

The Privilege of Language, Trigger Warnings, & Some Controversies of Pedagogy

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Abstract

This paper explores debates around trigger warnings, examples of linguistic whitewashing in canonical texts, and Title IX controversies, as they contest the power of language to subvert hegemonies of convention. The ethical implications, for example, of the NewSouth Books 2011 edition of Mark Twain's classic, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn*, sans the 219 instances of "the n-word" is paradigmatic of how such omissions have contributed to re-inscribing white assumptions of entitlement. From Ovid's "Metamorphosis" to more contemporary instances of David Mamet's "Oleanna" and Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan's debut novel, *Sarong Party Girls*, literature's ability to dramatize and speak our more disturbing truths is what maintains its power to undermine the silencing apparatuses implicit in mainstream discourses. In bell hooks words, as she discusses the effort of coming to voice in black cultural studies, "Everywhere we go there is a pressure to silence our voices, to co-opt and undermine them." This paper attempts to deconstruct some appropriations of efforts to voice exclusions as they overtly or covertly attempt to neutralize such challenges.

Keywords: canonical literature, whitewashing, editorial revisioning, cultural studies, language of racism.

Mark Twain notes "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning."¹ Twain's classics, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and its prequel, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), were reissued by NewSouth Books in February 2011, with this publication blurb:

In a bold move compassionately advocated by Twain scholar Dr. Alan Gribben and embraced by NewSouth, *Mark Twain's Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn* ... replaces two hurtful epithets that appear hundreds of times in the texts with less offensive words, this intended to counter the "preemptive censorship" that Dr. Gribben observes has caused these important works of literature to fall off curriculum lists nationwide.²

¹ Mark Twain (Samuel L. Clemens), see Bainton 87–88.

² Suzanne La Rosa, "A word about the NewSouth edition of Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn."

Dr. Alan Gribben, Chair of the English Department at Auburn University, felt he was helping to keep Twain's classics in circulation and on school curricula by proposing an edited version of the canonical novels, sans the 215 repetitions of "the n-word" now substituted with "slave;" "Injun" is also replaced in the 2011 NewSouth edition by "Indian." According to Dr. Gribben this initiative, which resulted in the 2011 NewSouth edition, is an effort to reach a larger readership by eliminating Twain's use of racial slurs, such as "Nigger" and "Injun"—"[t]he n-word possessed, then as now, demeaning implications, more vile than almost any insult that can be applied to other racial groups. There is no equivalent slur in the English language," notes Gribben in his introduction, adding too, that "it should be remembered, [Twain] was endeavoring to accurately depict the prevailing social attitudes along the Mississippi River Valley during the 1840s by repeatedly employing in both novels a linguistic corruption of "Negro" in reference to African American slaves," as well as "by tagging the villain in Tom Sawyer with a deprecating racial label for Native Americans."³

Dr. Gribben explains that in some 40 years of teaching and book forum presentations, he "always recoiled from uttering the racial slurs spoken by numerous characters, including Tom and Huck." It is always an overtly political dilemma to speak for another, as any substitution of language for an originating text has ethical implications. As bell hooks notes in *Talking Back*, talking within dominant structures of (white) discourses, means "speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless" (8). Twain's canonical ruffians speak in a vernacular representative of the cultural and racial specificities of their historical moment, which is one of racial prejudice in an ante-bellum era. Alan Gribben informs us that he "invariably substituted the word 'slave' for Twain's ubiquitous 'n-word'" pointing out that "[s]tudents and audience members seemed to prefer this expedient;" this desire to avoid the discomfort of using the vernacular suggests more than Gribben's intention to rectify the history of racism with his substitutions. It suggests a desire to be rid of the moral responsibility for racism's legacies.

The linguistic whitewashing in the NewSouth edition expresses notions of "otherness" and "difference" bell hooks has deconstructed in her essay, "Culture to Culture, ethnography and cultural studies as critical intervention." She points out "how often contemporary white scholars writing about black people assume positions of familiarity, as though their work were not coming into being in a cultural context of white supremacy, as though it were in no way shaped and informed by that context" (*Yearning* 124). If Gribben's editorial re-visioning is not directly employing "white western intellectual traditions to re-inscribe white supremacy," or to "perpetuate racist domination" (124), the act of re-writing begs the question of intellectual entitlement; to substitute "slave" for any number of times "nigger" is used in the novels, manipulates a historical context to satisfy, or make more comfortable, in Gribben's

³ Alan Gribben, "An excerpt from the editor's introduction to Mark Twain's *Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn: The NewSouth Edition*."

words, the inherent discomfort of a racist circumstance Twain had no intention of neutralizing.

In chapter six, Huck's father, Pap, rants infamously against some of the liberties being given to freed slaves, and represents one of the 215 instances in which the substitution of "slave" distorts the text:

Oh, yes, this is a wonderful govment, wonderful. Why, looky here. There was a free nigger there from Ohio – a mulatter, most as white as a white man. He had the whitest shirt on you ever see, too, and the shiniest hat; and there ain't a man in that town that's got as fine clothes as what he had; and he had a gold watch and chain, and a silver-headed cane -- the awfulest old gray-headed nabob in the State. And what do you think? They said he was a p'fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages, and knowed everything. And that ain't the wust. They said he could vote when he was at home. Well, that let me out. Thinks I, what is the country a-coming to? It was 'lection day, and I was just about to go and vote myself if I warn't too drunk to get there; but when they told me there was a State in this country where they'd let that nigger vote, I drawed out. I says I'll never vote agin. (28-29)

If instead of "nigger," we now have "There was a free *slave* there in Ohio—" (my italics), and again substitute "slave" in the sentence, "but when they told me there was a State in this country where they'd let that slave vote," the tonal pitch of the diction is changed. By taming the bigotry of Pap's diatribe, the force of its violence is also softened, and the result is that Huck's Pap seems, perhaps, more familiar, speaking as an uneducated redneck; but the visceral intensity of humiliation which "nigger" embodies, is neutralized with the substitution of "slave." In other words, the overt expression of racism demonstrated in Pap's language is made to represent a less racist, or more politically correct expression, that assimilates rather than exposes his racial prejudices. "Assimilation," hooks reminds us in "Overcoming white supremacy: a comment," "is a strategy deeply rooted in the ideology of white supremacy and its advocates urge black people to negate blackness, to imitate racist white people so as to absorb their values, their way of life" (*Talking Back* 113). What we have in Gribben's word substitutions is a revisionist act of containment that negates the full impact of the racist culture Twain's novel brings to life.

Paraphrasing Cornel West's "Black Culture and Postmodernism" in which West focuses on the ways in which debates of otherness can "further marginalize ... actual people of difference," hooks makes the argument that trends in cultural studies can reinscribe "patterns of colonial domination, where the 'Other' is always made object, appropriated, interpreted, taken over by those in power ..." (*Yearning* 125). I would argue that Alan Gribben's editorial intervention is such a case of appropriation, his stated intention to neutralize the "demeaning implications" of the two racial slurs with the substitution of "Indian" for "Injun" and "slave" for "nigger" is an act of erasure that prioritizes Gribben's (and NewSouth Books's) desire to more comfortably speak for a text, and time, which Twain gives voice to through representative characters. In essence Gribben's intervention enacts a process of assimilation that veils the originating historical context of Twain's work, explicitly rewriting the language of

racism and thus implicitly demonstrating a discourse of representation whose agency once again serves white interests; it camouflages the language that exposes its racism. This is the problem of “being ‘talked about’” or remaining “an absent presence without voice” (*Yearning* 126), when the politics of representation serve those in power. If Twain, as a white author, brings his characters’ worlds to life through their spoken vernacular, steeped as it is in the prejudices of the Mississippi backwaters, he is voicing an ethnography of location which Gribben’s changes supplant, and relocate, in a language which erases that ethnographic specificity.

Besides the incorrect usage of Gribben’s substitutions, for example calling a freeman a “slave” or a “free slave” someone who had never been a slave, or “Injun Joe,” “Indian Joe,” the tampering distorts, too, Twain’s original satiric intentions, as Alexandra Petri notes in a January 2011 article of *The Washington Post*:

Huckleberry Finn is uniquely marvelous because it is of its time yet manages to transcend it. In spite of the limitations of vocabulary, cultural expectations, and racial stereotypes, it lays bare the inhumanity of slavery through the power of satire. To remove it from this context is to strip it of its power—and to needlessly whitewash a period that deserves no whitewashing.

If Gribben’s concern is to return a sense of subjecthood to the objectification of the African-American slave, he is seemingly unaware that the linguistic alternatives he uses are also signifiers; the cultural hegemony of white America is not displaced or deconstructed by Gribben’s substitutions, it is further veiled in that the circumstances of racism are apparently neutralized. Suddenly Huck’s father is speaking a more politically correct language *despite* his racism.

What then is the issue at stake, it is not so much the discomfort and revulsion of using racist language but rather, more profoundly, the fear of that discomfort. The fact of an “Injun Joe,” the fact of a Miss Watson, or a Pap, as representatives of extremities of evil (Injun Joe), hypocrisy (Miss Watson), and racism (Pap), that a dominant white economy would like to avoid seeing articulated through characters that bring back to life its racist past. This then becomes part of the wider debate regarding literature’s role and its power to disrupt and force confrontations with hegemonic discourses, to resist the inscriptions, or re-inscriptions, of paradigms that flatten the power of such discomfort to upset convention. As Gerald Graff has argued in *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*, controversy is at the heart of critical inquiry; without it, we are in the problematic, if not blatantly sinister, position of Orwellian Newspeak where all undesirable ideas, let alone emotions, are silenced.

Sadly, the trend in academia since Graff’s 1992 book has become increasingly reactive, and Orwell’s definition of what could happen to language in his fictional Oceania of *1984*, is eerily prophetic:

The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought—that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc—should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words. ... This was done partly by the invention of new words, *but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words* and by stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings (312-313, emphasis added)

Undesirable words are, among other things, words that unsettle hierarchies of what convention, or any dominant discourse, privileges as “speakable” which begs then the question of what is not being spoken; a case in point is an example from a Columbia University syllabus in which the teaching of Ovid’s “Metamorphosis” was referenced in a post in the *Columbia Spectator*: “Ovid’s ‘Metamorphoses’ is a fixture of Lit Hum, but like so many texts in the Western canon, it contains triggering and offensive material that marginalizes student identities in the classroom”(Johnson et al.). That Ovid’s “Metamorphosis,” might “trigger” distress, or traumatic memory, became a subject of controversy. “Trigger warnings” have become a kind of de rigeur on syllabi⁴ to warn students susceptible to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), such as victims of sexual assault. Not unlike Gribben’s effort to replace Twain’s less emotionally charged language, the disclaimer on the syllabus referencing Ovid’s “Metamorphosis” negates, or attempts to neutralize, historical contexts. The post in the *Columbia Spectator* concludes with “These texts, wrought with histories and narratives of exclusion and oppression, can be difficult to read and discuss as a survivor, a person of color, or a student from a low-income background.” Indeed, literature’s ability to disturb us centuries on is a testament to the reasons we read and teach it, and it is the worlds it continues to evoke, contest, and provoke that brings it, and us, to life in our cultural present.

I’d like now to consider some canonical literary moments of alternative or silenced discourses within dominant discursive structures to illustrate a kind of genealogy of subversions; to point out how these authors attempted, to different degrees, to provide opportunities for underwriting their characters’ exclusions and cultural appropriations. I mean here to emphasize that language as a signifying tool is always implicated in a politics of representation that will necessarily reflect cultural hierarchies of power. The case of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* whose hostile reception was probably the reason Chopin essentially stopped publishing, was castigated by her critics as morbid and “with the leer of sensuality”⁵ when it appeared in 1899; the novella follows the emotional “awakening” of Edna Pontellier’s gradual recognition of the limitations of her middle class life and marriage to an emotionally disengaged husband. Like Twain, Chopin was known for her regionalist aesthetic, the

⁴ The term was used was in an Op-Ed of Columbia University’s *Spectator*: columbiaspectator.com/opinion/2015/04/30/our-identities-matter-core-classrooms

⁵ Gilbert in the “Introduction. The Second Coming of Aphrodite” where she refers to various critics of the period, and quotes one who compares Chopin to “Aubrey Beardsley’s hideous but haunting pictures with their disfiguring leer of sensuality” 13-16.

uses of a Creole dialect, and like Huck, Edna, is an outsider within her Creole community at Grande Isle. If the reception of *Huckleberry Finn* was less vigilantly critical of Twain's protagonist, critics nevertheless took issue with his use of dialect. One reviewer in a March 2, 1885 review in the *New York World*, describes "Mr. Clemens's wit" as "deliberately imposing upon an unoffending public a piece of careless hackwork in which a few good things are dropped amid a mass of rubbish."⁶ Edna's not always articulated consciousness of her alienation, and Huck's vernacular, act as something of a parallel language, and undercurrent, to that which upholds mainstream values in these respective narratives, and as such underwrite Chopin's Edna Pontellier paradigms that sanction the sexism and racism in the discourse of their times. Edna Pontellier's malaise contests the paradigm of a bourgeois family's gendered roles, and in Twain's case the overt racism of a slave economy. The vernacular, and alternative articulations, of these respective worlds serve to destabilize hegemonies that maintain the racial and gendered biases and inequalities by making them explicit.

That critics, regarding Chopin's novella, were outraged by its theme, suggests that then as now the language of what would constitute political correctness is the language invested in what will empower or disempower specific cultural values upheld by what is "speakable" as opposed to "unspeakable." Edna's slow emotional divorce from her middle class life, and Leonce Pontellier, was not a reality her contemporaries were prepared to endorse as a representative experience. As hooks articulates it in "Choosing the Margin" with regard to movements in black cultural studies, and her own efforts to come to voice amidst the exoticisms and trends in the academy, "Everywhere we go there is a pressure to silence our voices, to co-opt and undermine them" (*Yearning* 148). What hooks says of mainstream appropriations of the efforts to voice exclusions, can be applied to all discourses that overtly and covertly subsume challenges to its hegemony. In Edna Pontellier's case we have a first scene of her still inarticulate but clearly distressed feelings when Leonce Pontellier "reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children" talking "in a monotonous, insistent way." Edna stays awake listening to "the everlasting voice of the sea" which brings on a fit of tears, "An indescribable oppression, which ... filled her whole being with a vague anguish" (49).

Chopin demonstrates Edna Pontellier's increasing alienation from specific gendered paradigms, one of which is that represented by the "mother-women" who "extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood" (51); this leaves her isolated and vulnerable, bereft of a language by which to articulate her difference. Thus, her emotional involvement with Robert Lebrun an admiring bachelor who is as much a part of the social fabric of her time as is her husband, makes her particularly susceptible to dominant ideological scripts by which gender is read. When, for example, she declares her desire for a life with Robert, he reminds her that she is a married woman. Not unlike Arthur Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter*, Robert cannot break from those conventions that represent Edna

⁶ See unsigned review: twain.lib.virginia.edu/huckfinn/nyworld.html

Pontellier as married, and Hester Prynne as an adulteress. In both Hester's Salem, and Edna's late nineteenth century New Orleans, the gendered terms of behavior limit if they don't erase the singularity of these protagonists. In both cases this is done by demonstrating what these women, Edna and Hester, can in fact feasibly express of outside a structure of mainstream values.

Neither Hester Prynne nor Edna Pontellier is anything like Twain's Huck Finn but their examples attempt the same work of deconstructing representations of identity that resist conventional paradigms. If Edna and Hester reflect the possibilities of alternative ways to exist in their respective worlds, that potential is sabotaged by the voices of the mainstream, spoken by the men in their lives. Mr. Gribben, too, enacts a repositioning of discourse that announces itself to be a corrective while ignoring the fact that in this intervention his attempt neutralizes the language of racism by rendering invisible how that language exposes the injustices and ethical quandaries of the mainstream. More central to my argument of the ethics, and politics, of representation, the discourse of experiences apart from the mainstream, such as Hester's, Edna's, and those in Twain's novel, is subsumed by conventions that render these discourses invisible by labeling them unacceptable; the roots, discursive and cultural, of what has contributed to this unacceptability are no longer apparent. To Hester's "Shall we not meet again?" Dimmesdale invokes the law, formally silencing her with "Hush, Hester, hush! ... the law we broke!" (254). Not dissimilarly, if more driven by a scripted romanticism, Edna tells Robert that if Leonce Pontellier were to tell him "Here, Robert take her and be happy; she is yours," she would "laugh at you both" which makes Robert grow "a little white" and ask "What do you mean?" (167). These canonical moments of gendered rebellion are reminders that convention will not tolerate what bell hooks in the context of race describes as "the authority of experience" (130) when that experience dismantles, or exposes, the hegemony of privileged, and oppressive, archetypes.

The lived life of a community articulated in the vernacular of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* gives us a language by which "the authority of experience" provides the opportunity to see the racism and hypocrisies of the slave culture in Twain's American South. Colloquialisms by definition, because they are not standardized, articulate realities that destabilize hierarchies that deny the repressions and exclusions upholding them. Take for example, Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan's debut novel, *Sarong Party Girls* that Gabrielle Bellot reviews in the *Literary Hub*; the novel is written in "Singlish," a "Singaporean colloquial English" which the Singapore government has waged a campaign to discourage. Bellot discusses Tan's expressed motive for writing the entire novel in this colloquial dialect, because "there are things she can say in Singlish that she can't convey in standardized English. Singlish, she writes, is 'packed with attitude and humor and often is deliciously vulgar.'" Bellot elaborates that Tan, "thankfully, almost never feels the need to translate terms that readers outside of Singapore might not be familiar with," noting that she, like so many before her, allow for the context to define the content.

The values that sustain and shape any given context would be erased of their cultural-historical specificities given interventions. Imagine editing out the discomfort

in the racist and gendered biases of some of literature's most famously infamous—think of Euripides's *Medea*, Shakespeare's *Shylock*, Plath's *Daddy*—think of somehow editing out the tortured mania of any one of these moments in the literary canon to make more palpable their words, to make their truths less disturbing. And if this were the case, wouldn't that be a direct distortion of authorial intention. The genius of these dark singularities is in *their* language. Imagine trying to rephrase Plath's "Every woman adores a Fascist,/ The boot in the face, the brute/Brute heart of a brute like you" (lines 48-50). What substitution of words would make this less brutal, and what would be left of the raging ironies and metered eloquence of *Plath's* voice?

To speak for someone else is always a violation of context; it inevitably substitutes the terms that shape the originating discourse. A voice imposed apart from an original intention, even if the content declares itself to be equal to its originating source (as in Gribben's expressed motives for substituting "slave" for "nigger"), will change if it does not distort or erase, an original intention. David Mamet's 1992 play *Oleanna* is another example that dramatizes how language can be used to impose and interpret specific ideological interests. What seems on the surface to be an impasse of communication is more profoundly an ethical dilemma that exposes how words are used to manipulate hierarchies of power. When Carol, a student, wants clarification on the book her professor, John, has written and used in his course, he takes the occasion to flaunt his authority, and dismiss her concern about potentially failing; Carol's vulnerability becomes an occasion for John to demonstrate a position of privilege. He will make it easy for her to pass the course, for example, but she doesn't understand how this can be done when the course is almost over and she is failing.

Having read John's *The Curse of Modern Education*, Carol is perplexed by phrases like "ritualized annoyance" (20) and the "virtual warehousing of the young" (9). Passing John's course will determine Carol's academic future. John, arrogant though not malicious, takes the opportunity to show off his apparent empathy for the plight of students: "So we confound the *usefulness* of higher education with our, granted, right to equal access to the same. We in effect, create a *prejudice* toward it, completely independent of ..." (21). Carol finds the jargon obscure and confusing, she tells John she feels stupid and doesn't want to fail; he interrupts with long-winded answers. She shouts back, "I'M SPEAKING ..." (21). John keeps up a patronizing rhetoric to Carol's declared insecurity. Dependent as she is on his privilege, and subordinate to him, he seems oblivious of her genuine concerns. She repeats, "*Teach* me. *Teach* me" (9). And John, absorbed as he is in his pending tenure, and phone call interruptions that punctuate their conversations, is glib about the depth of her anxiety.

bell hooks has theorized the interface of cultural contexts as a space where "points of privilege" come together. When discussing "poor, underclass communities, who enter universities or privileged cultural settings" she notes that such spaces are also places of domination (148). Carol, wishing to survive academically, and convinced she can only do so by learning John's language, or understanding it, eventually turns it on him. Language as an instrument of power which John has used to advance his career and write his book, is what Carol learns to use to her own advantage, to reflect the underprivileged position she feels herself to be in in relation

to John. The increasingly traumatic impasse between them foregrounds the subject of language and the ethical legitimacies of its uses; John is shocked when his tenure is denied as a result of Carol's actions, having reported his offer to change her grade to an A, and tutor her so she can pass the course. Out of context the offer becomes sinister as he reads her claims from the report: "He told me that if I would stay alone with him in his office, he would change my grade to an A" (33). *Oleanna* had impassioned responses when it came out in 1992, just a year after Susan Faludi's 1991, *Backlash, The Undeclared War on Women*. Accused of backlash sexual politics, *Oleanna* is as Ben Brantley notes in an October 11, 2009 *New York Times* review, "above all, a war of words colliding." As such the play illustrates the conflict (and violence) implicit in what hooks describes as the co-opting of language that can undermine and silence what does not fit a paradigm (another of the words John uses which Carol asks him to explain).

More recent debates around the ethics of how language is being used to wield particular agendas and shape cultural priorities revolve around trigger warnings and the controversies of Title IX clauses in the academy. In Laura Kipnis's much discussed February 27, 2015 piece in *The Chronicle*, "Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe" she goes to bat for the more innocent days of a less policed "shark-filled moat" of relationships between teacher and student, not all of which were intimate, or romantically inclined, and not few of which ended in marriage, "[w]hich isn't to say that teacher-student relations were guaranteed to turn out well, but then what percentage of romances do?" She furthers the point that relationships more generally don't always go the way you want them to, and as such are a good education for "not taking power too seriously." She believes, too, that "the less seriously you take [power], the more strategies you have for contending with it." It is an important observation that current academic environments seem to be ignoring. If anything, as Kipnis explains, "It's the fiction of the all-powerful professor embedded in the new campus codes" that is feeding the "obsession with helpless victims and powerful predators." Kipnis was served two Title IX complaints⁷ for her *Chronicle* piece, which in itself is technically incongruous with the stipulations of the Title IX amendment, part of the 1972 Education Amendment, which insures "*No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.*"⁸ Kipnis's concern in her article was the misunderstandings in a case she considered ethically biased. To her bewilderment and increasing unease, she is told that the complaints and resulting "inquisition" are the result of having "triggered" students' sensitivities regarding her apparently lax treatment of sexual relationships between students and professors:

⁷ Kipnis, "My Title IX Inquisition."

⁸ "Title IX," www.knowyourix.org/college-resources/title-ix/

My inbox became a clearinghouse for reports about student accusations and sensitivities, and the collective terror of sparking them, especially when it comes to the dreaded subject of trigger warnings, since pretty much anything might be a “trigger” to someone, given the new climate of emotional peril on campuses.

Kipnis makes the point in her initial *Chronicle* article that it is “melodramatic imagination’s obsession with helpless victims and powerful predators” that is contributing to the “skyrocketing” sense of student vulnerability. She notes, too, and importantly, that as a result of this obsession, a respect for language’s ability to be a critical guide though such confusions is also at stake; that is, the freedom to use language as a tool for clarifying an objective truth, as far as such objectivity is accessible, is being sabotaged by interests that don’t always declare themselves. Referencing another “Title-IX-Inquisition” case in her university in which an undergraduate sued a professor for inappropriate behavior, she describes the case as being dismissed for its lack of clarity regarding the definition of sexual misconduct. The language of the complaint, or the student’s description of the relationship, went quickly from alleged “fondling” to calling the professor a “rapist;” Kipnis demonstrates that the inflammatory vocabulary had grown increasingly melodramatic, as hard, factual evidence of misconduct was often absent or inadequate.

Kipnis experiences a similar “under-explanatory” vagueness in the rhetoric the university’s Title IX coordinator uses to inform her of student complaints regarding the “chilling effects” of her *Chronicle* article. The “Title IX” addition to the 1972 Education Amendments was historically passed to address cases of sex discrimination in federally funded programs,⁹ not as Kipnis notes, for expressing ideas in print: “Marching against a published article wasn’t a good optic—it smacked of book burning, something Americans generally oppose.” When Kipnis asks for more definition as to what might constitute “chilling effects,” she is told that the two students who lodged complaints could provide witnesses. Things get more complicated still when Kipnis tweets: “It’s a problem that ‘trauma’ is now deployed re any bad experience. And dating is not the same as rape!”¹⁰

Kipnis argues that the Title IX charges against her are never defined within the context of gender discrimination, and that what was essentially at stake was “that open conversations are practically impossible.” More essentially, the inherent discomfort of such conversations lay bare the less savory aspects of what keeps power in place, namely the repressions of alternative perspectives and positions. This brings us back to the likes of Edna and Hester, to say nothing of all the nineteenth century heroines and their struggle to come to voice. If we can recall that the sanctioning of Edna Pontellier’s desire outside her marriage would have underwritten the centrality of the Victorian patriarch and his power over the family, or that Hester and

⁹ Passed by Congress in 1972 to deal with gender discrimination in public education, as Kipnis notes in her “My Title IX,” “all institutions receiving federal funds were required to be in compliance.” In 2011 the U.S. Department of Education specified this to include “steps to end sexual harassment and sexual violence.” See www.justice.gov/crt/overview-title-ix-education-amendments-1972-20-usc-1681-et-seq

¹⁰ twitter.com/laurakipnis/status/574650063651209217

Dimmesdale, given their relocation to England, would undermine the shaming power of Hester's letter A, we can remember, too, that power is punishing and always resistant to challenges to its hegemony. It is why we have the voices we do, from Shakespeare to Twain to Plath, hooks, Mamet, Kipnis, and all those who continue the ongoing, uneasy conversation of articulating the less attractive aspects of our cultural and human being. That literature is born of a necessary conflict is why it necessarily exists, and the ways its reception will challenge given historical contexts is also why some texts, like Chopin's, are misunderstood in their own historical moment. Think, too, of Zora Neale Hurston's work, and the importance of her vernacular in expressing resistances to mainstream discourses.

In "Politics and the English Language" Orwell reflects on the use of specificity in language as a reflection of clear and concrete thinking. The "mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence of the language," he points out in 1946, "is the most marked characteristic ... of any kind of political writing" (145). Using Kipnis's argument that campus politics, sexual and otherwise, have come to muzzle free speech and controversy, the question is again begged regarding what political interests this serves. Certainly American education, at least ideologically, is meant to reflect a First Amendment right to free speech. But the culture has become "accusatory and sanctimonious" and administrations more prone to kowtowing to student complaints when they are seen as customers in the "increasingly corporatized university landscape" (Kipnis, "My Title IX"). The not-so-new but now voracious hegemony of the corporate model has grown more defensive given the exorbitant tuitions students go into lifelong debt to pay back. If intellectual capital is being held hostage to economic interests, we are indeed in a dangerous place.

A more recent case in point that continues the debate around the kinds of language we sanction, and don't, and what this reflects of the permission we give, or don't, to discourses, couched as they are in their specific ideologies, is that of Jodi Kelly, Dean of Matteo Ricci College at Seattle University (Jaschik). Upon being asked by one of her students to recommend more diversified readings Kelly recommended Dick Gregory's memoir *Nigger*. Based on this recommendation, in May 2016 a group of minority students organized a sit-in demanding her resignation because of her use of the slur. That Kelly was eventually retired in June, and her recommendation of the book, and mention of the title, taken entirely out of context, is chilling. It bodes of the kinds of extremities interventions such as Gribben's, albeit respectable, desire to be politically correct might lead to. Tampering with literature, with the histories it represents, and the contexts of its making, risks being left with the dark reality of a language that will eventually, like Orwell's *Newspeak*, "make all other modes of thought impossible." Literature's existence relies on its ability to articulate the seemingly inarticulate, its challenge, and pleasure, invested in the way it can reinvent the world provides renewed ways to experience it. Given the trend in policing curricula we may be left with a sorely unbrave version of such.

It is noteworthy that Dick Gregory, the author of *Nigger*, came to Kelly's defense, saying that he was not offended by her use of the word "nigger" in reference to his book, stressing that "In fact, I am pleased that she has the foresight to want to

give these young men and women the knowledge, insight and experience of a civil rights activity that might just help them understand life a little better” (Gregory). But his defense did not suffice, neither did his statement of disappointment “that [the students] seemed to have stopped at the title instead of opening the book and reading its contents.” If history, tampered with as it has always been tampered with in totalitarian states, is at the mercy of whatever the system wishes, in its moment of power, to dominate, we will all be enslaved.

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