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Words Gone Sour?¹

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In 2002, the Washington state legislature passed a bill characterizing the word *Oriental* as “pejorative,” prohibiting its future use in publically funded materials, and urging “...all state and local entities to review their statutes, codes, rules, regulations, and other official documents and revise them to omit the term *Oriental* when referring to persons of Asian descent.”² Champions of the bill claimed that “[t]he word *Oriental* carries with it racist overtones...,”³ that it characterizes those to whom it is applied as “exotic, strange, and so forth,”⁴ and that it offers “...a Eurocentric depiction of the worst of Asian habits and lifestyles.”⁵

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² Washington State Engrossed Senate Bill 5954 (2002).

³ Representative Velma Veloria, quoted in Cherie M. Querol Moreno, “Washington State Illegalizes ‘O’ Word,” *Philippine News*, Nov 22, 2002.

⁴ State Senator Paul Shin, quoted in *ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.* New York state passed similar legislation in 2009, with Governor David Paterson announcing: “With this legislation, we take action against derogatory speech and set a new standard....The word ‘Oriental’ does not describe ethnic origin, background or even race; in fact, it has deep and demeaning historical roots.” New York State, Official

Discussing the bill with a reporter, a legislative aid noted that many speakers who used *Oriental* “didn’t realize the term had negative connotations;” some, despite having been provided with “historical evidence and dictionary references,” “simply refused to believe the word was negative.”⁶ Perhaps such resistance stemmed from belief that the historical record was incomplete or erroneous, or that the dictionary had gotten it wrong. But it might also have arisen from a conviction that it wasn’t *up* to the dictionary, or the legislature, to settle the matter. That is, a speaker’s refusal to accept that *Oriental* was an offensive word could very well be due to her certainty that she didn’t mean any offense by it.

We have, however, a fair amount of philosophical evidence that the meaning of a word is not determined by the beliefs and intentions of the person using it. Theorists who endorse externalist, anti-individualist, or social theories of language all provide arguments to support their position that semantic facts are settled by a sometimes complex interplay between historical and environmental facts, rather than by the individual language user. Thus, as Jennifer Hornsby writes, one is not able to “unilaterally suspend the derogatory element of the meaning of a word in a language that one shares with others;”⁷ if our language is (as it seems to be) “genuinely social (not individualistic),” then “...a speaker expresses contempt for A when she uses certain words whether or not she herself feels contempt for A.”⁸

Statement: “Governor Paterson signs legislation to eliminate the use of ‘Oriental’ in state documents,” posted online at <http://blog.timesunion.com/capitol/archives/17963/oriental-banned-from-state-documents/>

⁶ Other speakers, the aide noted, “were very agreeable;” Querol, “Washington State Illegalizes ‘O’ Word.”

⁷ Jennifer Hornsby, “Meaning and Uselessness: How to Think about Derogatory Words,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* vol. 25 (2001), 128- 141: 131.

⁸ She continues: “The point might be useful in defending an assumption, which I am helping myself to here, that a shared language is prior to an idiolect in the order of

My aim in this paper is to highlight some important implications of a non-individualistic account of derogatory words. I will do so by critically examining an intriguing claim of Hornsby's: that derogatory words – words that, as she puts it, “apply to people, and that are commonly understood to convey hatred and contempt” – are **useless for us**.⁹ In their stead, she maintains, we employ neutral counterparts: words “that apply to the same people, but whose uses do not convey these things.”¹⁰ I will argue that Hornsby's distinctions – between *derogatory words* and *neutral counterparts*, and *them* (speakers who have use for the former) and *us* (who do not) – is not sustainable. I begin by considering examples that suggest that some of the words that some of us have use for are indeed derogatory. I then offer reasons for thinking that words that would presumably be identified as acceptable

philosophical explanation.” *Ibid.*, 139.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 128. Hornsby elaborates on this point in the following passages: “Derogatory words are ‘useless’ for us...there is nothing that we want to say with them” (129); “There is no need to take a particularly high-minded or moralistic stand to hold that derogatory words are useless. Most of us probably have no trace of a tendency to use them” (129); “In the case of derogatory words, it is not merely that one does not to count oneself among the words users so that one is not in a position to make their claims. One cannot endorse anything that is done using these words. And that is what I mean by useless – absolutely useless, as it were” (130).

Hornsby's central aim is to show that, as a consequence of this uselessness, derogatory words (which are unquestionably part of the language of our community) will remain untreated by our semantic account of that language. Her argument for this position is rather complex, but the reasoning takes roughly the following form:

- (1) Derogatory words are completely useless for us.
- (2) The meaning of a derogatory word can be given only via use of that word.

Therefore: Derogatory words will remain unaccounted for by our meaning theory. Hornsby does not argue for (1), although she characterizes our commitment to the uselessness of derogatory words as “ethical” in nature (128). In support of (2), she offers evidence that the “particular *overtones* or *connotations*” (138) carried by a derogatory word cannot be captured by anything other than a use of that word. Thus, on her view, that which makes a word derogatory (and thus renders it useless for us) is precisely what takes it beyond our reach as meaning theorists.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 128.

counterparts to derogatory words are not, in general, neutral.

1. The words we use

The Washington legislation mandated for state employees what Hornsby takes us to be in voluntary compliance with: a policy of uselessness for some particular piece(s) of language. Both Hornsby and the legislators attribute this uselessness to the fact that a word has a “derogatory element” as part of its meaning when it has been regularly used by speakers with problematic attitudes; someone lacking those attitudes would, therefore, express that derogatory element if she uses the word. This is built in to Hornsby’s position on uselessness: a word is useless for a speaker when she believes that what she would express were she to use it is not in line with her own attitudes and intentions:

In finding a word useless, we assume that we are not in a position to mean by it something different from that which those who use it mean. The assumption is borne out by practice.

When words—racist words, say—have been used too often in a way that purports to validate the attitudes they impart, there is nothing to be done except to find different words.¹¹

The problem, however, is that, if meaning is socially determined, then we will inevitably be in error about the meanings of some of the words that we use. And this appears to conflict with Hornsby’s contention that derogatory words are useless for us: for although one might

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 131.

have a sincere (and general) commitment to the uselessness of derogatory language, one might nonetheless use a word that is, in fact, derogatory.¹²

The fact that a word is in widespread use in one's general speech community, and is viewed as unproblematic by the typical member of that community, will not suffice to settle the question of whether it is derogatory. When the Washington legislators made their case against *Oriental*, they did so by highlighting the attitudes and beliefs that were prevalent among the word's originators and subsequent users, and emphasizing that these attitudes and beliefs derogated and demeaned those to whom the word was applied; they maintained that, as a result, the word was offensive and derogatory, even when used by a speaker who did not share those attitudes and beliefs. If we accept their argument, we should identify *Oriental* not as a word whose formerly neutral meaning has somehow 'gone sour', but rather, as a derogatory word that was, until relatively recently, used by speakers who either did not fully grasp its meaning, or did not recognize that that meaning was problematic. This is analogous to the way that practices that are discriminatory and harmful may not be recognized as such, even (indeed, perhaps most particularly) when they are widespread. And, unfortunately, there is no reason to maintain that we would not make this sort of error.

In a 1925 book titled *The Travel Diary of a Philosopher*, author Count Hermann Keyserling offered his assessments of people that he encountered during a year-long journey around the world, including:

¹² One could certainly take the "us" in Hornsby's claim (that derogatory words are useless for us) to refer only to speakers who in fact do not use derogatory words. (And this interpretation may well be good enough to serve her main aim in the paper, which is to explore the consequences for such a speaker's meaning theorizing.) I have deliberately chosen *not* to so interpret the claim, in large part because (as will soon become apparent) I think that we are too quick to presuppose that we (philosophers, well-scrupled people) are in the clear. (Hornsby herself suggests as much, when she writes that, not only do we not have a trace of a tendency to use such words, but are even surprised to find that we know what they mean.)

The Chinaman...is profound, perhaps the profoundest of all men. No one is rooted so deeply in the order of nature, no one is so essentially moral; and externals mean to no one as much as they do to him. Only profound men are capable of taking forms so seriously.¹³

Let it be well understood that I am to-day concerned with the definition of the general characteristics of the Chinese, not with their concrete and specialized embodiments...the Chinese substance is something very great, a life-force which, in power if not in richness, can hardly be excelled.¹⁴

Even the greatest Chinaman is *not* a personality in Goethe's sense... everything which presupposes a differentiated consciousness of uniqueness or singularity is beyond his power: thus, individual character, individualized love...for this reason the Chinaman lacks the personally creative quality which necessarily presupposes the consciousness of uniqueness...[i]n so far as the Chinese is not very individualized, one may say that he is on a lower level of nature than we are. No matter how little I like the dogma of evolution: a man as a mental being does develop in the sense of progressive differentiation, and in this way we have got further than the Chinese.¹⁵

¹³ Hermann Keyserling, *The Travel Diary of a Philosopher, Vol. II*, translated by J.H. Reece (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1925), 68.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 133-34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 134-5.

(However: “In cultural accomplishment the Chinaman is the most advanced man; the whole of his natural disposition is transfused with spirit, and its expression seems perfect everywhere.”¹⁶)

Keyserling’s book was favorably reviewed in the *Journal of Philosophy*, with the reviewer marveling at the way that Keyserling, “[a]fter a stay of a few weeks in an Oriental land, ...plumbs the nature of its people to a depth which few foreigners who have spent as many years among them have been able to reach.”¹⁷ The book was characterized as a “unique work of genius” in the *Philosophical Review*, whose reviewer wrote: “Count Keyserling has traveled from land to land, plunged into the movements of countries and races, so that he might think undisturbed!”¹⁸

There is no evidence that Keyserling intended to insult or express contempt for those whose physical vitality and perfect courtesy (and, alas, shallow nature) he was highlighting. Indeed, the *Journal of Philosophy* review noted Keyserling’s “...very sensitive intellectual conscience and a remarkably unprejudiced and judicial mind...,”¹⁹ and the *Philosophical Review* emphasized his “...tremendous *appreciation* of the virility of the racial stock in China and of the mental capacity of the Chinese as a people (italics mine).”²⁰ And yet, I submit, his attitudes and beliefs were problematic to a degree sufficient to qualify as *derogatory*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁷ James B. Pratt, Review of *The Travel Diary of a Philosopher*, by Hermann Keyserling, *Journal of Philosophy* 22 (1925), 693-697: 696.

¹⁸ Rufus Jones, Review of *The Travel Diary of a Philosopher*, by Hermann Keyserling, *The Philosophical Review* 35 (1926), 279-284: 280.

¹⁹ Pratt, Review of *The Travel Diary of a Philosopher*, 697.

²⁰ Jones, Review of *The Travel Diary of a Philosopher*, 280.

Derogation is standardly portrayed as involving an overtly negative attitude, or the explicit linking of membership in a particular group with possession of some negative feature(s). But, as the striking poem “Asian is not Oriental” makes clear, this is not always so:

ASIAN

is not

Oriental

head bowed, submissive, industrious

model minority

hard working, studious

quiet

...

ORIENTAL

is a white man's word

Oriental is jap, flip, chink, gook

it's “how 'bout a backrub mama-san”

it's “you could teach them

a thing or two”

...

WE

are not Oriental

we have heard the word all our lives

we have learned to be Oriental

we have learned to live it, speak it,

play the role

and to survive in a white world
become the role
the time has come
To look at who gave the name..²¹

Elucidation of this particular form of derogation is given by Michelle Moody-Adams:

The 'conceptual space' that a society historically makes out for a disfavored group places very definite boundaries on what those not in that group will think of them... One of the most dangerous – and least questioned – distortions is the notion that the disfavored group has some psychological and behavioral 'essence' that is allegedly genetically transmitted and inescapably possessed by all members of the group. Moreover, *beliefs about the alleged essence of some group need not be primarily negative in order to have destructive consequences* (italics mine).²²

To be specified by the term *Chinaman*, and on that basis identified as one who is profound and possessing great physical vitality, is to be demeaned and insulted; it is to confront an attitude that denies that you, as a person, have the standing to determine your basic features and value, and that rules out the possibility that such can vary among those of your *kind*. If such attitudes and beliefs prevailed among the originators and subsequent users of the *Chinaman* (or its German equivalent) employed by Keyserling, then it was a

²¹ "Asian Is Not Oriental," by an unknown poet, <http://home.snu.edu/~hculbert/asian.doc>.

²² Michelle Moody-Adams, "Race, Class and the Social Construction of Self-Respect," in *African-American Perspectives and Philosophical Traditions*, ed. John P. Pitman, 251-266: 259.

derogatory word, even if it failed to give pause to those editing and reading the esteemed philosophical journals of the day.

We are now in a position to draw a three-part conclusion:

(1) Hermann Keyserling's beliefs and attitudes concerning those whom he would specify with the word *Chinaman* were derogatory and offensive;

(2) Philosophical contemporaries with sufficient standing to review his book in leading journals alluded to those very attitudes and beliefs when they wrote admiringly of Keyserling's "very sensitive intellectual conscience and... remarkably unprejudiced and judicial mind."²³ Thus, it is very likely that the attitudes and beliefs that prevailed among Keyserling's contemporaries were no better (and probably in many cases worse) than his;

(3) When a word for people is introduced by those who hold derogatory attitudes towards, or beliefs concerning, those people, or when, over time, such attitudes and beliefs generally and consistently accompany uses of that word, then those attitudes, beliefs, and conceptions are part of the word's meaning, and are part of what is expressed by anyone who uses the word – even someone who does not share them.

Given (1)-(3), we must, I think, reject Hornsby's claim that "derogatory words are useless for us." Keyserling should surely fall within the scope of her "us" – he was, after all, an upstanding philosopher, lauded while he lived for promoting "...an internationalist outlook and

²³ Pratt, Review of *The Travel Diary of a Philosopher*, 694.

an attitude of toleration and understanding.”²⁴ But Keyserling had use for *Chinaman*, and *Chinaman* was derogatory; this suffices to show that there is no in-principle exclusion of derogatory words from our vocabularies.

2. Whence neutrality?

Moreover, I will argue, we should not hold out much hope for *neutrality* in the supposed counterparts of many derogatory words. This is because, in the cases that I will consider, both the derogatory and the counterpart word are implicated in the perpetuation of perceptions that underlie a wide range of problematic practices. More specifically: when it is indeed a social fact that members of a particular group are, in virtue of their membership, subject to discrimination, restriction, or violence, the meaning of the words by means of which the group and its members are specified will reflect the particular disfavor in which they are held. This is not to say that all such words are equally problematic – the fact that, as Hornsby notes, some words “suit us better” than others provides *prima facie* evidence that they are not (although it may also be that we find a word suitable because we are ignorant of certain social facts, or of the wrongness of their holding). Nonetheless: when the practices of classification from which a word obtains its meaning are marked by non-neutral assessment and attribution, we cannot maintain that the word is fundamentally different from the ones that we identify as derogatory, even if we find it more suitable in certain ways.²⁵ Although my

²⁴ J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* (Routledge 1997), 109.

²⁵ In “We Must be Hunters of Words: Race, Metaphor, and the Models of Meaning,” D. Marvin Jones takes a similar position: “our dusty old orthodoxy about race holds that stereotypes are bad. My point is that the fabric of racial identity is itself woven from stereotypical images.” *Brooklyn Law Review* 67 (Summer 2002), 1071-1095: 1085.

discussion will largely focus on words for race and ethnicity, much of what I say, I believe, also holds for words for gender and sexual orientation.

Words like *Asian*, *Black*, and *White* are used to address or describe groups of people – “Applications from Black students are especially encouraged,” “Whites Only,” “Asians are good at math,” etc. – or to characterize a particular individual – “Andrea is Asian,” “Paulette is Black, but she looks White,” etc. To maintain that these words are neutral is, presumably, to take their meaning to be exhausted by their classificatory function, and to see them as classifying by way of *description*, not *evaluation*.

So, for example, a word like *Asian* would qualify as neutral in virtue of meaning something like *persons born in East or Southeast Asia*. We would, however, immediately confront the fact that *Asian* is not applied to those born in Shanghai of parents who were themselves born in England, but is applied to many born in England. The candidate meaning might then be modified by an appeal to ancestry, with a formulation like *persons having origins in...*²⁶ The problem is that it does not seem that *having origins in...* can be fleshed out in a way that captures the way that we apply the this sort of term.

In particular, our practices suggest that we operate with the background belief that *each person can be racially classified*. This point is emphasized by journalist Lisa Khoo (whose ancestry is Chinese, Malay, English, and Scottish (or White and Asian)), who notes that she and other “mixed-race people” constantly face the question “What are you?”²⁷ The ubiquity of

²⁶ For example: “White” designates persons “having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa;” “Black” designates those persons “having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa” (note the inclusion of the word “Black” in the definition of “Black”), etc. US Census Bureau, http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/meta/long_RH1225209.htm.

²⁷ Lisa Khoo, “Mixed Blessings: Mixed-Race Identity,” CBC News, September 7, 2007, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/mixedblessings/>.

the query reveals both the general presumption that there is an answer for each person, and the importance we assign to knowing what that answer is. (Think about what we would want to learn about someone before agreeing to a blind date: their sex, sexual orientation, race – we want to know: *what are they?*) A passage from Canadian novelist Lawrence Hill’s memoir clarifies what we need to learn in order to be satisfied:

Imagine me at a party, sipping mineral water. A stranger walks up.

STRANGER: "Do you mind me asking where you're from?" [This is code for "What is your race?"]

ME: "Canada." [This is code for "screw off."]

STRANGER: "Yes, but you know, where are you *really* from?" [This is code for "You know what I mean, so why are you trying to make me come out and say it?"]

ME: "I come from the foreign and distant metropolis of Newmarket. That's Newmarket, Ont., my place of birth." [Code for "I'm not letting you off the hook, buster."]

STRANGER: "But your place of origin? Your parents? What are your parents?" [Code for, "I want to know your race but this is making me feel very uncomfortable because somehow I'm not supposed to ask that question."²⁸

²⁸ Lawrence Hill, *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada* (Harper Collins 2001), 175.

Hill, in this exchange, answers the “What are you?” question in terms of *his* origins – where he comes from. He was born in Ontario; he is Canadian. But his questioner isn’t after *this* information. Learning the origins of Hill’s grandparents and great-grandparents – all born in the United States – probably wouldn’t do it either. That is: knowing about origins, even several generations back, won’t suffice to settle the “What are you?” question. To give a satisfactory answer, Hill would need to say “My father was Black, and my mother was White,” or “My great-great-great... grandparents were born in Africa.” With either of these answers, the questioner would have the information that he was after: Hill is Black.

The sociologist Ann Morning describes the beliefs and conceptions that underlie our actual practices of classifying by race:

An emphasis on *belief* in common descent, as well as *perception* of similarity and difference, is crucial for a useful definition of race. Without them, we could not account for the traditional American “one-drop” system of racial classification, for example. According to this logic, a person with one black great-grandparent and seven white great-grandparents is a black person, because their “drop of black blood” means they have more in common with blacks than with whites. This shows how we base racial classifications on socially contingent perceptions of sameness and difference, not on some kind of “natural” calculus.²⁹

It is in these “socially contingent perceptions of sameness and difference” that we will find the basis of our application, and interpretation, of terms like *Black* and *Asian*. The use of these

²⁹ Ann Morning, “Keyword: Race,” *Contexts* 4 (2005), 44-46: 45.

words is guided by a range of complex beliefs about what e.g. Asians are *like*; we take “...putative physical resemblances...to be emblematic of a host of other, often non-obvious attributes, properties, and competencies. Frequently these involve beliefs about morally laden and evaluative characteristics.”³⁰ Indeed, even at its most ‘clinical,’ the task of classification has been mixed with evaluation: “...to scientists, race has clearly meant more than just biology. In his early human taxonomy, Linnaeus described *Homo sapiens Afer* (African *Homo sapiens*) as ‘crafty, indolent, negligent; anoints himself with grease; governed by caprice,’ and *Homo sapiens Europeaeus* as ‘gentle, acute, inventive; ...governed by laws’.”³¹ Thus, when it comes to this sort of *kind-specification*, even in biology, it is far from clear that origin or ancestry is more central to the categories than appearance, “temperament, ability, and behavior.”³²

The particular constellation of beliefs, conceptions, and attitudes that is, in fact, *the* socially determined meaning of a particular racial term is, of course, not static. Tommie Shelby provides a useful example of this in a discussion of racist beliefs:

...beliefs [about what members of a particular race ‘are like’]... often shift and are reformulated given specific political contingencies, economic circumstances, and socio-historical context. And, with the possible exception of the belief in the reality of ‘races,’ no one belief is essential to the legitimating function of the belief system: during the period of American slavery, black slaves were commonly thought

³⁰ Lawrence Hirschfeld, *Race in the Making: Cognition, Culture, and the Child’s Construction of Human Kinds* (M.I.T. Press 1996), 5.

³¹ Ann Morning, “On Distinction,” from an online Social Science Research Council forum titled “Is Race ‘Real’?” June 7, 2006, <http://raceandgenomics.ssrc.org/Morning/>.

³² *Ibid.*

to be docile, superstitious, easily satisfied, and obsequious, but in the present postindustrial phase of capitalist development, blacks are more often viewed as socially parasitic, full of (unjustified) anger, irresponsible, and dangerous.³³

The fact that such words convey much more than membership in a particular class is made clearer by cases of deliberate misapplication:

The insult of calling a man a woman, a boy a girl, is as old as the hills and travels well. Hector, in what can only be described as trash talking, calls Diomedes, who flees before him, 'no better than a woman'... the category of the womanly man depends on a prior ungenerous notion of the courageous capacity of women. Women, however, were generally excused being called cowards; being called 'woman' was enough.³⁴

To learn a language is, in part, to receive guidance (explicit and implicit) from one's elders and peers on proper application and response to words. As a child, one comes to know that e.g. *Asian* or *Black* applies to *them*: persons whose ancestry is presumed to trace back to this or that place, who have certain appearance features, and who eat, talk, act, and think in particular ways. By the time that one is capable of reflecting on the beliefs and attitudes that guide one's linguistic practices, the categories have been established; their structuring of one's world are akin to lenses that fit snugly over the eyes – and so one can be unaware of how they shape the most basic perceptions and direct judgments, about both self

³³ Tommie Shelby, "Is Racism in the Heart?" *Journal of Social Philosophy* 33 (2002), pp. 411-420.

³⁴ William Ian Miller, *The Mystery of Courage*, (Harvard University Press, 2000): 233.

and others. And so it should not be surprising that, when we lose the focus provided by these beliefs and conceptions – e.g., when those auditioning for the orchestra are behind the screen – the judgments *change*.³⁵

The application criteria for terms like *Black, White, Asian, Woman*, etc. are not, therefore, neutral. They emerge from a complex interplay between (i) putative necessary and sufficient conditions for belonging to a particular category; (ii) beliefs about who is in the category, what those in category are like, and how those in the category should be responded to and treated; and (iii) the ways that (i) and (ii) direct and give content to a wide range of perceptions and judgments. The way that these purportedly neutral terms are implicated in creating and sustaining decidedly non-neutral categories means that they are not, in fact, so different from those that we would single out as derogatory.

In identifying a putatively classificatory word as derogatory in its *meaning*, we presumably want to insist that it is an ‘empty term’: after all, since no person is like *that* – for

³⁵ See Claudia Goldin and Cecilia Rouse, “Orchestrating impartiality: The Impact of ‘Blind’ Auditions on Female Musicians,” *The American Economic Review* 90, no. 4 (September 2000), 715-741. After analyzing a sample of 14,133 individuals and 592 audition segments, Goldin and Rouse found that the switch to blind auditions may explain between 30 percent and 55 percent of the increase in the proportion female among new hires, and between 25 and 46 percent of the increase in the percentage female musicians in orchestras from 1970 to 1966.

A straightforward advocate for retaining the traditional forms of audition was Otto Strasser, former chair of the Vienna Philharmonic, who maintained:

I hold it for incorrect that today the applicants play behind a screen; an arrangement that was brought in after the Second World War in order to assure objective judgments. I continuously fought against it, especially after I became Chairman of the Philharmonic, because I am convinced that to the artist also belongs the person, that one must not only hear, but also see, in order to judge him in his entire personality.... Even a grotesque situation that played itself out after my retirement was not able to change the situation. An applicant qualified himself as the best, and as the screen was raised, there stood a Japanese before the stunned jury. He was, however, not engaged, because his face did not fit with the ‘Pizzicato-Polka’ of the New Year’s Concert.

Quoted in William Osborne, “Why Did the Vienna Philharmonic Fire Yasuto Sugiyama?” <http://www.osborne-conant.org/sugiyama.htm>

example, *perfectly courteous and lacking in individuality in virtue of having origins in China* – the term *Chinaman* doesn't *really* apply to anyone. And yet: *Chinaman* has been *used*, at times widely and with seemingly little compunction, to specify people, either as a group or singly, and the people so classified have been so treated.

To take some representative late 19th/early 20th-century examples from the *New York Times*: on October 18, 1881, an article titled “One of the Tricks of the Chinamen” began: “For some time the Chinese, whose passion for gambling leads them to run all sorts of risks to satisfy their ambition to win a few dollars at games of chance, have been devising all sorts of schemes to beat the law;” April 6, 1893, the headline “Swarming with Chinamen” topped an article in which was described a particular “menace to the United States”: the fact that the province of British Columbia was “being overrun with Chinese, who are only awaiting an opportunity to smuggle themselves across the boundary line;” and, in additional headlines: “A Chinese Gambling Hell: Fourteen Chinamen Captured in a Den in Brooklyn” (1883); “Lying Chinamen” (1887); “Chinamen Attack Sleuth” (1910); “Pigtailed Cargo Seized: Three Chinamen Crossed from Canada in a Side-Door Pullman” (1913). Reading through these (and many, many other) articles in which *Chinaman* (and *Oriental*) appeared over decades, one would, I think, come to have a rather rich understanding of just what the term meant. And there is one sense in which it would be right to conclude: look, no one in reality was like *that*.³⁶

³⁶ Relatedly, the ‘Yellow Peril’ concept refers to “the supposed nightmare of Oriental hordes swarming from the East and engulfing the ‘civilized’ societies of the West;” it encompassed “diverse fears including the supposed threat of military invasion from Asia, competition to the white labor force from Asian workers, the moral degeneracy of Asian people, and the specter of genetic mixing of Anglo-Saxons with Asians.” Daniel A. Metraux, “Jack London: The Adventurer-Writer who Chronicled Asian Wars, Confronted Racism—and Saw the Future,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, http://www.japanfocus.org/-Daniel_A_-Metraux/3293.

But people were, nonetheless, identified and labeled as such. They were, as a result, subject to the particular practices deemed appropriate for that kind of person. In another *New York Times* article, titled “Chinamen Cannot be Citizens,” it was noted that a judge “denied the application of Moy Sam, a Chinaman, for naturalization” because the applicant was “a native of China, of the Mongolian race,” and thus, “not a white person within the meaning of the act of Congress.”³⁷ To hold, then, that “there are no x’s” is, in such cases, a form of wishful thinking, or denial; it was in virtue of *being a Chinaman*, after all, that Moy Sam was refused his petition for naturalization.

The words in widespread use now are different; but there is ample evidence of a continuing connection between categorization and consequences (as well as the widespread denial of such) from recent social psychology:

...the Implicit Association Test, or IAT for short...has been used to show that a great many people, including those who genuinely profess themselves to be racially impartial and explicitly disavow any form of racial prejudice, display subtle signs of racial bias in controlled experimental settings...Counterintuitive as it may seem, this robust pattern of results shows that a person’s avowed views on race and racism are not a reliable guide to whether or not they are implicitly biased.³⁸

Similarly, research on the phenomenon of “stereotype threat” strongly suggests that being reminded that one belongs to a particular category can negatively affect one’s performance on tests:

³⁷ “Chinamen Cannot be Citizens,” *New York Times*, March 1, 1881.

³⁸ Dan Kelly and Erica Roedder, “Racial Cognition and the Ethics of Implicit Bias,” *Philosophy Compass* 3 (2008), 522-540: 526-7; also cited in Marti (this volume).

...Black college freshmen and sophomores performed more poorly on standardized tests than White students when their race was emphasized. When race was not emphasized, however, Black students performed better and equivalently with White students.³⁹

The claim that an individual speaker is not the master of her words' meanings can thus be seen to be true at two levels. First, there are the issues already highlighted, having to do with individualism versus anti-individualism in thought and language. If the anti-individualist is right, the meaning of a word is determined, not by the overt beliefs and intentions of the particular speaker who uses it, but by various social and historical facts holding in the speech community within which it has been introduced and used. And second, we appear to be unreliable judges of the beliefs, conceptions and attitudes that underlie our own classification practices. To take a representative example:

One recent study investigated the effect of race on hiring practices in two U.S. cities. Researchers sent out fabricated resumes to Help Wanted ads appearing in major newspapers in Boston and Chicago.

³⁹ Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson, "Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African-Americans," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69 (1995), 797-811. W.E.B. Dubois noted the existence of what he evocatively labeled "double consciousness":

The Negro is a seventh son born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world—a world which yields him *no true selfconsciousness*, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always...measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.

W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903): 36.

Half of the resumes were headed by a very Black sounding name (e.g., Lakisha and Jamal), while the other half were headed by a very White sounding name (e.g., Emily and Greg). The results were remarkable: overall, resumes bearing White names received an astonishing 50 percent more callbacks for interviews than their Black counterparts... The amount of discrimination was fairly consistent across occupations and industries.⁴⁰

3. What is to be done?

Those who perceive the derogatory beliefs and harmful practices bound up with these practices of classification do not, however, uniformly argue for elimination of the classificatory term. The origins of *Indian* (or *American Indian*) are similar to those of *Oriental*: both were introduced to specify particular 'others' towards whom negative attitudes and treatment were directed. And yet, when, in the 1960s, an intended replacement term for *Indian* was introduced, it received a mixed reception. Lakota activist Russell Means wrote: "I abhor the term Native American... I prefer the term American Indian *because* I know its origins. ...We were enslaved as American Indians, we were colonized as American Indians and we will gain our freedom as American Indians – and then we will call ourselves any damn thing we choose (*italics mine*)."⁴¹

Means' assessment of *American Indian* is two-fold. On the one hand, he fully acknowledges that it was introduced by outsiders as a means of labeling those that they

⁴⁰ Kelly and Roedder, "Racial Cognition and the Ethics of Implicit Bias," 523.

⁴¹ Russell Means, "I am an American Indian, not a Native American!" (1998), <http://www.russellmeans.com/russell.html#HOME>.

would target for enslavement and colonization. By highlighting the fact that he “knows its origins,” and that he and others so-classified have yet to gain their freedom, Means indicates that *Indian* is, here and now, inextricably linked to the negativity of the past; it is in no way a neutral word. And yet he rejects *Native American* – presumably, because those who would wield it might consider themselves to be in consequence unburdened by those past attitudes and actions. But, as Means points out: he and other present-day American Indians continue to be limited by those attitudes, and by the consequences of actions that they justified. He is (still) *an Indian* – unquestionably a member of a historically problematic category, and subject to various ills as a result.

"What is an Indian?" - I take it that Means' answer would be something like "a person who, in virtue of being so identified by Whites, is viewed, and treated, as savage, threatening, inferior, and thus a legitimate target for colonization and brutalization". It is from particular social practices and historical events that the category Indian, and the term *Indian*, emerged; to offer a replacement word is to buy into the fiction that *that very category* could be 'neutralized,' and the past attitudes and practices from which it arose severed from present circumstances.⁴²

⁴² Similarly, Indian activist Christina Berry wrote:

While the new politically correct terms were intended to help ethnic groups by giving them a name that did not carry the emotional baggage of American history, it also enabled America to ease its conscience. The term Native American is so recent that it does not have all the negative history attached. Native Americans did not suffer through countless trails of tears, disease, wars, and cultural annihilation -- Indians did. The Native people today are Native Americans not Indians, therefore we do not need to feel guilty for the horrors of the past. Many Indians feel that this is what the term Native American essentially does -- it white-washes history.

From "What's in a Name? Indians and Political Correctness," *All Things Cherokee*, http://www.allthingscherokee.com/articles_culture_events_070101.html.

Just how difficult it is to actually make such breaks with the past is nicely (albeit inadvertently) illustrated in Hornsby's paper. She provides an excerpt from R.M. Hare's *Freedom and Reason*, in which Hare considers the way that "our language can be a vehicle for new ideas."⁴³ Hare mentions the epithet commonly referred to as *the n-word*, and registers relief that he is not "confined to" using it when speaking to a person at whom it might be aimed by others. In her reproduction of Hare's passage, Hornsby replaces *the very word that Hare chooses to use instead*, and tells us that her "alterations to the original, signaled with square brackets, are designed to remove connotations which have accrued to Hare's own words with the passage of time, and which could only be a distraction from the present point."⁴⁴ The "old ideas," as we see, sometimes prove stronger than the word.⁴⁵

Moreover: even when a new idea gains hold, it may not much disturb the old:

During the mass immigrations of the late 1800s and early 1900s,

⁴³ R.M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford University Press, 1965), 25.

⁴⁴ Hornsby, "Meaning and Uselessness," 133. I use *n**** to represent occurrences of 'the n-word,' which is present in the texts of both Hare and Hornsby. Hare wrote: "...if we want, in the Southern States, to speak to a negro as an equal, we cannot do so by addressing him as a *n****; the word '*n****' encapsulates the standards of the society; and, if we were confined to it, we could not break free of those standards. But fortunately we are not so confined; our language, as we have it, *can* be a vehicle for new ideas." *Freedom and Reason*, 25.

Hornsby reproduces Hare's passage in this way: "If we want, in [a particular locality] to speak to a [black person] as an equal, we cannot do so by addressing [her] as a *n****; the word '*n****' encapsulates certain standards; and, if we were confined to it, we could not break free of those standards. But fortunately we are not so confined; our language, as we have it, *can* be a vehicle for new ideas." "Meaning and uselessness," 133.

⁴⁵ See Tom W. Smith, "Changing Racial Labels: From 'Colored' to 'Negro' to 'Black' to 'African American'," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 56 (1992), 496-514. Smith notes that "*Negro* was defined to stand for a new way of thinking about Blacks. Racial progress and the hopes and aspirations of Blacks ...were to be captured by the term *Negro*, and old racial patterns in general and Southern racial traditions in particular were to be left behind with *Colored*." (498) However: "...the term *Negro* itself eventually fell under attack. In order to break from the past and to shed the remnants of slavery and racial serfdom, it was argued that a new name was needed....*Black* was promoted as standing for racial pride, militancy, power, and rejection of the status quo." (499)

within the U.S. there was contentious, at times violent, response to the Federal government policies that permitted people from European ethnic groups not typically found in the U.S. to enter... once those who were judged white for immigration purposes were here, they became citizens and despite possible hostile reception, had the opportunity to gradually adopt the ideologies, norms, and practices of whiteness, to be accepted as white, and to become entitled to the accompanying systemic advantages. Those who applied as white but were judged to be non-white, East Indians, for example, were refused the right to become naturalized citizens, denied the privileges awarded white citizens (voting, for example), and were not given the same chances to be assimilated as white.⁴⁶

So: what's to be done?

Those who theorize about meaning, Hornsby tells us, must do a "credible" job of capturing the "commitments of speakers who apply the word."⁴⁷ I hope to have shown that doing this requires a greater engagement with history, psychology and sociology that has perhaps been the norm among philosophers of language.

The job of ordinary speakers is harder. In my view, there is little reason to hope for *truly* neutral words to replace those whose meaning so inextricably mixes the descriptive and the evaluative. Sally Haslanger clarifies the nature of our problem when she writes: "...to say that I am a White woman is to situate me in complicated and interconnected systems of

⁴⁶ From Judy Helfand, "Constructing Whiteness," in *Race, Racism and the Law* (2002), ed. Vernellia Randall, online at <http://academic.udayton.edu/race>.

⁴⁷ "Meaning and Uselessness," 135.

privilege and subordination that are triggered by interpretations of my physical capacities and appearance.”⁴⁸ In the end, I find myself in agreement with her conclusion: “when justice is achieved, there will no longer be...Whites or members of any other race.”⁴⁹

The problem is that it does not seem to be within our power as individual speakers to ensure that our talk is in line with justice (or even its pursuit). To end with a brief example that illustrates the sort of difficulty that we face: writing the majority opinion in a case involving determination of congressional districts, Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor maintained that the re-drawing of congressional district boundaries in the state of North Carolina in order to create "majority-minority" districts amounted to "political apartheid," and reinforced "impermissible racial stereotypes." O'Connor concluded that "racial classifications of *any sort* pose the risk of lasting harm to our society. They reinforce the belief, held by too many for too much of our history, that individuals should be judged by the color of their skin (*italics mine*)."⁵⁰ And yet, as a federal district court noted in upholding the redistricting plan, in the years between 1901 and 1992 North Carolina had elected not a single Black representative to congress, even though at least a quarter, and at times up to a third, of the state's population during those years was Black.⁵¹ Thus, it seemed that race needed to be taken into account when district boundaries were determined, if there was to be a chance for a different outcome; O'Connor might find racial classification to be impermissible, but the

⁴⁸ Sally Haslanger, "What are we talking about? The semantics and politics of social kinds," *Hypatia* (2005), 10 – 26: 11.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁰ Sandra Day O'Connor, Majority Opinion, *Shaw v. Reno* (1993), 509 U.S. 630.

⁵¹ "North Carolina – Race and Hispanic Origin: 1790 to 1990," U.S. Census Bureau.

citizens of North Carolina had, decade after decade, largely voted along racial lines, and so appear to have found such classifications to be of use in the voting booth.⁵²

The bind that we are left in is this: there seems to be little hope of thinking and acting as we would wish, as long as we continue to operate with, and thus sustain, our non-neutral words and categories. And yet: to find them useless in an instant, in the way suggested by O'Connor (and, in a more limited way, the champions of *Native American*), is no solution; to do so would leave us without a means of accurately representing, scrutinizing, and addressing the injustice that has been, and *is*.

⁵² In the 2008 United States presidential election, Barack Obama received the majority of the popular vote in the state of North Carolina, with a margin of victory of .33% over John McCain.