FOREWORD TO THE SECOND EDITION.

ANTIBLACKNESS AND THE USE OF THE N-WORD IN ACADEMIA

This second edition comes about because of important feedback I received concerning Chapter 1 from several Black-identified readers. While there are small edits to other chapters, the main and most important changes are to Chapter 1. In the first edition's Chapter 1, I responded to Jerry Farber's metaphor for students as N-words, and continued that train of reflecting. I also used a variant of the N-word later in the chapter after quoting it from Dead Prez, a Black rap music group.[1] Through this discussion, I confused the enslaved Black body with Black people as slaves, suggesting unintentionally an inherent slave subjectivity to Black people. Thus, through this languaging, I participated in antiblackness.

While I did not mean to do this, my inability to recognize my antiblack languaging led me to do deeper researching and reflecting. I would not have been able to do this if it were not for several Black readers of the chapter, all of whom have my gratitude. I'm also thankful for their willingness to offer me feedback. Those discussions, and my own further research, thinking, and reflecting, which I've rendered in this foreword, helped me make significant changes to Chapter 1.

I am grateful to my Black colleagues who offered me important counsel and support in thinking through the antiblack elements of Chapter 1. They are Xyan Neider, Claudine Richardson, Joe Lott, DuValle Daniel, and J. D. Hudspeth. I thank my Latina colleague, Leticia Lopez, who gave me wise counsel about my own earlier tactics of avoidance and denial. I also thank my white colleagues, Jennifer Whetham and Dutch Henry, who offered their support too. And of course, I thank Marlyn Thomas, the Black colleague and reader who initiated the conversation about the chapter. Without her reading and feedback, I would not have had the opportunity to grow in the ways I have. I also thank several close colleagues and friends. I thank Frankie Condon

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1   I understand that all people in contemporary society are racialized in some way, not always uniformly or consistently. Thus when I reference individuals' or groups' racial designations, such as a "Black author" or a "white author," I mean an author who is identified as Black, or a white-identified author, which means they are racialized as such through systems and social environments. This racializing pertains to both the ways a person identifies, or interpellates themselves, and the way others may identify them racially. At times, I use phrases like "Black person" or "Black-identified person" to mean the same thing.

who offered me a careful reading of this foreword. I thank Neisha-Anne Green who provided me with wise feedback on several key points. I thank Mike Palmquist for his support, understanding, thoughtful feedback, and careful editorial help. Finally, I'm indebted and grateful to my dear friend Vershawn A. Young, who carefully read Chapter 1 and versions of this forward and discussed them with me. As usual, he's been an important guide for me on these matters. Thank you, brother.

As I begin, I offer a warning. Some of the quotations I use to discuss the N-word reproduce the actual word, which I will not do in my prose. As my discussion explains, there are conflicting positions on reproducing the N-word in this way. I choose to leave it as originally published by Black authors in order to honor and value their languaging, and not engage in further silencing of Black voices. But I realize that, for some readers, the word, however reproduced, may be a trigger. I am still working through how to address this contradiction. I hope those readers who disagree with this practice will have compassion for and patience with me. I do not reproduce the N-word lightly, and I continue to consider carefully the impact of that on Black readers.

DEFINING ANTIBLACKNESS

Some readers may not be familiar with the concept of "antiblackness," at least in the ways I'm using it in this foreword. It is not the same as being racist, which is too broad a term. So I start with a brief discussion of antiblackness, one that offers a way to hear the urgency and contingency in my foreword's larger discussion. It also may help some readers understand better the ways that antiblackness is a part of all of our global histories and societies, making it important for all of us to confront in our own teaching, languaging, and lives. So for me to say that I have participated in antiblackness is to admit to my own enculturation in our antiblack societies and histories, something we all inevitably participate in. It is also an important step toward dismantling antiblackness in my own life and languaging, which is a lifelong process.

In their introduction to *Antiblackness*, João H. Costa Vargas and Moon-Ke Jung explain that racism is not the same as antiblackness. To explain the difference, they say that "[a] world without racism requires deep transformations in social practices and structures. A world without antiblackness necessitates an entirely new conception of the social, which is to say a radically different world altogether" (7). Thus racism is primarily a set of structural conditions that create various kinds of oppression and inequality. It is dismantled in policies, practices, and procedures in classrooms, institutions, and other settings. While antiblackness can be found in the structural, in our conditions, it is also a deeply embed-

ded part of how everyone is asked to be oriented in the world, how we all come to orient ourselves in the world, how we come to understand what is human and its opposite, what is inhuman. In another important sense, antiblackness is a part of Althusserian interpellation that constitutes each of us, the hails that make us who we think we are, that call us to be and act in the world in the ways we do, and understand ourselves and others in particular ways, ways that usually feel "normal" or "natural" to us.

This new conception of the social that Vargas and Jung speak of references the ways that throughout history, particularly in the very influential Western European world, Blackness has been a key way to define good and bad, right and wrong, human and inhuman, and consequently to define various kinds of people. While most race theorists and historians, such as Ivan Hannaford, Nell Painter, David Theo Goldberg, and George Fredrickson, have argued that the concept of race (and racism) didn't gain purchase until the Enlightenment (the 17th and 18th centuries), a term itself that uses the binary of light versus dark (white vs. black) as a reference, more recently some historians have argued that race was more than nascent in earlier periods. Debra Strickland has argued that in medieval texts there is a "symbolic equation of black with spiritual darkness, implying the concomitant equivalence of white with spiritual enlightenment." Thus Strickland says that the perceived "blackness of the Ethiopians obliterated their humanity . . . Ethiopians were transformed from living humans into symbols [of the demonic]" (Strickland 84, 86; quot. from Mills 21). Geraldine Heng's recent award-winning book, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, makes a similar kind of argument about the concept of race in the middle ages, and Blackness was usually framed as negative. Heng explains: "Within Christianity the color black accrued a slate of negative significations that yoked the 'abstraction' of blackness . . . to sin, ignorance, shame, error, and the state of redemption preceding forgiveness and salvation, as well as . . . to the devil, the demonic, the infernal, and the damned" (186).

Perhaps one reason many contemporary scholars of race have missed these earlier conceptions of race in their histories, which as Charles Mills points out go back to Aristotle (22), may have something to do with where they've been looking. As Heng's and Strickland's separate discussions suggest, there are recent discussions of the origins of antiblackness in Christian history and theology. In an impressive doctoral dissertation in Pan-African Studies, John Chenault argues that the concept of Blackness existed in early Christian doctrine, inherited from ancient Greek texts, which became important centuries later after emancipation in the US.

Chenault argues that "early Christian theologians categorically imposed conceptual metaphors about *Blackness* on African people that depicted them as the exemplars of evil to teach Christian doctrine about sin and salvation" (v). He too

finds that early concepts of Blackness linked to Ethiopians go back to Homer, in which the original term, "Αιθίοψ (*Aithiops*/Ethiopians) derives from two Greek words: αἴθω (*aitho*, 'I burn') + ὤψ (*ops*, 'face')" (43). This means that the literal translation for the ancient Greek *Aithiops*/Ethiopians is "burnt face." Drawing on a range of classical scholars, Chenault concludes that Aristotle's concept of "natural slaves" and the Greek concept of *Aithiops*/Ethiopians was important to later notions of Blackness that yoked Blackness to slave as a natural condition and even an inhuman one. He concludes, "This concept of natural slavery also became a mainstay in the early discourses the West devised to justify African dehumanization and enslavement and as a counter argument to combat the growing threat of abolitionism in the early nineteenth century" (60).

The theological scholar Katie Grimes draws on some of these discussions to define antiblackness in theological studies, and it's useful for my discussion. Grimes explains that antiblackness is really "antiblack supremacy." In contemporary society, its key tenet is "to preserve the association between both blackness and black people and slave status" (172). And the association to Black "slave status," a unique condition historically says Grimes, is key to contemporary notions of antiblackness. She explains that the slave condition "renders its victims natally alienated and socially dead" (173). Like most who discuss antiblackness, Grimes draws heavily on the Jamaican sociologist Orlando Patterson and his influential 1982 book, *Slavery and Social Death*. In that book, Patterson explains that slavery is "the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons" (Patterson 5), which Grimes reiterates is "a substitute for death, usually a violent death" (Grimes 173).

Much of the current formulations of antiblackness, however, come out of Frank B. Wilderson's theorizing of "Afro-pessimism." In a 2018 article, "Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption,"[2] which he made into a 2020 book on the subject, Wilderson explains that Afro-pessimism is premised on a particular understanding of Blackness that is also influenced by Patterson's discussion of the slave:

> Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness. Blackness *is social death*, which is to say that there was never a prior meta-moment of plenitude, never a moment of equilibrium, never a moment of social life. Blackness, as a paradigmatic position (rather than as an ensemble of identities, cultural practices, or anthropological accoutrement), cannot be disimbricat-

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2   A version of this article by Wilderson was originally published a few years earlier. See Frank B. Wilderson, "Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption," *The Occupied Times*, 30 March 2016. https://theoccupiedtimes.org/?p=14236.

ed from slavery. The narrative arc of the slave who is *Black* (unlike Orlando Patterson's generic slave who may be of any race) is *not an arc at all*, but a flat line, what Hortense Spillers (2003) calls "historical stillness": a flat line that "moves" from disequilibrium to a moment in the narrative of faux equilibrium, to disequilibrium restored and/or rearticulated. To put it differently, the violence which both elaborates and saturates Black "life" is totalizing, so much so as to make narrative inaccessible to Blacks. This is not simply a problem for Black people. It is a problem for the organizational calculus (Spillers 2003) of the Humanities writ large. (Wilderson n.p.)

Thus it is the Black person's direct association to slaveness that is unique to Blackness, an abstraction that, as Heng has already explained, is historically equated to "sin, ignorance, shame, error . . . as well as . . . to the devil, the demonic, the infernal, and the damned." According to Wilderson's Afropessimism, to be Black today, as it has been throughout history, is to be inextricably bound to the category of slave, that is a category that equates to "social death."

In his discussion of Wilderson's Afropessimism, Greg Tate explains that "Wilderson believes that the binary frame for the world's pathological anti-Blackness shouldn't be whites vs. Blacks but 'Slaves' (Blackfolk) vs. 'Humans' (white dudes, mostly)" (n.p.). This framing emphasizes the continuing category of Blackness as slave in society that has always operated. Furthermore, as Vinson Cunningham explains, "One of the bleakest aspects of Afropessimist thought is its denial that there is any meaningful analogy between Blacks and other nonwhites . . . In Wilderson's view, 'people of color'—a term he uses for those who are neither white nor Black—are 'junior partners' to whites in the enslavement of Blacks" (n.p.). This centrality of Blackness is critical to how society orients itself, how people orient themselves, how we all in some way get interpellated as white, Black, brown, Asian, Latinx, etc. Antiblackness is the orientation that makes not just whiteness and white supremacy, but all orientations that might be cast as human, since the human is also defined by the nonhuman or inhuman.

Kihana Miraya Ross too glosses Wilderson's notion of antiblackness as a part of the "structural reality" of society. She links it to Black personhood, as Wilderson does, and reiterates that "blackness is inextricably tied to 'slaveness'" (n.p.). Antiblackness does not require an operating system of chattel slavery to be present. It's a continual state of "abjection" in which the "afterlife of slavery," as Saidiya Hartman coins it, remains. As Vargas and Jung explain, "Since the dawn of modernity, Black people have been progressively, singularly positioned – materially and sym-

bolically – as the 'slave race' around the globe" (4). Ultimately, as Ross explains,

> Anti-blackness describes the inability to recognize black
> humanity. It captures the reality that the kind of violence that
> saturates black life is not based on any specific thing a black
> person—better described as "a person who has been racialized
> black"—did. The violence we experience isn't tied to any par-
> ticular transgression. It's gratuitous and unrelenting. (n.p.)

All of this means that antiblackness is a deep part of our dominant ideological structures, the hegemonic, by which whiteness, and white supremacy, are constituted in our society, in our discourses, and in our ways of understanding ourselves. As all of the scholars I've been discussing have said in various ways, whiteness as a category or a concept requires Blackness. But when placed in Western binaries next to the category of white, which began at least as far back as Aristotle and the ancient Greeks, Blackness becomes antiblackness in order to prop up the category of white(ness). This is the premise that Robin DiAngelo begins with in her chapter on antiblackness (91). She further explains the ways antiblackness leads many white people to feel white guilt (95). Drawing on Carol Anderson's important work on the subject, antiblackness also leads many white(ly) people to "white rage" (DiAngelo 96). DiAngelo ends with a list of white fragile behaviors that result. All of these behaviors are a reaction to seeing, feeling, and understanding our antiblackness as a condition that we each must continually confront and hopefully dismantle in humble and compassionate ways. And this is what the rest of my foreword's discussion attempts to do, which began with a Black reader's response to Chapter 1 from the first edition of this book.

SOME BACKGROUND

Three years after this book was published, I received feedback on the chapter from a Black identified reader, Marlyn Thomas, who was involved in an antiracist project with other community college faculty in the state of Washington. The project asked those faculty to read the chapter for their antiracist teacher preparation. Thomas' critique of the original chapter led me to do some deep and extensive reading and reflecting on my own participation in antiblackness, in particular on my use and reproduction of the N-word in the chapter and my framing of the enslaved Black subject as slave without any recognition of the antiblackness in such a representation.[3] Over the months that I rethought,

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3   I capitalize "N-word" to keep in line with the tradition that started with W.E.B. Dubois' 1920s campaign to capitalize the term in print, as an "act of recognition and racial self-respect" (Smitherman, Word 55). While I will not use the term, because of the nature of this discussion,

researched, and revised the chapter, I also spent time in a "thinking document," a document where I summarized, reflected, and thought through the ideas, feedback, and texts with which I was engaging. This foreword is the direct product of that thinking document.

Thanks to the Black female readers in that antiracist project, most notably Marlyn Thomas and Xyan Neider, I began to do explicit work on my own antiblackness, work I thought I'd already done yet neglected to continue to do. While my thinking was meant to help me consider my own use of the N-word for academic purposes in Chapter 1, it goes deeper than that. Much of my thinking centers on whether or not an academic of color like me can use or reproduce the N-word for academic purposes without participating in antiblack languaging, but I'm also considering the paradoxes within these debates. I wonder about how anyone can discuss racist languaging, magical words like the N-word, words that Gorgias would say have incantatory powers that often bewitch us.[4] And I wonder how we can talk about antiblack languaging more generally, in ways that are meaningful and compassionate toward everyone, ways that work toward social and linguistic justice. Can an academic of color who is not Black-identified engage with, or even quote, the N-word without causing harm to Black readers even as they work to dismantle the word's antiblackness? Or maybe it is as Wilderson explains, that I am a "junior partner" with white people in the larger project of antiblackness, and this kind of dismantling is simply not possible given who I am in the world and how I'm read by others, particularly by Black readers. How might I escape this partnership, and can my journey start with thinking through my past use of the N-word?

Of course, I have never condoned the casual use of the term in any situation, nor do I believe it should be used in classrooms without a lot of careful and compassionate discussions and agreements beforehand. Even after all that, the conclusion may be to not use the term. I'm thinking of the good discussions around how to engage students with topics like the N-word and other racism-related topics that are discussed by Derald Wing Sue, Matthew R. Kay, and Helen Fox.

In the broadest sense, my central concerns in this foreword are these: How do non-Black identified scholars reference the N-word in their academic texts or presentations without participating in antiblackness or reproducing Black trauma and harm that the word creates in many Black identified readers and listeners? Is it even possible? Or should everyone's goal be to completely remove the word from

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many of the texts I use do employ the N-word, so when I quote from such texts, I will keep the term as originally published in order not to erase or elide the words of Black writers and scholars.

4   I'm drawing on Gorgias' sentiments in his fragment, "Encomium of Helen," where he explains that "speech is a powerful lord," and that it is like "Sacred incantations," "witchcraft and magic" (45).

all of our vocabularies given the term's history? Does its removal, or everyone's ignoring of the word, erase a part of Blackness itself that Black rhetors and academics draw on to do their work in ways that come out of their own Black histories and languaging conditions? Where do other scholars of color fit into these discussions of antiblackness and the N-word? What does it mean, for instance, for an Indian scholar from India to engage with the term, or a Mexican American scholar from the American southwest, or a Japanese American scholar from North Las Vegas like me?

Or perhaps, this concern around who can use, or even quote, the N-word is just a whitely preoccupation, a function of a haunting whitely anxiety that comes out of a white nostalgia around the use of the term, which ends up oppressing Black people and uplifting white people yet again. Maybe the answer is simple: No one can use the term but Black people, and all the other arguments about the term simply come out of whitely preoccupations that always end up oppressing Black people. There's strength to this argument, but then how does a scholar like me engage with texts from Black authors who use the term in their writing? Are they simply unquotable texts for me?

In their introduction to *The Rhetorics of Whiteness*, Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe draw on Freud to explain this phenomenon of whiteness, particularly its nostalgia and haunting qualities: "As an identification, whiteness functions . . . as a ghost, a haunting, that feeds on invisibility, nostalgia, and melancholy" (5). What they mean by haunting and invisibility in this definition, they explain, is that whiteness often functions in the world in enthymematic ways (6). It's a rhetoric that leaves out central premises or propositions, but still uses them, depending on them for coherence and meaning. The assumption of white bodies, whitely orientations, and whiteness as central organizing principles are the unstated propositions in such whitely enthymemes, but as Wilderson and others have pointed out, such whitely orientations assume an antiblack orientation. They assume Black subjectivity as inhuman and slave. We likely can find these kinds of invisible propositions in many of the discussions around the use of the N-word and antiblackness more generally. And this kind of framing of the discussions has been one source of fog and confusion for me, which I'll explain below.

And so, my discussion in the rest of this foreword attempts to offer a journey of sorts, one that moves through my thinking about the revisions of Chapter 1 and my own antiblack languaging more generally. What follows, I hope, opens up questions about, first, the academic use of the N-word by various racially identified academics; second, the limitations of past discussions of the use of the N-word, particularly through the ways the debate has been framed as a Black vs. white issue; and third, the deeper implications that the first two discussions have

to all antiblack languaging that circulates in our society and academic spaces. As I begin, though, please do not read this foreword with the assumption that I have figured everything out, or even most of the ideas and questions I engage with. I have not. I am still very much learning.

USING THE N-WORD

In an August 30, 2022, posting on the antiracist project's Canvas discussion boards, Marlyn Thomas provided a powerful critique of my use of the N-word in Chapter 1, which pushed the antiracist project's core group of organizers (me being one of them) to put the issue on our agenda to discuss in our next online convening with all the participants of the project. Thomas explains her reaction to Chapter 1 in the Canvas posting:

> This chapter gave me such a visceral response to the material starting about page 29. And this was not the sort of visceral response that helps a person or is good for a person. I don't think a person being exposed to racist language in an academic setting is for the person's "good" or to "help" or to assist in "resilience" which is all neoliberal racism. I find it interesting that even in antiracist work that there has to be space for nonBlack people to use the n-word. I don't understand it and I never will. And I hate that I have anticipated this the entire time and that it happened.

This is certainly not the experience I was wanting for Black readers. What I hear in Thomas' explanation of her reaction to the N-word and my use of its variant in the chapter is similar to the reaction that a group of "Concerned Black Stanford Students" had about the utterance of the N-word by a non-Black guest lecturer in an Introduction to Comparative Race and Ethnicity Studies course in the Spring of 2020.

The Black student group wrote a letter to the department, which also was published in *The Stanford Daily*. In the letter, the group offers a recounting of the incident, the flawed and insensitive responses by the Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity (CSRE) program, and a counter to the response letter that the program circulated. Thomas' reaction to my use of the N-word, I believe, can also be explained by these Black students' argument:

> Her [the guest speaker's] use of the slur added nothing to the academic environment of the class. Furthermore, we contest your argument that such words must be spoken aloud in

order to honor their historical significance. The harm enact-
ed when a non-Black speaker utters the word far outweighs
any perceived critical "benefit." In arguing that students
and instructors cannot "insulate ourselves completely from
the harmful effects of speech about racial inequality," you
presuppose Black pain as a necessity in any academic envi-
ronment studying race and ethnicity. You assume that Black
students must experience trauma in your courses in order for
non-Black students to learn. This presumption is flawed and
reiterates entrenched assumptions about the subjugated role
of Blackness in an academic context. To draw on the words of
Toni Morrison '75, "[t]he function, the very serious function
of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work.
It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for
being." Ultimately, Black students do not feel safe in the class-
room because they are forced to sacrifice their well-being for
those who do not share their histories or experiences. Black
personhood is sacrificed so that others are enlightened. This
makes it clear whom these courses are really meant to serve.

When I put Thomas' reaction next to the Stanford students' argument about
the mere presence of the N-word, even in academic discussions not meant to
demean or disparage anyone, I realize that there is always an element of Black
pain around the N-word, particularly when a non-Black identified person uses
it, even in academic spaces. As the Stanford students explain, the word is, at this
point in history, an embodiment of Black pain, hurt, enslavement, oppression,
degradation, and non/inhuman status. But the word is also many other things,
positive and warm things, for some Black people when they use the term. I think
this is why the term is so fraught, so difficult for some of us to navigate. The
word is everywhere in U.S. history and culture, and it's used in a variety of ways
by a lot of different people.

What convinces me the most in the Stanford students' explanation for why
they find the utterance of the word a problem from a non-Black speaker, why
the word is a source of antiblack languaging that must stop, is how any ar-
gument for an academic use of the N-word by non-Black people reproduces
educational conditions that are predicated on Black harm and pain. Thomas'
argument and the Stanford students' words make me pause and wonder in what
ways have my own pedagogies and assessment ecologies been predicated on or
ignored Black trauma. While Chapter 1 is the only instance in which I use the
N-word in my scholarship, and I've never had a discussion of the N-word in my

courses, there are likely other instances of antiblack languaging that I've committed. So I wonder: Is this the tip of a larger antiblack iceberg in my teaching, one mostly submerged?

Surely, if Wilderson's ideas about antiblackness are correct, then most of what we do in the classroom, all that we've been trained to do in Rhetoric and Composition, is predicated on antiblack languaging, even if we try to position ourselves against the "normal" antiblack ways of teaching writing. Being a writing teacher, performing that role in a university or college, means not being a writing teacher as much as being a *whiting teacher* whose duty it is to whiten all students with standardized English, bleaching tongues, rooting out Blackness without naming it. I've had this critique before, but I've not always realized just how much it depends on understanding antiblackness as a deep part of the colonial project of the college language classroom.

In our world, to promote a standardized English and a dominant whitely set of language habits, for whatever reasons, means also that we set ourselves against Blackness and Black languaging. Most of us likely never realize that we orient ourselves and our language teaching projects as antiblack. We just turn away from Blackness and toward whiteness, white habits of language, all of which promote white language supremacy. Ironically, in this foreword, in order for me not to silence Black voices on the use of the N-word, I have to reproduce that word in quotations from those authors. This is a contradiction that is not easily straightened out. How do you talk about something that is unmentionable?

Now, I don't believe any writing teacher wants any of their lessons or teachings to be paid for by Black pain, just as I don't think we want to cause anyone else pain through our lessons and pedagogies, nor do we want to promote white language supremacy. I don't think we want to be antiblack, but that's not the same as not participating in antiblackness. Wanting and doing are two different things. I do think that the pain the Stanford students are referring to is not merely transient discomfort, which I believe can be meaningful in learning contexts (I'll say more about this later). The Stanford students' conclusion that "Black personhood is sacrificed so that others are enlightened" seems to fit too well the history we know about the US, and it's the source of Wilderson's Afropessimism.

In my deeper searching for understanding, I found Langston Hughes' description of the N-word and the way many Black people often understand it. He is discussing the liberal white and conservative Black audience responses to the white author Carl Van Vechten's 1926 novel whose title uses the N-word in it. Hughes is writing in 1940:

> The word *nigger* to colored people of high and low degree is
> like a red rag to a bull. Used rightly or wrongly, ironically or

> seriously, of necessity for the sake of realism, or impishly for
> the sake of comedy, it doesn't matter. Negroes do not like it
> in any book or play whatsoever, be the book or play ever so
> sympathetic in its treatment of the basic problems of the race.
> Even though the book or play is written by a Negro, they still
> do not like it.
>
> The word *nigger*, you see, sums up for us who are colored
> all the bitter years of insult and struggle in America: the
> slave-beatings of yesterday, the lynchings of today, the Jim
> Crow cars, the only movie show in town with its sign up FOR
> WHITES ONLY . . . . (268-269)

He goes on to list more examples of Black bitterness and pain. But ultimately, Hughes finds Van Vechten's novel admirable, and argues that its title is an ironic critique of the segregation and Jim Crow conditions of his time. He finds Van Vetchen's depictions of the Black characters in Harlem to be sympathetic and complex. Hughes isn't alone in his praise of the novel, nor in his acceptance of a white author using the N-word. Nella Larsen, Walter White, Zora Neale Hurston, and Wallace Thurman all agreed in various ways with Hughes' take on the use of the word in such art (Asim 139).

In his own discussion, though, Hughes disagrees with the conversative Black opponents' objections to the novel, arguing that most of them never read the book, only the title (270). Hughes' argument suggests that context and effect of the N-word is vital to whether it can be used or not by a white author. But it is clearly dangerous territory to walk in since Hughes starts this discussion with the above description of the word. Now, when I pan back from Hughes' autobiographical book, looking at it as a fuller discussion, Hughes himself uses the N-word 42 times, mostly in quotations from others. But he also uses the word without quotes or italics on a few occasions in the book. In his own uses of the term, I hear a critique, an almost sarcastic wink to his reader, particularly when he uses it without quotations or italics after he's just quoted it.

For instance, early in the book in a chapter called, "Central High," a high school Hughes attended in Cleveland, which he says served mostly students of foreign-born parents and Black students. Hughes explains what he learned about the word at the high school from his peers:

> From the students I learnt, too, that lots of painful words can
> be flung at people that aren't *nigger*. *Kike* was one; *spick*, and
> *hunky*, others.
>
> But I soon realized that the kikes and the spicks and the

hunkies—scorned though they might be by the pure Americans—all had it on the niggers in one thing. Summer time came and they could get jobs quickly. For even during the war, when help was badly needed, lots of employers would not hire Negroes. A colored boy had to search and search for a job. (28)

For me, Hughes' use of italics for the terms initially calls attention to the words themselves, much like quotation marks, only louder. By dropping the italics in the next paragraph and using the terms with "the" in front of each, the passage reads to me like a sarcastic calling attention to the way those students are imagined through the language that Hughes remembers from high school. So the perspective I hear in the sentence is one of the speakers who use those terms and the way the terms help interpellate those students racially in larger systems of oppression, even as they form contradictions that Hughes identifies around getting summer jobs. Hughes calls our attention to the fact that racial oppression ain't equal.

Hughes' turning back to the terms "Negroes" and "colored boy" without "the" in front of them suggests to me his own voice and stance, the real lessons learned from his peers. It appears that the N-word is not a term Hughes uses very often, and, when he does, it's to call attention to it and the racialized contradictions it highlights, at least in *The Big Sea*. The three racist slurs may be painful for those whom they are spoken to, but they do not reference equally oppressed groups when you contextualize those groups in the economic conditions and social relations of Cleveland in the early part of the twentieth century. Hughes highlights the fact that all racist slurs ain't equal.

Originally, this was the kind of use of the N-word I thought I was embodying, calling attention to it in a way like Hughes. However, I neglected to consider the fuller politics that many Black readers bring to a reading of my book. As Hughes now shows me, there is an antiblackness always operating around Black bodies and the N-word. It is revealed in the economics of Cleveland, an economics that resists paying Black workers for their labor, resists even considering Black people as workers. Black people are slaves, goes the logic, so how can you hire and pay them? Thus the racist slurs are not equal.

More recently, I hear similar tensions in the use of the N-word in literature by Black academics and artists. As the Elma Lewis Distinguished Fellow and Professor at Emerson College, Jabari Asim has shown in his book on the N-Word that the history of this word is filled with Black pain and degradation as much as it is filled with other associations. For instance, while Asim notes that the term can be found in writing in the 17th century, it was perhaps most

prominently used a century later when the Scottish poet Robert Burns used it in a 1786 poem titled, "The Ordination," which yokes the word to the descendants of the Biblical character of Ham, a negative association (10). In many Christian traditions, Ham is the epitome of the marked body, the slave body. Thus the "curse of Ham" became the way many Christians, particularly in the US during legalized slavery, justified enslavement of Black people (Rae n.p.). It was a part of God's Will. Asim also shows in great detail the various ways that the N-word was commonplace in U.S. culture from the 18th century on, always conferring negative, inhuman, and degrading qualities. But what is not contested throughout U.S. history is the harm and hurt the N-word conjures for Black people, as the Black Stanford students explain in 2020.

And yet, even Asim is equivocal about whether the word should be present in academic work or art, like novels. He cites the famous example of *Huckleberry Finn*, in which the N-word shows up 215 times. Asim explains that "[h]ardly a year passes without an effort by blacks in some school district to have the book removed from reading lists," then gives an example from 1998 in which the NAACP attempted to ban the book as "hate speech" (110). He concludes that while he is "sympathetic toward those who are made uneasy by the language in *Huck Finn* [. . .] its merits as literature and as a teaching tool outweigh its shortcomings" (110).

Furthermore, Asim is not too keen on replacing the N-word with other terms in such texts, as some people have suggested. He argues that doing so would "not only undermine Twain's attempted fidelity to the customs and attitudes of mid-nineteenth-century Missouri but also dilute the impact of his scathing sendup of white hypocrisy" (111). Asim summarizes his own position by citing Shelley Fisher Fishkin's response to similar arguments: "If one is not willing to show racists, how can one effectively satirize racism?" (111). I want to make the same argument about academic uses of the N-word for pro-Black purposes. But if I cannot utter the word, then how do I do this kind of pro-Black languaging work? Perhaps literature and art are different from academic discussions and books? Much like Hughes, these arguments are squarely about fiction and art, not scholarship or nonfiction.

Vershawn A. Young's arguments for not banning the use of the N-word by Black-identified faculty at his university seem closer to considerations of the N-word in scholarship. Responding to his own university's ban of the word, Young argues that while he does not use the word in his own courses, unless it is quoted material, he feels "we should leave the Black cultural uses of the N-word relatively alone." Further, he explains that

> To forbid the N-word actually serves the purposes of white
> supremacy and resuscitates racism rather than defeat it. I say

> this because we know our society oppresses Black people.
> But do you know that we are also culturally suppressed in
> predominantly white spaces? Barring the N-word functions
> as a too-easy way to quash the six or seven insightful ways the
> word functions in Black culture. ("Banning" n.p.)

Young is arguing that outright bans of the N-word, which would include Black artists and scholars, equates to more Black cultural and linguistic suppression. It ignores the ways the word is used in Black culture by Black people, and such bans end up again silencing Black people.

The six or seven ways the word is used in Black culture is a reference to Gloria Naylor's 1986 *New York Times* essay, "What's In A Name?" (reproduced as "The Meanings of a Word"). Young references the essay in this article and discusses it in his book that uses a form of the N-word in its title (*Your Average* 62-63). Of course, Black cultural uses of the N-word that Young references, I think, implies Black cultural subjects who employ the word. But what defines a Black cultural subject exactly? Young himself discusses some of this in his book by considering the ways Black masculinity is performed in and out of school settings, but he doesn't discuss white, Latinx, indigenous, or Asian subjectivities that are always set next to or in opposition to Blackness and masculinity. I should note that this juxtaposition is not for the same reasons that Blackness is set against whiteness.

I'm speaking of the differences that colorism makes in a world filled with shades of whiteness. Whiteness is the yardstick of value. How close are you to the white subject, to white languaging, etc.? This tells a body of color how "good" they are, how "beautiful" they are understood to be in the world, and so on. It also suggests how "appropriate" or "clear" or "effective" your languaging is. That is, colorism does these things because Blackness is made definitional to whiteness. Blackness is the extreme other end of the binary, because whiteness situates itself at the front end. Thus, as Young does, to identify various meanings and uses of the N-word is to push against such antiblackness that makes the N-word simply and only evil or inappropriate. For Black scholars and teachers like Young, there are however big differences in using texts with the N-word in them, using the N-word in one's own texts, and using the N-word in classrooms. Further, Young highlights the ways gender and race matter in understanding these differences.

But what about Black readers or students' sensitivities to the term itself. That is, there is an argument to be made (and it has been made) that just the presence of the word is traumatizing to many Black students or readers. Is this the essence of the Stanford students' argument? Is it the essence of Thomas' reaction to my chapter? In his account of the N-word, Asim discusses the O. J. Simpson trial

in which the N-word was central to understanding Mark Fuhrman's character. Asim cites the famous argument made by the defense attorney, Johnnie Cochran, to allow the tapes of Fuhrman to be heard in full by the racially mixed group of jurors. Furhman uses the N-word more than 40 times in the recordings. Cochran explains, "It is demeaning to our jurors to say that African Americans who have lived under oppression for two hundred-plus years in this country cannot work within the mainstream, cannot hear these offensive words." The Black journalist Keith Woods agrees, particularly about not censoring the Furhman tapes. Woods argues:

> You just can't convey that definition with n-dash-dash-dash-dash-dash . . . You can't communicate it with bleeps and blurbs or euphemisms. The problem is that sometimes the only way to do your job as a journalist is to say or write the word that furthers the mission of racists. (180)

Is an academic book much different in its social purposes than *Huck Finn*, or in the journalism that Woods speaks of, or the use of the Furhman tapes for a jury decision? If they serve similar kinds of social purposes, then would Asim's, Fishkin's, Cochran's, and Woods' arguments apply to academic texts that seek to understand, explore, or signify using such antiblack languaging as the N-word? Would altering texts so that all instances of the N-word are euphemized keep with the "fidelity" of those texts and the ethical mission of academic exploration?

Even though I think it is reasonable to assume that most Black readers and students have strong and durable psyches, ones that can withstand the sound and printed image of the N-word, this doesn't mean that there isn't trauma or pain caused by its presence. And this should give anyone pause, something I didn't do when writing my chapter originally. Tough sensibilities to the N-word by Black people don't keep it from being a trigger, nor an instigator of trauma. So it seems understandable that the NAACP in 1998 would argue that the word in *Huck Finn* amounts to hate speech. But is that how it circulates in classrooms? How would we really know? What evidence could we gather? Further, does the reproduction of a trigger word, say in a quote, amount to hate speech in an academic article or book by a non-Black identified author? Is that hate speech too when the author is engaged in an antiracist or pro-Black project?

While there is no universal definition for "hate speech," the United Nations does offer this one:

> any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are,

in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor. (United Nations n.p.)

I wonder: When a reader is triggered by the N-word, are they also attacked? Is the N-word trigger automatically hate speech? To answer this question, it seems to matter what the text's context, purpose, and effects are. Additionally, when it comes to the N-word, it matters what the cultural and racial ethos of the writer and the reader are.

HOW I USED THE N-WORD

In her Canvas posting, Thomas refers to my introduction, where I discuss the trigger words I use in the book. Earlier in her post, she reiterates my introduction's rationale for using trigger words. Here's the passage she references:

> By using these terms I look to produce in readers a bodily response that I hope will urge you to pause, notice, and reflect. And so, I must name the thing we are really talking about and not shy away from it by using neutered euphemisms in order that my audience might skip the very problematizing of their own subject positions and *habitus* that are assumed in their standards. (6)

Thomas' response, as she explains, is that when she read this in my introduction, she heard me saying that I was going to use the N-word, and sure enough, I did in Chapter 1, quoting it, quoting a variant of it, then using that variant without quotes. Thomas' reading of this trigger warning is a reasonable interpretation, and it is supported by my use of the N-word in Chapter 1.

In that Chapter, I quoted then reproduced the N-word in quotes a total of nine times from two academic authors, Elaine Richardson and Jerry Farber.[5] The variant I also used was from a Black identified rap group, Dead Prez, in their song "They School," which is still in the second edition's chapter. The variant is often written with an "a" instead of an "er" ending, which in Black English from

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5   While Elaine Richardson identifies as Black, Jerry Farber does not identify by race. As explained in his March 9, 2019, blog post and through a series of email exchanges with me, Farber explains that he does not accept the concept of "race" as a scientific idea that has usefulness in understanding individuals or groups. It has mostly done great harm. He acknowledges that the concept of race has historically been used to create societal outcomes, such as racism. Because of this, Farber does not identify racially with any known category, but acknowledges that many people around him over the years have made such racial identifications about him, but he does not endorse any of them nor claim a racial identification.

a Black speaker changes the word significantly (Smitherman, Talkin' 62; *Word* 49, 52). I chose to use texts that had the N-word in some form in them because I thought they served my problematizing purposes, and they were from Black authors speaking about students and a Black racial *habitus*. But I also used the N-word variant 17 times without quoting it in the second half of the chapter.

My uses of the N-word all come after I quoted Dead Prez' song, "They School," which uses the N-word variant numerous times. The first passage below is the first passage in which I drop the quotes from the term that I'm taking from Dead Prez. The others are typical passages that I believe Thomas was triggered by.

> What "They School" says about the college writing classroom is directly related to the *habitus* there and not there. Consider the paradoxes of the Black, male subject position and African-American English in any writing course. Who is a "mad nigga" who don't finish in a writing classroom? What he look like? What a mad nigga sound like in that classroom or in writing? Do a mad nigga's voice get graded favorably? The figure of the mad nigga begs the question: how you gonna liberate someone if you don't let em pose they own problems in they own words? [. . .]

> Mad niggas aren't slaves who don't see their own bondage, or are subservient. They are defiant Black bodies that critique and speak out against the problems in their schools and classrooms on their own terms and propose alternatives that center schools on Black communities and their needs, yet they do not succeed in the White system or society very easily. [. . .]

> In a contemporary classroom, where a standard is dictated out of necessity by a teacher, who statistically speaking is White and embodies a White racial *habitus*, mad niggas don't never succeed. They ain't gonna make no grades, and thus don't usually have the power to uplift their communities.

These three passages are the typical ways I used the term. I thought I was centering Blackness because I was identifying and problematizing the white vs. Black student binary that is present in the texts, present in my classroom and school experiences, and present tacitly in many of the ways that students get imagined, particularly if we accept (and I do) Wilderson's Afropessimism and theories of the ubiquity of antiblackness. I thought I was also uplifting Black English and the Black student subjectivity offered by Dead Prez by using the

term as an alternative student subject position, a positive term. I drew on my own upbringing in an all-Black community, North Las Vegas in the 1970s and 1980s. I used Black English to voice the critique because that was the only way I thought I could properly voice it. But for Thomas and Neider, as well as others in the antiracist project, my languaging didn't come off that way. They didn't read this as centering Blackness in a way that uplifted Black students or Black subjectivities nor did they hear it as being respectful toward Black readers or students. This is what Thomas and Neider explained to me in their own ways, and they were reading my chapter as participating in the hegemonic antiblackness in our society.

In an email message to me, Neider compassionately explained this problem by giving an example of a white rap artist, Emenem (Marshall Mathers), who does not use the N-word in his rap music, a genre in which most Black artists use the term a lot:

> He grew up immersed in Blackness. He makes clear and knows that he has been made rich through his adoption of Black music. He gives props to those who came before. And he never utilizes the n-word in any of his tracks, I'd have to go back and listen to his collabs but I am not sure his collaborators use the word when they work with him either – which if so, gives us good information about the use of that word – who uses, when, around what people, in what contexts. He also finds ways to uplift Black artists and highlight the brilliance of Black culture. He doesn't lean on Black trauma to make his points. Which is one of the current public conversations happening right now around Shaun King and his continual use of Black trauma, leveraging Trayvon Martin. Recently, Trayvon's mom has come out asking activists to keep Trayvon's name out of their mouths because she feels Shaun King and others have utilized Trayvon's image, likenesses, and name to advance their causes for shock value and to gain followers and money.

In the initial moments and even days after receiving these words from Neider and Thomas, it was hard for me to hear it all. I knew that my goals were to uplift Black students and Black languaging, yet these Black readers did not read this in my chapter. Thomas and Neider helped me confront this disconnect between my intentions and my antiblackness.

When Smitherman discusses the reclaimed, postive uses of the N-word and cites Kennedy's conclusion that anyone should be allowed to use the term, even

if there are "costs," she also cites KRS-ONE, a Black rapper who defends the use by "anyone who is a member of the Hip Hop Nation" (*Word* 59). KRS-ONE argues that "[e]ven European-American youth call themselves niggas." He explains that "nigga means anybody; and it is not graphically or verbally disrespectful because anyone who speaks the code correctly also shares in the oppression, sexism, and racism inflicted on them by the American mainstream" (59-60; KRS-ONE 242-243). Smitherman's response is that she agrees "in theory," but ultimately, no, not in the real world, where there is real Black struggle, pain, and death. What I think Smitherman is pointing to is the real and material antiblackness that structures our world, our disciplines, our languaging, our lives, and harms Black people most. So I agree with Smitherman, as much as I also admire KRS-ONE. I don't share Black struggles, or Black pain, or a history of Black oppression that is linked to that term. I don't share in the slave subjectivity that antiblackness places on all Black people and the category of Black. I'm also not "a member of the Hip Hop Nation," or at least, I don't think I am.

Smitherman explains her position this way:

> So it would behoove White folk to be very sure of their surroundings, they girls, they boys, they peeps before sprinkling their conversation with niggas. Some Whites view this as the operation of a linguistic double standard, representing a kind of Black privilege. Well, yeah, that's what it is, make no bones about it. It's a symbolic challenge to White hegemony, one of the precious few to which Brothas and Sistas can lay claim in this society. (*Word* 60)

To hammer her point, she cites the Black comedian Chris Rock and his explanation for why so many people find an argument like Smitherman's hard to accept. Rock explains succinctly the epistemology of whiteness that Ahmed theorizes and that is activated in whitely people when this topic comes up: "White people are ticked off because there's something they can't do. That's all it is. 'I'm White, I can do anything in the world. But I can't say that word.' It's the only thing in the whole world that the average White man cannot use at his discretion" (Smitherman, *Word* 60). Smitherman ends this chapter with the words of Micahel Eric Dyson on the ways Black people use the term, "even in distasteful, unruly fashion," as a way "to undo white supremacy" (*Word* 62-63), but it's clear that Dyson, like Smitherman, sees the term usable only by Black folks.

But if reclaiming the term for a positive use, one that dismantles white supremacy, is a big part of how Black people use the N-word, and that white people cannot do this, then where does that leave me, an Asian American academic also trying to dismantle the white supremacy around one of the subjectivities

that the N-word invokes? I think this is an instance where I have to say that I must fight this fight differently than my Black colleagues. I'm not gonna stay out of it, but I don't want to cause any collateral damage, which we know will hurt Black colleagues more than others.

One thing I didn't think carefully enough about is my own ethos in the chapter. In *Not Light, But Fire*, Matthew R. Kay discusses how, as a Black teacher, he engages in deep discussions of the N-word with his high school students, particularly when they are reading literature that uses the term. Kay focuses his students' attention on "the complicated relationship with that word" that we all have. He explains, "It's not as simple as 'black people replace the *-er* with an *-a*, and then use it for respect.'" One of Kay's Black male students offers succinctly a way to understand this complicated relationship: "I think black people use the word to reclaim their power over it. When we use *nigga*, we are saying that racism didn't break us" (153). I wish I had taken this insight into account. It's important. I also wish the antiracist project had followed Kay's lead in having explicit discussions about the fact that we all were about to read a text with the N-word in it. How did we feel about this word and what is our relationship to it? This was a misstep of mine.

While we did have discussions that led to compassion agreements, we didn't discuss each of our relationships to that potent word in a central text we all were engaging with before we read it. Most importantly, my relationship with the N-word, while complicated, is not complicated in the same ways as a Black reader's or writer's is. I cannot use the term to invoke my own survival of racism. And this fact reveals to me the ways my own use of the N-word discounts or ignores the Black uses of the N-word that do embody such defiant and brave stances in a thoroughly antiblack world. But as Neider's example to me illustrates, Black English is not owned by Black identified groups either, even if it is closely associated with those groups. Non-Black identified people, such as Emenim, speak and use Black English all the time, just as I have in my life because of where I grew up. And yet, I cannot deny that Black English is a product of Blackness, Black culture, Black people, their struggles, conditions, and ways with words. I also cannot deny that the N-word isn't just any old word.

Those explicit discussions about each of our relations to the N-word are important for another reason. Black readers, like any other group of readers, are not a monolithic audience. There is, as in any social or racial formation, unevenness and variety in how anyone responds to texts, which includes the N-word. And if Asim and Hughes are any indication of a mixed Black response to the use of the N-word in artistic and academic texts, then Thomas and Neider are not necessarily fully representative of all Black readers' responses. In fact, in a later email message to me, Thomas admits this. She explained that she may be more

sensitive to a non-Black identified person using the term because of where she grew up and where she lives (Baltimore and Atlanta, respectively).

WHAT WAS I THINKING?

It's hard for me to remember exactly my mindset or my decisions on everything in the chapter. But I have to admit that I did not carefully consider the various ways different Black readers would respond to the N-word in my text. I didn't think through the complicated relationships with the word that we all have. In typical academic fashion, I used the term after quoting it from Black authors, thinking that because this was an academic discussion and my purposes were clearly to investigate student subjectivities, I was not doing any harm to Black readers. But this is not true. Harm clearly was done.

Now, I didn't use the term unthinkingly. I took my cues from several Black academics and linguists who discuss the use of the N-word, its variants, and their meanings. These are folks such as Geneva Smitherman (*Talkin' and Testifyin* 62), H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman (112-113), and John McWhorter (*Talking Back* 162-165). But I assumed that since they used the word in their academic books and since our purposes in our scholarship were similar, I could use the word without any problems. I mean, I wasn't using it pejoratively or to demean anyone. I wasn't using it to identify any person negatively. I wasn't directing it at a person or about a person in particular. I was talking about a subjectivity that comes out of Black English languaging, and I was saying it was a preferable subject position to embody because of its critical and dismantling nature toward white supremacist school systems. I was saying it was a critically conscious subject position. I thought that was enough to take the harm out of the term and center Black English as critical languaging. I thought I was revealing the antiblackness in the conventional binary that makes our students. But this explanation still centers non-Black readers more than Black readers.

I neglected Alim and Smitherman's point that they make about such Black English languaging in their book, *Articulate While Black*. Quoting Arthur Spears, they ask about Black speech more generally: "On what basis is speech to be judged negative, positive, or neutral? On whose norms is such an evaluation based?" (124). Their response is historical and contextual, as well as one rooted in the racial ethos of the writer/speaker and pathos of Black readers. They explain that because of the "broader context of the marginalization of Black people, it is difficult for Blacks to see genuine, well-intentioned White participation [in Black languaging] as a nonthreatening sign of cultural appreciation" (125). Ultimately, Alim and Smitherman say that "Black communication **becomes** controversial only in a society that deprecates Blackness" (125). To me,

Alim and Smitherman sound a lot like Kay's student when explaining why Black speakers use the term. The positive use of the N-word is about claiming power and exclaiming the fact that "racism didn't break us." Thus I hear in their words that I cannot employ the word in this same way. It can't be heard that way by Black readers. I was not broken by the N-word or its antiblackness. If anything, I was tacitly made stronger by it. I mean, I'm often framed as the "good" minority, the "model minority." I'm somewhere closer to the white pole in the binary.

In his 2002 book on the term, the Black scholar Randall Kennedy investigates the use of the N-word in court decisions and popular culture. His discussion is nuanced but clear on his stance toward the word's use. He argues that anyone should be able to use the term, but with careful considerations. It's not a free pass for anyone to use the word for any academic or artistic purpose. Kennedy concludes his book this way:

> Still, despite these costs, there is much to be gained by allowing people of all backgrounds to yank *nigger* away from white supremacists, to subvert its ugliest denotation, and to convert the N-word from a negative into a positive appellation. (139)

I cannot help but notice that even in his conclusion he moves back and forth from using the term, italicizing it, and then using the replacement term "N-word." Is he waffling a bit? Or is it that the word must be very carefully deployed at this point, even by a Black author? Even as he holds this democratic stance toward who can use the word, Kennedy is clear that the word is harmful, loaded culturally.

Kennedy cites both the rapper and film star Ice Cube and the professor and ordained minister Michael Eric Dyson on the use of the term. They both speak to the way the term is "a racist word" when spoken by white people (Kennedy 41). However, Kennedy concludes:

> There is nothing necessary wrong with a white person saying "nigger," just as there is nothing necessarily wrong with a black person saying it. What should matter is the context in which the word is spoken – the speaker's aims, effects, alternatives. To condemn whites who use the N-word without regard to context is simply to make a fetish of *nigger*. (41)

After this, Kennedy cites Carl Van Vechten as an example. Beyond publishing his 1926 novel with the N-word in its title, Van Vechten used the word when corresponding with his friend Langston Hughes, who seemed not to object (Kennedy 42). Kennedy explains that "Van Vechten, a key supporter of the Harlem Renaissance, had shown time and again that he abhorred racial preju-

dice, would do what he could to improve the fortunes of African Americans, and treasured his black friends" (43). Kennedy describes this context as one of "trust" between the two men.

I too thought I'd gained this kind of trust with my Black readers. But why would I think that? I didn't ask any Black readers before this. And given the antiblackness in our world, why would any Black reader feel they could trust even me, an antiracist academic of color? It's like putting a loaded gun on the table at a party with friends. The presence of the gun, no matter who is in the room, increases exponentially the chances of someone getting killed. It's simple statistics. Take the gun away, and the chances drop dramatically. Maybe, the fact that I have to ask such readers about this issue suggests I should just stay away from the term. But that seems to dodge my responsibility to interrogate fully my own antiblackness that is centered, focused on a term even though I don't use the term in my daily life. Yes, this makes for a contradiction, since I reproduce the N-word in quotations from Black authors in this foreword. But I don't know how else to make amends.

Ultimately trust has to be given, not assumed (as I did), or taken. Kennedy's three-part definition of context is a helpful heuristic in untangling why I may have thought initially that I had trust in Black identified readers and where I stopped interrogating.

1. Were my "aims" for my use of the N-word variant antiracist and attempting to uplift Black people? Yes. I think this is still clear given the book, my previous scholarship, and what I was concluding in the chapter.
2. Were the "effects" of my use of the term one of uplift and affirmation? No, or at best, it is unevenly felt by Black readers. But it is clearly not the case given the words of Thomas and Neider, and by the Black Stanford students about their situation.
3. Finally, were there "alternatives" to using the N-word in my chapter? Yes. I could have said "mad Black student." This could have signified on Dead Prez' term, which I was trying to do, but this new term would not have come out of Black English languaging. Or I could have just not used the term at all in my problematizing, which was the decision I came to ultimately in the second edition of the chapter, since the term doesn't add enough to the discussion. It mostly places a gun on the table to scare white readers, but the gun only fires at and hits Black people.

In his references to Kennedy's attraction to rap artists who use the N-word, Vershawn Young explains that such uses are a part of "nigga-gender," which is a hypermasculinity designed to protect the Black body. It's a masculinity that is opposed to the racialized gendered performance that Black male academics, such

as Young, often have to perform in order to survive in such places (Young, *Your Average* 62). Thus the N-word, according to Young, is inextricably linked to a Black male gender that "exaggerate[s] . . . blackness and masculinity" in order to hide the fact that such Black men do in fact "give a fuck" (63). So when I think about alternatives I may have used, I'm not sure any could center Black English, center the Black male subjects I was attempting to center, center the very subjects that Young discusses in detail in his book.

But this is likely due to my own relationship and access to Black English today, and to my relationship to the word itself. I just don't use Black English much anymore, not since high school. Perhaps this is a catch-22 for a scholar like me, one who is not identified as Black. Regardless of what I could have said, I didn't look for alternatives, and none seemed available to me if I had. I wanted to use the Black English from Dead Prez' song and I wanted to shock white readers with the N-word, but as the Stanford students explain, this rhetorical strategy is thinking about how to enlighten white readers at the cost of Black ones. It participates in antiblackness. It is not ethical. It does not practice Black compassion, that is, compassion for Black readers who are more likely to be harmed in such discussions.

THE ASSUMED WHITE VS. BLACK BINARY

Now, I'm a pretty smart guy and I've been doing antiracist work for over twenty-five years. Why was I unable to attend to these matters when I drafted and revised the chapter originally? This question leads me to wonder about my languaging conditions. Today looking back, those conditions seem foggy. Where did the fog come from? I can't help but notice that when the question about who can say the term is discussed by Kennedy, Asim, and others, it is always framed as a Black or white issue. I don't fit into this framing. I identify as an Asian American cisgender heterosexual man who was raised poor in an all-Black city. I'm literally not in the discussion. This doesn't excuse my use of the N-word, but it does show how little anyone has accounted for the broader intersectional racial dynamics of this question. Poverty and race and languaging, these are not easily navigated when they intersect so much as to be a tangle, a knot.

In one sense, this binary framing of the discussion of the N-word participates in the haunting whitely nostalgia that Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe explain. A part of that nostalgia is the assumption of a simpler time in the US when race was simply Black vs. white. Thus the question is one about Black and white people's uses of the N-word. But what about other kinds of authors and speakers who have literally always been present? While this is an oversimplification of this question, as Kay illustrates in his recounting of his own classroom in

Chapter 5 of his book, this binary framing in the literature and popular cultural discussions of the N-word elides other academics of color like me who need to be a part of those discussions. To call on Kay's framing of the word (153-155), there are many other "complicated relationships" to the N-word than just white relations and Black relations to it.

The haunting whitely nostalgia in the discussions of the N-word are also similar to what Catherine Prendergast called out in her 1998 article, "Race: The Absent Presence in Composition Studies." Prendergast speaks to the ways that race has been present but invisible in the field, an "absent presence," and opens with an example from Shirley Brice Heath's famous rendering of race, or rather her erasure of race in *Ways with Words*. Prendergast explains: "Instead race becomes subsumed into powerful tropes of 'basic writer,' 'stranger' to the academy, or the trope of the generalized, marginalized 'other'" (36). In the present case, it isn't the avoidance of race in discussions of the N-word that is the problem. It is the absence of nuanced discussions of race, the "absent presence" of Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian subjectivities in such discussions of the N-word. It isn't like we, Asian, Latinx, or Indigenous people, don't also come into contact with the N-word.

In Kennedy's book, he offers examples from films. Both Spike Lee and Quintin Tarantino have used the term in their respective movies, but Lee maintains that only Black people can do this. From this debate, Kennedy offers three "plausible" theories for why Lee's assertion that only Black people can deploy the term is defendable:

> One is that the long and ugly history of white racist subordination of African Americans should in and of itself disqualify whites from using *nigger*. A second holds that equity earned through oppression grants cultural ownership rights: having been made to suffer by being called "nigger" all these years, this theory goes, blacks should now be able to monopolize the slur's peculiar capital. A third theory is that whites lack a sufficiently intimate knowledge of black culture to use the word *nigger* properly. (103-104)

Kennedy concludes that these theories each fall short of careful scrutiny and end up "cast[ing] a protectionist pall over popular culture that would likely benefit certain minority entrepreneurs at the net expense of society overall" (104). He has more to say about this, but I read Kennedy as more ambiguous about the N-word's use than what the above might suggest. This can be seen in his focus on the three-pronged definition of "context" that helps me interrogate the instances of the word. And yet, I'm trying now to imagine a context where I could

use the N-word without risk. I cannot. All three of Kennedy's proposed theories seem too convincing to me.

I bring up Kennedy's three theories not to argue against or for them, although I disagree with his conclusions about them. In fact, I'm more compelled by Asim's deeper discussion of these and other films that use the N-word in his chapter, "To Slur With Love" (188-195). I think all three of Kennedy's theories make good sense. And they each seem quite active in discussions of the N-word I've heard over the years. None of the three theories are new to me. They are common arguments. I'm more interested, however, in the way Kennedy cannot escape the white vs. Black binary in these theories, which like most of the scholarship on the N-word leaves academics of color like me out of the discussion. Even Asim's more nuanced and detailed discussion uses a white vs. Black frame. Where am I in a discussion about Spike Lee and Quintin Tarantino, or Mark Fuhrman, or Mark Twain and *Huck Finn*? All these discussions frame the debate over artists' and others' use of the word as a Black vs. white issue.

To be fair, Asim references Asian Americans in his discussion once, and it's instructive. He uses Asian subjectivities to make a comparison. After citing Dave Chappelle's comment that he loves to hear white kids call other white kids the N-word, Asim says, "As much as I admire Chappelle, I can't help wondering if, say, an Asian-American man would be similarly encouraged by the sight of one black kid calling another black kid a 'gook' or a 'jap.' Would he see the exchange as a sign of racial progress? (226-227). By invoking an Asian subjectivity, and racist Asian slurs, he tries to shed light onto the question of white people using the N-word. As I read this, Asim hasn't asked the question about an Asian American using the N-word, instead he has made a comparison of racist words in order to better understand the white vs. Black binary in this debate without fully recognizing this limited framing.

I do feel conflicted about Asim invoking the words though, but I get it – and perhaps this is part of his point. Maybe what this comparison helps me notice as a reader who identifies as Asian American are my feelings when a Black author uses those racist Asian slurs in his text. Am I offended or triggered? Is the situation that he describes something I think is commensurate with the N-word? My gut tells me that I am a bit triggered by those terms, and the comparison seems appropriate, even if the terms being compared are not equal in historical or racist weight. I also know that I'm okay with sitting in this discomfort knowing that Asim is trying to honor me in his discussion. Asim is trying to think through such racist languaging, has made one attempt to include me, and has not invoked racism or disparaged me, even as I wince at those words in the text. But this is me with those two terms, terms I've been called to my face. I'm also not representative of all Asian Americans. As Asim explains in his book, and as

Wilderson's Afropessimism draws on, there is not nearly the long history in the US with any other negative term as there is with the N-word. The N-word is the embodiment of antiblackness. There is no defining category of antiasianness like antiblackness. And this difference matters. Ironically then, this comparison, in these ways, is one of racist language apples and racist language oranges.

Maybe this is just a product of the cultural sense that those who identify as Asian in the US are thought to be near-white, at least when it comes to economic and academic success. You know, "model minority" shit. I'd argue no. Even these two dimensions of whiteness and success in the US are not uniform across all Asian populations. Furthermore, I have never been white, not by society's standards, not by the standards of any school I've ever attended or worked at. I too have experienced lots of racism and racial slurs directed straight at me. An entire generation of my tribe in the US was imprisoned unlawfully, stripped of their worldly belongings, had their homes and property stolen by whites, their entire livelihoods taken away in a day, a full generation of wealth and property gone. I have been called many ugly and harmful names. I've been mistreated by neighbors and teachers in ugly, hurtful, and racist ways. I too bear racist trauma in my body. My trauma is not made from slavery, nor the N-word, but it is racial trauma by the hands of white settler colonial institutions and people.

Now, I don't say this to suggest that my racial trauma means I can use the N-word, or that I couldn't participate in antiblackness. Additionally, Japanese immigrants too came to the US as settlers, settling on land of indigenous peoples, particularly in the West. We've been a part of settler colonialism that has harmed Native American groups, taken their lands, even if those lands were later taken from us. We too have been party to indigenous injustice and oppression. No one gets to claim unsullied hands in global racism, settler colonialism, or antiblackness. And so, I do not wish to compare racisms or the traumas that go with them. Those are unproductive and unhelpful discussions in my opinion. I bring up my racial trauma because not only are our racial traumas different, but the histories I reference are part of what fogs up these questions for me, and what helped me think that I could not be antiblack in my languaging, when in fact, I was.

In full disclosure, I should mention that the N-word has been used in the past on occasion against people identified as Asian. There is the term "Asian Nigger" and "rice Nigger." Both terms are derogatory terms referring to Filipinos and Chinese people, respectively. I've only heard them a few times in my life. I've been mistaken for being a member of both cultures, but that's not membership in a cultural group. There's also a 1967 poem by the Black identified artist George Preston (Nana Anakwa) by the same name, "Asian Nigger."[6] I don't find

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6   I can find very little information about this poem or the artist. The poem is on streaming

the poem offensive or demeaning. It seems clearly focused on thinking about Black experience, but maybe this tells me something about the word's lack of connection to me. Maybe these terms are just a few instances of racist riffing, using the most loaded and offensive term to make a new racist slur. Still, my knowledge of them does not help with the fogginess.

The dynamic I see is a common one. The oppressed oppress others who are oppressed because of oppression. That is, in conditions of oppression, the oppressed can often rehearse the oppressions of the oppressive system. As Neider reminded me on several occasions, because of our history in the US, Black people always get "punched down" upon. While there are arguments against framing the problems of racism as who is "punching up" or "punching down" (Morenoff), I hear Neider making a different point about this. Saying that Black people are always "punched down" upon underscores a racial hierarchy of hurt operating tacitly in the US and likely everywhere.

If there are to be negative consequences in a system, context, classroom, or place, Black people are most likely to attract those negative consequences. If hurt is to be had, Black people are likely to get it. The negative consequences are mostly or more negative to Black people. This means that I, an Asian American scholar, sit at a different place in this racial hierarchy of hurt. This is also why Asian racist slurs are apples to the N-word's oranges in Asim's comparison. Even so, because of my own history with racism and racist slurs, it was harder for me to feel and make decisions as a writer because of where I am positioned in the racial hierarchy. I've been hurt, but not by that word. I've experienced racist trauma, and this makes it hard to remember that I too can be a dealer in trauma, especially to Black readers. And so I should have thought first, how would Black readers read that word from a writer like me? What harm to Black readers might there be in my use of the N-word?

Because subjectivities like mine have not been a part of the discussions of the N-word, I have felt somewhat above and outside this conversation about who can say the N-word. This kept me from asking questions about harm for Black readers. I believe there are other historical reasons for this foggy thinking, even if now I can see this is not only flawed thinking, perhaps lazy thinking, but it also leads quickly to antiblack languaging.

Here's what I mean. The white vs. Black binary framing of the discussion in the scholarship of the N-word, beyond ignoring other racial subjectivities, in my case participates in the Asian-as-perpetual-foreigner or "Asian American Otherness" narratives that have persisted in the US (Lee, Orientals 3; Yamamo-

services on a 1967 album of poets reading their poetry titled, *New Jazz Poets*. George Preston has a website (https://www.georgenelsonpreston.online/) and a Wikipedia page (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Nelson_Preston). Preston is an artist and scholar of African art.

to 5). These narratives relegate Asian Americans to perpetual outsider status. If we are always understood as foreigners, then of course, we are excluded from such quintessentially "American" discussions as who can say the N-word. Asian people like me are not in the discussions in the scholarship because I'm not "in" America in the ways that white and Black citizens are. Just as white and Black racial subjectivities form most of the discussions of students and racial issues in national conversations, white vs. Black subjects are at the center of the scholarship on and discussions of the N-word.

I'm not saying anyone is thinking about this framing explicitly. But that's the point. I didn't think about it. And my absence in the scholarship creates a space for me as an Asian American to not ask this question about my own antiblack languaging. I was able to avoid the question. I thought: "Well, I'm not white. I've been hurt by racism. I grew up using Black English. I can use the N-word if my motives are right." But of course, not being white ain't being Black. And being identified as Asian American, even one who is often mistaken for Latino, ain't being identified as Black. Most importantly, whether a guy like me can use the N-word has never really been asked of subjects like me. And my absence in the larger discussion aided me in not having to ask it of myself. We can talk about rappers like Eminem or writers like Mark Twain or film directors and producers like Quintin Tarentino, but they are all white, and I am not. So those examples have a degree of racial separation from me.

I say all this not to play the victim, or to make excuses, but to show how complex this question is for me, how much fog there has been to clear away, how insufficient the discussions about the N-word have been for me. Many of these perpetual foreigner narratives began with other narratives, such as those around Asians as a "yellow peril," which launched numerous anti-Asian laws and policies in the US like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and "foreign miner's taxes" (Lee, *The Making* 90-91; Lee, *Orientals* 137). The legal scholar and professor, Angelo Ancheta, offers a history of anti-Asian laws and court decisions that reveal the evolving ways Asian people of all kinds have been legally understood as "unwelcome immigrant," "foreigner," or "illegal alien" in the US (11; see also Lee, *Orientals* 3). Most know about the racist government actions against Japanese during World War II, but fewer people are aware of the "Tacoma Method," named after an incident in 1885, when 800 to 900 Chinese residents of Tacoma, Washington, the state in which the antiracist project was being conducted, were forced out of the city on foot, their homes and businesses looted and destroyed, by an armed mob of white residents (Lee, *The Making* 94; Lee, *America* 104).

Over time, the Japanese American responses to such anti-Asian racism, particularly during and after WWII, and our unlawful imprisonment, has been to be "more American," to give up our names and languages, to give up our links to

Japan, to be brand new in a country that understands us only as foreigners, never quite American enough. Robert Lee offers a rendering of how the themes of assimilation into white American culture and the model minority myth have been represented in U.S. popular culture in films such as the 1956 film *Sayonara* (Lee 171-172) and the 1960 film *Flower Drum Song* (176-177). Today, our representations have not come much farther. Even the recently lauded film, *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) based on the novel by Kevin Kwan sets the all Asian cast in Singapore, so Asians are understood as not American, but primarily from and of somewhere else. Mostly though, assimilation means that a white man marries an Asian woman. And so again, Asian men remain, even in these narratives, on the sidelines, outsiders, not really a part of the conversations about who is American. These kinds of narratives still circulate in U.S. culture today and feed our ideas about where Asian Americans fit in the Black and white racial framing of many racial discussions.

Such anti-Asian history, representations, and legal decisions create a pattern of ignoring Asian identified people in important aspects of our lives. That is, we often get left out of discussions, such as antiblack racism and the N-word. Perhaps our version of antiblackness is *Asian exclusionism*, an orientation that ignores or turns away from Asian identified people, that places us in perpetual outsider status, and leaves us out of conversations in which we too have a stake. We are not inhuman as antiblackness identifies the way the Black category is defined, rather we are *exohuman*, outside of the (white) human category, or maybe phase-shifted a step or two. We are undiscussed. We don't constitute any important aspects of the dominant definition of the human or the binary that makes it. Is this too hyperbolic? I don't think so. While not remotely the same, nor do these two terms (antiblackness and Asian exclusionism) have the same immediate and deadly consequences to those they reference, it is the closest analogy I can muster.

This history, some of it marked on my body, fogs my mind, and has kept me from seeing clearly my participation in antiblack languaging. This history is no excuse, but it is a part of the historical conditions that an Asian American like me lives in, that makes my languaging difficult to navigate sometimes, difficult to notice when I've participated in antiblackness, and difficult to know what to make of others who accuse me of such things.

TRIGGERS AND THE CENTRALITY OF WHITE AUDIENCES

I've suggested already that I assumed Black readers would be okay with my use of the N-word, not shocked, because I leaned on my good intentions, even as I had "antiracist rhetorical purposes." But having such purposes isn't enough to not be antiblack in today's academy. And I forgot this principle. The Black readers in the antiracist project were shocked. They said so. As Thomas explains

in her Canvas posting, that kind of Black shock does not serve the purposes that the white shock I was going for does in this antiracist discussion.

If I'm being honest, though, I'm not sure white readers were shocked either. I mean, I received no feedback on the use of the term in the review process of the book, nor by any reader up to that point. If there were to be white shock, the reviewers, or some white-identified reader, might have mentioned it. I must assume that those readers were engaged in white habits of language when they were reviewing my manuscript, and they did not register any shock to me about the use of the term in the book. It was never mentioned. They seemed to agree with me that my proximity to the N-word, the fact that it was reachable by me, equated to my license to use it in the academic fashion I did. My reviewers were more concerned about the use of "white supremacy" and "white language supremacy." They, like me, were more concerned about the white readers of the book.

On the same page in the Introduction, two paragraphs above where Thomas identifies my warning about trigger words, I try explicitly to name the kinds of trigger words I'm speaking of. I start by linking their use with practices of compassion, sitting with others in their suffering. Then I explain my reason for the use of words in the book that may trigger some:

> It is compassionate to suffer with others, like the suffering that so many of our students feel when a standard that is not of their own is used against them. Staying a while in your discomfort that my use throughout this book of the terms "White language supremacy" and "White supremacy" bring is an important part of a critical, Freirean, problematizing practice that I'll discuss in Chapter 1. The terms are a constant reminder of pain, our own and our students'. Sometimes our work as teachers and scholars cannot be cool, objective, unemotional, and purely reasoned. Sometimes it must hurt, cause us some discomfort, so that we really change.

This is the original paragraph right above the one Thomas cites. I still stand by this practice, but I can see now that I was thinking primarily about white readers, even as I did not name them, but I also didn't name Black readers, or any other racialized reader. My assumption was white readers needed to be confronted with white supremacy. The use of the terms "white language supremacy" and "white supremacy" are arguably more shocking to white readers. This was the shock I was wanting them to sit with. But what I see now is that this amounts to caring more for white readers than Black, Latinx, indigenous, or even Asian readers.

To further complicate this, every year I am Internet stalked, doxxed, and threatened by right-wing and other news media and individuals for my use of the two terms I listed in the introduction as the trigger words most on my mind. Some threats I have received have even been to my life and to my family. Now, I use a detective at ASU who checks all tweets, emails, Facebook posts, and phone messages that I get that even hint at being threatening. In fact, I don't even post much on social media anymore because of the past threats. I'm also on right-wing "watch lists" and websites that list who those sites consider dangerous educators. During the drafting of the book (2017-2019), I was just off the heels of an incident (in 2016) in which I was doxxed and received hundreds of threatening emails and tweets. So this was on my mind for sure when considering these trigger words.

This is not an excuse for my use of the N-word nor for not thinking clearly about its triggering effects on Black readers, but it likely got in the way for me at that time. My past use of "white supremacy" and "white language supremacy" in other places were the causes of many of the threatening emails and phone calls I got, and continue to get periodically. I was trying to speak to those kinds of readers, ones who might be upset that I'm using such terms, might think I'm calling them all racists or white supremacists. And this was on my reviewers' minds too. My reviewers mention this in fact, wondering to me how I might find a few ways to soften their use, maybe take the terms out of the book.

LISTENING CLOSER TO MY ANTIBLACKNESS

There is one more complication to my antiblack languaging in the chapter. One of the co-leaders of the antiracist project, Xyan Neider, explained to me thoughtfully that at times I came off as if I was affecting a Black voice, or "playing Black," which I heard as doing rhetorical Blackface. This usually happened around my use of the N-word, which can be heard and seen in the passages from the chapter I quoted earlier. In this context, I understand how this could be read in my languaging, but I was not trying to affect anything. I was trying to be me. But I do see how a Black reader may get this impression in this chapter, and this is a real problem. Or rather, this is what is important here, my effect on Black readers, not what I was meaning to be or do in my languaging. This is part of my own paradoxical languaging.

Like everyone else, what makes my languaging are the conditions I have been in and the people in those places. I was raised through elementary school using Black English because I lived in North Las Vegas, an almost all Black city. This was starting at age five for me. I went to mostly Black schools in elementary school and a Six Grade Center located in North Las Vegas. I spent many years stripping

the Black English out of my mouth because I embraced the idea that the white standardized English of school was the way to get out of poverty, to go to college, etc. Now I regret those ideas about my Black English part of my tongue.

In the last decade, I've worked on letting go of these ideas around my use of Black English, that my past Black English isn't good enough for my scholarly work, or for me. I dipped my toe back into my past languaging pool, a shallow area for sure, not fully realizing that the waters have changed, that there are unseeable undertows. So I was not playing Black, and given that my own history is mostly known to folks in rhet/comp circles, and that I mention this history in the book a few times, I thought it was safe to do that in the chapter. And yet, my use of Black English can be read in a way that sounds or looks like I'm affecting a Black voice since most of my languaging adheres to a standardized English, although not all of it.

Black English and a white standardized English are both a part of me. They make up my own languaging paradox. I have Black English, or had it, yet I cannot use it in a chapter like this without sounding to some like I'm affecting a Black voice. I don't really know how to come to some clean conclusion about this paradox because I'm also unwilling to give up a deep part of me, my past, and my languaging. Sometimes shit just comes out.

In many ways, Black English was the words that fed me in a time of my life when my family was very poor and I was always hungry. Black English loved me and gave me power on the block. It made friends with me. But maybe that's all it did. It didn't end up making me, did it? I'm actually not completely sure anymore. So, from this perspective, I cannot change my languaging just because some readers may not know me fully, even if they are Black readers. And I don't wish to hide away a part of my tongue anymore. It would be a betrayal of my past conditions and the people who gifted me a part of my languaging. And yet, how much of that Black English from North Las Vegas is really left on my tongue? How long does its residue last?

I also must agree with Neider that I don't think that my use of Black English works for some or most Black readers, who are my most important readers in those moments. So I'm torn up about this. I want that connection through a shared language. But maybe I don't get to have that anymore, or maybe I never had it. Maybe I just remember having it. How do I write myself forward and through these paradoxes? How do I honor and center the Black English that is a part of me, my history, and that I love, that I'm trying not to lose, even as I know I have lost most of it? How do I not give up my own version of code-meshed English that I find bubbling out of my throat now and again? I don't know the answers. And, of course, I accept Neider's reading of my Black Englishing in the chapter. That is her reading. I cannot tell her not to have it. I also don't wish to

be heard or read as reproducing rhetorical Blackface, just as I don't want to give up a part of me anymore.

I don't have any good answers on this point. But I'm trying to find ways to be more compassionate to all of my readers. What good is my languaging if it does not open up others' hearts and minds? What good is my Englishing if it hurts those I'm trying to form connections with, those I'm trying to love with my words? And how can I love my Black readers in the ways I still yearn to love them, through some code-meshed version of my own old and vanishing Black English?

LESSONS MOVING FORWARD

I hope through this discussion it is clear that I am trying hard to bravely confront some important problematics in my own languaging and antiracist orientation. And I'm trying to do it in a way that helps you understand my process, my tensions, my questions. I've cultivated an antiracist orientation over the last 25 years, but I've not done enough to cultivate an explicitly pro-Black one, nor have I excavated the antiblackness that is a part of my own habits of language, a part of all of our English languaging since our world is an antiblack one. So of course, I'm not alone in all this. I didn't invent my antiblack languaging from nothing. It has been and continues to be in my personal and professional conditions.

Our conditions in the academy and in our society are antiblack. I've known this, seen it, even commented on it in the past, but I've not done enough to look closely at my own languaging, as I've done more recently. I've not examined well enough my own participating in antiblack languaging. I recognize this viscerally now, thanks to Thomas, Neider, and the authors I've considered in this discussion.

I believe that part of the reason I and other whitely academics were unable to account for the antiblack languaging in Chapter 1 is because we circulate in antiblack systems and conditions. These conditions lead us all to believe that an academic of color like me could use the N-word for academic purposes without causing Black readers harm. While I was trying hard to write for a diverse antiracist writing teacher audience, my default audience in my head was a white audience.

But I didn't make up the idea on my own. I didn't make up the idea that I could use the N-word without causing Black people harm. The practice, the habit, the idea had to come from the social and institutional systems I have operated in. Systems had to encourage me or allow me to use the word in this manner, allow me room to think that the availability of the N-word equaled my license to use it in an academic book. Those systems, as I've said numerous times, are white supremacist systems. But those systems are also antiblack, systems predicated on Black trauma, systems that equate Blackness with badness

and evil and slaveness. Thus my motives for my own languaging are not enough to not participate in antiblack languaging. I had opportunities to know, reflect, and resist. I had some opportunities to realize the N-word is not something I can use, even in an academic discussion. I had opportunities to recognize the trauma the word inevitably causes many Black readers. But I did not take those opportunities

While the demographic realities of the discipline of the teaching of writing in English are indeed mostly white, this illustrates another part of the problem of such conditions in academia. Because of our antiblack histories and structures, because they are mostly made up of white and whitely people in control of systems, policies, and decisions, what happens is antiblack expression and consequences, usually without anyone but the Black people in the room noticing. This is another way of saying: The academy is a racial hierarchy of hurt where Black scholars and readers always get traumatized. This is what Thomas and Neider were telling me. This is what the Black Stanford students tell us all. I participated in these systems. I replicated the antiblack languaging. But if we all want to make real changes to our antiblack conditions, we must work at dismantling the antiblack conditions that make it so easy to reproduce Black trauma in our daily work as status quo, yet think we are not doing it, or believe that we are uplifting Blackness, as I thought I was. I don't think this means we ostracize those of us who admit to and work on changing our antiblackness to pro-Black orientations.

In an *Inside Higher Ed* article that responded to the Stanford situation I mentioned earlier, Ruth Starkman offers a way to understand the problem with using the N-word for academic purposes in classrooms that I think applies more broadly to all antiblack languaging. She asks what teaching end does the N-Word's use serve, and argues that it's possible to "teach history in all of its violent, cruel realities associated with this word without actually saying it. There is no moment where a brute historical or textual positivism is essential to learning." Starkman also admits that it is not necessary to "pounc[e] on a teacher who missteps an opportunity for better understanding," and doing so usually means "a misplaced effort to showcase one's own allyship and antiracist credentials" (n.p.).

Given the more nuanced arguments I've discussed from Kennedy, Asim, Smitherman, Young, Kay, and others, Starkman's argument feels too universalizing, too cut-and-dry, for me. I find Young's argument more pro-Black in its handling of the term for academic purposes. His arguing that any kind of universal ban on the N-word equates to silencing Black scholars is one that holds on to the nuance, centers Blackness and Black languaging. Thus I still think there is, and must be, a place for the use of the N-word in academic discussions, just as I think we should continue to read *Huck Finn* and August Wilson's *Fences*. I

also think Starkman, like McWhorter, makes a good point in how we respond to teachers or scholars who engage in antiblack languaging. It is a moment of compassion and learning for everyone. I also hear her referencing the "cancel culture" that many people rail about, saying it is just so many liberals being too "politically correct" or too sensitive.

The impulse to cancel someone seems to me so driven by correcting and condemning the wrong-doer, who does need correcting, but in the process shames and ostracizes them to the point of fomenting bitterness, sewing seeds of further distrust and maybe even hatred. It lets our traumas and anger consume all of us, consume the traumatized and the traumatizer. It often also separates the individual offender from the spaces in which they might learn more about their antiblackness, and do future good work together.

So instead of recruiting more allies and co-conspirators, cancel culture can too often drive people away from the social justice movements they may actually wish to be a part of, the movements we all need to be a part of, not apart from. What cancel culture doesn't end up doing is making more socially just conditions. It makes conditions that resist dialogue and discussion about difficult topics like racism and antiblackness. Our initial anger, hurt, and other feelings are important, but we shouldn't let those emotions take over and control the events that happen after. Instead of a "cancel culture," I think we might think of our classrooms and other spaces as "*compassion cultures*," cultures that urge all of us to sit with those who suffer around us, to listen on their terms, to be open, to change. I know, it ain't easy for anyone. But we are all we got, and we need every last one of us.

Ultimately, a culture of compassion is one about helping others, sitting in their pain, holding them close because they too are worth it, making reconciliation, and bringing people in even as they have done harm. I feel quite fortunate that the antiracist project's participants acted more compassionate toward me than canceling. And for this, I am grateful. Because when we each fall or participate in antiblackness, and likely we each will from time to time given our cultures and histories, it will be crucial that those around us move to us with compassion, sit with us in our suffering bravely as we sit with those we've caused to suffer, so that tomorrow may be more socially just than today.