text, usually by students, but occasionally by me. In such cases, even when we don't twitch our fingers in the air, our unspoken presumption is that the word is being spoken with *extra* implicit quotation marks around it to show that it is being cited from the text or from "back then," rather than emanating from ourselves. During our "metadiscussions," I ask my students to consider how the word operates in Twain's book as well as in its socio-linguistic contexts both during the 1840s (when the book is set) and during the 1880s (when it was written). In addition, however, I want them to reflect on what actually happens when "we" sound and re-sound "nigger" at the turn of the twenty-first century.

The University of Texas lost the *Hopwood* case on appeal to a panel of the Fifth Circuit Court, a ruling that has so far

withstood all attempts at further review. Losing the case meant that public universities in Texas had to cease the practice of affirmative action in admissions, financial aid, and hiring.[6] One especially controversial aspect of the Fifth Circuit panel's ruling was its disregard of Supreme Court precedent with respect to the "diversity" rationale for affirmative action. As articulated by Justice Lewis Powell in *Bakke v. California* (1978), the diversity rationale holds that the educational benefits provided for all students by the presence of a racially and culturally diverse student body can legally justify giving race some weight in the admissions process. Dissenting justices on the Fifth Circuit characterized the majority's disregard of Justice Powell's "diversity" opinion as an "unprecedented and, we suggest, impertinent step," but as of this writing it still stands.[7]

After the 1996 *Hopwood* decision, the importance and meaning of having a "diverse" student body were much debated on campus, as was the question of what role racial discrimination still played at the University. In this context, my highlighting of the need to perform the word "nigger" when analyzing *Huck Finn* had an ulterior aim. I hoped to provide a concrete demonstration of the importance of diversity in college education by leading my white students to note and reflect upon the classroom's pervasive hue and how this might limit the reach of our discussion both of Twain's novel and of its contemporary relevance. I hoped to foster an experience-based insight about how a lack of diversity could impede their own learning and growth. As for those few students of color who might be in the class, beyond hoping that they wouldn't be offended I found myself unable to think coherently about what educational value, if any, they might derive from this discussion. In fact, since my "lesson" paradoxically relied upon deemphasizing the presence of nonwhite students in the classroom—of which I was nonetheless acutely aware—I was certainly guilty of reducing the problem of racism to the question of what white people think or feel.[8]

I have just presented this scene of antiracist pedagogy with rational, intellectualized detachment. However, when I am leading my classes in analytic discussions of the word "nigger"

my physical and emotional temperature is hot, not cold. I feel my face getting heated and often intensely wish that I could transport myself elsewhere. I squirm at my white students' foolish or "inappropriate" remarks, including: "the word is only used for a joke these days"; "black people use it among themselves all the time"; "my grandparents still use that word but they don't know any better." I sweat under my arms as I try to counter that the word continues to possess demeaning implications. Why am I, the ostensibly liberal and conscientious teacher, in such a state?

It is easy to identify where at least some of my awkwardness and embarrassment come from. In the first place, who am I to speak about this topic? Secondly, since many of the white students assume that racism lies safely in the past and plays no role in their own lives and minds, how do I challenge their remarks that appear almost transparently racist—or at least blind to their own race privilege—without seeming to claim a holier-than-thou status? Thirdly, and most uncomfortably of all, if there are African-American students in the room, who may or may not be contributing to the class discussion, what are they thinking and feeling? Have I made a horrible mistake in forcing them to sit through this? Do they feel ambushed, as if now they "should" say something on a topic that they may have no desire to discuss in this context? Have I made these students angry at me or ensured that they will be more than usually self-conscious about coming to my class for the next several weeks?

To me these sessions always feel stressful and frustrating, sometimes almost unbearably so. But I also experience them as uniquely intense. They twist my viscera and sensitize the surface of my skin. I leave with churning feelings, mostly of guilt, confusion, and shame, as well as a sort of depressive helplessness. It is a dictum of Freudian thought, however, that where there is guilt there is also unconscious desire. What does it mean that I feel as if I've been caught red-handed in some shameful act every time I embark on a pedagogical attempt to discuss the word "nigger"? What secret desire might underlie the guilt? It goes beyond, I think, excitement at breaking a taboo, at the repeating out loud of a forbidden word (which, of course, I know quite well before class that I will do).

What strikes me now, as I look back over the pattern I have described, is that for all the care and planning that goes into these sessions, when I walk out of my classroom, exhausted, I'm overwhelmed by one question: What was I just doing in there? I have not, it is clear, had the teacher's gratifying experience of achieving knowledge and understanding regarding some aspect of reality with my students. As Copjec puts it, *jouissance* arises "precisely there where we do *not* know" (1994, 123) Part of my acute discomfort when discussing the word "nigger," I suspect, comes from the sensation of a collision between my own symbolic position as liberal professor and the racial real of my university, my classroom, and my own psyche.

Regarding the Lacanian concept of the "real," Foster observes that what operates as the internal blockage or limit for a given reality is not "general or universal . . . the same everywhere for all people." Every structured reality will have its own "real," which depends on the "particular qualities in the forms of symbolic representation at work for a given subject" (1997, 12). For the symbolic system that governs my avowedly antiracist classroom at a prestigious and predominantly white state university—a university recently forced by a federal court to discontinue affirmative action— the inassimilable real begins with the crazy persistence of racial exclusion. This persistence, which is visible as soon as one becomes conscious of the overwhelming whiteness in the room but remains invisible as long as whiteness continues to be taken for granted or unmarked, can be called "crazy" because, as Nathan Glazer (1997) has trenchantly commented, it simply doesn't *make sense* some thirty-five years after the Civil Rights movement is supposed to have changed America.

Indeed, the Fifth Circuit Court's ruling in *Hopwood* categorically denied that affirmative action was still necessary to compensate for the University of Texas's admitted history of racial discrimination. Since the late 1960s, the Court emphasized, the University has officially welcomed diversity and has, moreover, devoted resources, including "a significant amount of scholarship money," to minority recruitment and retention programs. The Court noted that "the vast majority of the faculty, staff, and students at the law school had absolutely

nothing to do with any discrimination that the law school practiced in the past."[9] Given the University's long-running efforts to make up for past racism, and that it is now peopled almost entirely by those who had nothing to do with past practices of segregation, most of whom regard those practices with revulsion and anger, the court demanded, how could it make sense to depict the University of Texas as an institution that participates in or perpetuates racism? Yet one has only to open one's eyes (and look, for instance, at the staff from the highest-ranking administrators to the custodial workers) to see that a real of racist hierarchy and exclusion still persists.

Uttering the word "nigger" in my liberal, almost entirely white classroom cannot help but engage this real, from which, moreover, everyone in the dominant group continues to profit. Within what Foster calls the particular "forms of symbolic representation at work for a given subject," I would specify the inassimilable real further as the unwillingness—or the inability—of most white people in the room, including myself, fully to recognize and to imagine surrendering that unfair profit.[10]

Moreover, if, as M. Garlinda Burton argues, the word "nigger" inevitably conjures up the violent *history* of white supremacy grounded in the degradation of black people, then speaking the word in a class inevitably causes that history to collide with the liberal (arts) tenets ostensibly underlying our discussion. We operate under the assumption that all voices deserve to be heard, that our class discussions should be governed by fairness, rationality, and mutual respect.[11] Yet the history of white supremacy has helped in multiple ways to shape my own and other universities. The University of Texas was founded in 1883, during the post-Reconstruction heyday of white racism. This was also the year that Twain finished writing *Huckleberry Finn,* with its racially charged language. Several statues commemorating the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, which date from that same post-Reconstruction period, remain on campus.[12]

It might seem relatively easy to separate the University of Texas at Austin's objectionable and obviously dated statues and building names from its mission, which defines itself in rela-

tion to the Enlightenment values of reason, truth, fairness, neutral expertise, civilization, service, and progress. And it might seem the merest common sense to claim that the racism of many of the University's founders does not intrude into the practices of my own classroom. After all, the goal of my teaching is to empower students and to improve society through offering guidance in the tools and protocols of critical thought. Yet it has been a key insight of recent work in critical race theory that these Enlightenment ideals emerged from, and have historically been interpreted within, contexts that also accepted white supremacy as common sense. Might not such ideals be, as Gary Peller (1995) puts it, "a manifestation of group power, of politics?" (133). Regarding American higher education, Peller asks whether "myriad features of the day-to-day aspects of institutional life constructed or maintained during segregation might have reflected deeper aspects of a culture within which the explicit exclusion of blacks seemed uncontroversial?"

As I have argued, an encounter with the disjunction between one's own organizing "reality" and a pervading racist "real" yields a hot charge, not unlike putting one's finger into wires that one thought were "dead" and experiencing an electric shock. Regarding media responses to the D.C. incident, I suggested that one place this charge might go is into sadomasochistic fantasies organized around having or not having power. The almost rhythmic incantations of "nigger" during discussions of Twain's novel likewise evoke a sadomasochistic scenario, at least for me as a teacher. To adapt Freud's famous phrase, "a child is being beaten," the syntax of which allows for mobile fantasied identifications with the positions of victim, abuser, and observer, "a word is being said," and said, and said again, whenever *Huck Finn* is taught.

But if sadomasochism does come into play here, what are its specific vectors? As a Jewish New Yorker, I probably take some pleasure in being able to view my Caucasian Christian students (than whom I sometimes feel more marked or less "white") in the humiliating position of discovering themselves to be more discursively naive, more crudely provincial than I am. They don't know enough not to toss off remarks such as

"black people use it among themselves all the time" or "the word is only used for a joke these days." As for any black students in the class, my guilt tells me that I must be enjoying something of the voyeur's sadism, especially if they remain silent. Throughout the discussion I glance covertly in their direction. I enjoy the voyeur's sense of safety because, ultimately, I feel that the word "nigger," no matter how many times it is said, can never really touch or hurt me: I am white.

Apparently at odds with the sensation of invulnerability just mentioned, however, I think that there is also a masochistic (and narcissistic) sense of myself as a noble victim. I take pride in sacrificing pedagogical safety and comfort by taking the risk of staging such discussions, in being oppressed by anxiety about my students' feelings, and even in the humiliation of my self-exposure. There is at least a *frisson,* moreover, both in feeling myself "forced" to repeat the "n-word" and in listening to my students recite it back to me in turn. But the masochism here is, by definition, light. These discomforts leave no welts. The one day each term devoted to discussing the word becomes, at least for me, a session of stinging, but finally limited and controlled, encounters with the real.

I recognize that the present essay may seem to promote skepticism about liberal white antiracist pedagogy, at least as practiced within privileged educational contexts. Put most pessimistically: if such pedagogy does not go beyond bumping repeatedly against the racist real that continues to subtend the place of its own enunciation, then what's the point? Nonetheless, I hope that by gaining a better understanding of how I "get my enjoyment" I will be able to develop renewed and, yes, recharged possibilities for participation in social change. Above all, I hope to have contributed to a conversation.

Department of English
University of Texas
Austin, Texas 78712
pbarrish@mail.utexas.edu

Notes

1. For alternative perspectives on citations of this word, see Naylor (1995), who addresses its use by African-Americans, and most recently the important book by Randall Kennedy (2002), who argues that "to condemn whites who use the N-word without regard to context is simply to make a fetish of *nigger*" (51). Among the examples he adduces of whites who use the word even as they perform not only nonracist but antiracist actions is Lyndon Johnson's referring to Thurgood Marshall as a "nigger" when nominating him as the first African-American to serve on the Supreme Court. Rather than attempting to determine whether a given use of the n-word should or should not be considered "wrong" from a progressive standpoint, however, I wish to investigate moments in which even unintentional enunciations can force two contradictory contexts into simultaneous visibility.
2. As Judith Butler (1997) analogously observes, "The critical and legal discourse on hate speech is itself a restaging of the performance of hate speech" (7).
3. Even if one were to make a point of religiously substituting "the n-word," this break into what Burton terms "stilted" speech would call attention to the occluded word as a material object. The 1992 Bush campaign's introduction of the "L-word" as an all-purpose label for what the Republicans opposed was a technique not for erasing the word "liberal" from voters' consciousnesses, but rather for *foregrounding* it in a subliminal fashion. Given the semantic association between the "L-word" and "n-word," moreover, it does not seem to be accidental that the same 1992 Bush campaign sought to indict Michael Dukakis as soft on crime by using the notorious Willie Horton commercials.
4. A generally unremarked dimension of the space defining the D.C. event is likewise the fact that the District of Columbia, whose residents are mostly black, remains the only area within the continental United States without a voting representative in Congress.
5. Žižek (1998) calls *jouissance* "traumatic" because it is "structurally inassimilable into [the subject's] symbolic universe" (154).
6. The "ten-percent law," passed by the legislature in response to *Hopwood*, guarantees admission to the University of Texas for students graduating in the top ten percent of the state's high schools. Combined with increased recruitment efforts, the law has managed to restore the number of minorities matriculating to the University's undergraduate colleges to pre-1996 levels. (This number is, however, still significantly below the percentage of minorities in the state.) The enrollment of African-Americans in professional and graduate schools remains lower than it was before *Hopwood*. For complex reasons, the population of English majors is far less diverse than that of the University as a whole. Ironically, even the moderate success of the ten-percent law in improving racial and ethnic diversity in public colleges is tacitly predicated on the continuing *de facto* segregation of many Texas high schools.
7. "Dissent from failure to grant hearing *en banc*," cited from http://www.utexas.edu/hopwood/index.html. Within the next year or so, the "diversity rationale" of affirmative action will probably be addressed by the United States Supreme Court when it considers appeals of two lawsuits involving admissions at the University of Michigan.
8. For descriptions by Afro-Americans of what it felt like for them (or their children) to study or teach *Huck Finn* in predominately white classes, see Mensh and Mensh (2000).
9. *Hopwood v. State of Texas*, 78 F.3d 932 (5th Cir). March 18, 1996: "Opinion Reversing and Remanding," cited from http://www.ca5.uscourts.gov/opinions/pub/94/94-50569-cv0.htm
10. For a superb account of the "profit" in whiteness, see Lipsitz (1998). Wiegman's (1998) examination of "the hegemony of liberal whiteness" and its fantasy of a "postsegregationist antiracist white subject" dissects how attempts by white

academics and activists (for example, those involved in the magazine *Race Traitor*) to dismantle whiteness as a form of racial privilege inevitably founder on the unacknowledged "impossibility of white antiracism" (147).

11. For a forceful critique of these assumptions in the context of composition classes, see Jarratt (1991). Also useful in a pedagogical connection is Fox (2001).
12. For a discussion of seemingly "dated" monuments in locales ranging from Austin to Moscow, see Levinson (1998).

References

Arac, Jonathan. 1997. *"Huckleberry Finn" as Idol and Target: The Functions of Criticism in Our Time.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Burton, M. Garlinda. 1994. *Never Say Nigger Again!: An Antiracism Guide for White Liberals.* Nashville: James C. Winston.

Butler, Judith. 1997. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative.* New York: Routledge.

Copjec, Joan. 1994. *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Editorial. 1999a. Another N-Word Controversy. *The Atlanta Constitution.* 2 February, p. A12.

Editorial. 1999b. The Last Word. *The Boston Globe.* 30 January, p. A18.

Editorial. 1999c. Obsessing Over the "N Word." *The Hartford Courant.* 3 February, p. A14.

Feagler, Joe. 1999. Ignorance Was Trigger of 3-Syllable Time Bomb. *The Cleveland Plain Dealer.* 1 February, p. 2A.

Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. 1993. *Was Huck Black?: Mark Twain and African-American Voices.* New York: Oxford University Press.

———. 1996. *Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Foster, Dennis. 1997. *Sublime Enjoyment: On the Perverse Motive in American Literature.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fox, Helen. 2001. *When Race Breaks Out: Conversations about Race and Racism in College Classrooms.* New York: Peter Lang.

Glazer, Nathan. 1997. *We Are All Multiculturalists Now.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Graff, Gerald, and James Phelan, eds. 1995. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Case Study in Critical Controversy.* Boston: Bedford.

Grisales, Claudia. 1999. Hoelting Words Offend Some Staff. *The Daily Texan.* 5 February, p. 1A.

Jacoby, Jeff. 1999. It Wasn't the N-Word. *The Boston Globe.* 30 January, p. A15.

Jarratt, Susan. C. 1991. Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict. In Patricia Harkin and John Schilb, eds., *Contending with Words: Composition and Rhetoric in the Postmodern Age.* New York: Modern Language Association, pp. 105–23.

Kaplan, Justin. 1995. Born to Trouble: One Hundred Years of *Huckleberry Finn.* In Graff and Phelan 1995, pp. 348–59.

Kennedy, Randall. 2002. *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word.* New York: Pantheon.

Lane, Christopher. 1998a. Introduction to Lane 1998b, pp. 1–37.

———. ed. 1998b. *The Psychoanalysis of Race.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Leonard, J. S. 1999. *Making Mark Twain Work in the Classroom.* Durham: Duke University Press.

———. Thomas A. Tenney, and Thadious M. Davis, eds. 1992. *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on "Huckleberry Finn."* Durham: Duke University Press.

Lester, Julius. 1992. Morality and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* In Leonard, Tenney, and Davis 1992, pp. 199–207.

Levinson, Sanford. 1998. *Written in Stone: Public Monuments in Changing Societies.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Lipsitz, George. 1998. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Mensh, Elaine, and Harry Mensh. 2000. *Black, White, and Huckleberry Finn: Re-Imagining the American Dream.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

Naylor, Gloria. 1995. Mommy, What Does "Nigger" Mean? In Susan Bachmann and Melinda Barth, eds., *Between Worlds: A Reader, Rhetoric, and Handbook.* New York: HarperCollins, pp. 234–37.

Neuharth, Al. 1999. Niggardly Not Racist but Thin-Skinned Are. *USA Today.* 12 February, p. 15A.

Parker, Kathleen. 1999. Look in Dictionary before You Squawk. *USA Today.* 3 February, p. A13.

Peller, Gary. 1995. Toward a Critical Cultural Pluralism: Progressive Alternatives to Mainstream Civil Rights Ideology. In Kimberle Crenshaw et al., eds., *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement.* New York: New Press, pp. 127–58.

Savran, David. 1998. *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Smiley, Jane. 1996. Say It Ain't So, Huck: Second Thoughts on Twain's "Masterpiece." *Harpers Magazine,* 292(January):61–67.

Smith, David L. 1992. Huck, Jim, and American Racial Discourse. In Leonard, Tenney, and Davis 1992, pp. 103–20.

Spillers, Hortense. 1997. "All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother": Psychoanalysis and Race. In Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen, eds., *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism.* Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 135– 58.

Wallace, John. 1992. The Case Against *Huck Finn.* In Leonard, Tenney, and Davis 1992, pp. 16–24.

Weeks, Linton. 1999. Caught in a Verbal Vortex: One Word Leaves a Lot Still to be Said about Former D.C. Official David Howard. *Washington Post.* 29 January, p. C1.

Wiegman, Robyn. 1999. Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity. *boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture* 26(3):115–49.

Žižek, Slavoj. 1998. Love Thy Neighbor? No, Thanks. In Lane 1998b, pp. 154–75.