

Reading What's There: Precarity, Vicarity, and the N-word

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At the risk of setting off alarm bells before reaching the door bell, I'll begin by clarifying what I mean by "N-word." I don't mean the ugly racial slur that the term "N-word" has come to replace in classroom discussions of English and Anglophone literature across the nation. I mean the hyphenated euphemism "N-word" itself. Nonetheless, my argument will require that I occasionally quote the word that "N-word" stands for. If I were addressing a room full of students on the first day of class, this might be a good place to insert a trigger warning. Suffice it to say, *caveat lector*.

The meaning of "vicarity," derived from "vicarious," will, I hope, become clear as I proceed. You won't be far off the mark if you assume it has something to do with our ability to participate, imaginatively, in the lives of others, an experience that literature is best at delivering and that motivates most ordinary people to read it. As for "precarity," I use it not in its original sense, as referring to a physically precarious existence, but in its current, extended sense as a state of emotional vulnerability experienced by an oppressed group historically denied existential security.

My remarks are directed primarily at teachers of literature, but apply widely to teaching in general and may even have a bearing on how we conduct ourselves in our public lives. My immediate aim is to persuade you that today's widespread practice of N-word substitution in

classroom discussions of literature should allow for exceptions, and for one exception in particular: quoting from a racially offensive text or recording. In recent years, well-meaning advocates of N-word substitution have all but eliminated the *verbatim* quotation of offensive texts from the classroom. Before it goes the way of the dodo, I thought the practice deserved a hearing.

Because my case depends on finding a common basis of agreement on what the study of literature is for, I'll be reflecting on what we, as teachers of literature, profess. However, I won't be invoking notions of freedom, academic or constitutional, in support of my claims. Instead, I want to focus on what is lost to the study of literature by resorting to N-word substitution in classroom discussions of texts cited for purposes of commentary, analysis, or illustration, particularly when the sound of what we read matters as much as the sight.

Advocates of N-word substitution are, understandably, impassioned on the subject, and are to be found not only at institutions of higher learning in the US, but also at more remote locations in the Anglophone world. Sulaimon Giwa, a Nigerian-born assistant professor of social work at Memorial University in Newfoundland, Canada, is representative. The near-total absence of Black students in this province of Canada, he writes, increases rather than reduces an educator's responsibility to "create learning communities of care" and "a safer, more caring classroom culture." To that end, we all must "support an inclusive learning environment for racially diverse students." N-word substitution helps us build such an environment.

There are certain standards of mutual respect and social responsibility that we have a duty to uphold in any educational setting, . . . as a bedrock foundation for human decency in white people's interactions with Black people.¹

Giwa cites the blood-drenched history of the word in question and its role in legitimizing anti-Black violence and discrimination as reason enough to ban it from the classroom.

"Safe," "caring," "inclusive": who wouldn't want more of each? Don't we all deserve "decency" and "respect," and don't we all need to take "responsibility" for fostering it? Aren't we, in fact, morally obligated to do so? The obvious answer is, "yes."

But obligations often conflict. As Michael Clune reminds us in a recent essay on our declining profession, "Literary study is either an education in works of art or an education in morality. There are no other options, and the options are not compatible," as our long history of censoring words and works we find morally repulsive demonstrates.² In any case, professors of English have no training in the teaching of ethics or morality that would qualify them to speak on either subject with authority. Nonetheless, we persist.

The argument for N-word substitution is emotionally persuasive for anyone with an ounce of compassion, but as applied to the study of literature it's pedagogically unsound and can pose an obstacle to understanding. Its rationale comes down to an injunction borrowed from medicine:

¹ Sulaimon Giwa, "The N-Word Has No Place in the Classroom." *CBC Opinion*, Feb, 2022. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/giwa-opinion-n-word-classroom-1.6354944>

² Michael Clune, "Are Humanities Professors Moral Experts?" *Literary Criticism: Reflections from a Damaged Field*. Chronicle of Higher Education, 2023. pp. 20-27.

"First, do no harm." The mere sound of the word in question is, according to many, an insult to any Black person exposed to it and to the Black race in general, including those of its members not in the immediate vicinity, unless the speaker is Black.³ Even if not construed as insulting, for a Black person to hear or see the word can cause them emotional pain and even, according to some, trauma. Considering the monstrous legacy of slavery in America and the psychological damage it has inflicted on our Black citizens, a legacy for which the White race is overwhelmingly responsible, it follows that teachers of all races, but especially White teachers like me, as well as our students, should feel duty-bound to urge or even compel anyone who is not Black to refrain from using the word that the term "N-word" replaces, in any and all circumstances. For many non-Black supporters of N-word substitution this responsibility extends to making their position known to anyone who would defy or ignore the policy and asking, or in some cases demanding, that they respect it. On these occasions the teacher's Hippocratic obligation to "do no harm" is often broadened to include the emotional pain the word might inflict on anyone exposed to it, regardless of race.

There are other arguments in support of N-word substitution in the classroom generally that touch upon institutional practices and systems of oppression, which I'll address later. In what

³ This is a good place to add that I deplore the practice, underwritten by the pan-racial appeal of hip hop or rap music, of White people adopting the word "nigger" as a term of endearment, friendship, familiarity, or solidarity with their Black peers. In an interview with Sean Price, Neal A. Lester, former chair of the English Department at ASU, explains how it's come to this: "Much of the commercial hip-hop culture by Black males uses the n-word as a staple. White youths, statistically the largest consumers of hip-hop, then feel that they can use the word among themselves with Black and white peers. . . . But then I hear in that same discussion that many of the Black youths are indeed offended. " (*Learning for Justice*, Issue 40, Fall, 2011, at <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/fall-2011/straight-talk-about-the-nword>.) As they should be. For a White person to utter the word in this context is presumptuous and repugnant.

immediately follows, however, I'll be narrowing my counter-argument to a very fine point: uttering the word replaced by "N-word" when reading aloud from an assigned text. *Viva voce* utterance seems to be the flash point in most disagreements over N-word substitution, "giving the word life ourselves," as Koritha Mitchell puts it in an oft-cited podcast entitled, "The N-Word in the Classroom: Just Say NO."⁴ Opinions are less settled as to whether or not the word should be permitted in written commentary.

Well? What *is* it For?

However broad the range of our professional interests in literature, and however narrowly or broadly we define our subject, one thing teachers of literature can agree on is that what we do is all about words. Many or few, with or without pictures, spoken or written, discourse or text, poem or play or story, travelogue or pornography or court decision or recipe or board game instructions. Whatever our method of analysis and whatever we are using it to show, if what we're talking about has words, it's in our wheelhouse. We are long past the point where we can distinguish our object of study from all other written or spoken things merely by capitalizing it. We no longer pretend to teach the best that's been thought and said. We are in the business of teaching what's been said, whether spoken, sung, or written.

⁴ At 18:10 of Mitchell's podcast, which is available in a manipulable format at <https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/c19-america-in-the/s02e06-the-n-word-in-the-XktP8LKMGB0/>

If the study of literature is the study of words, what distinguishes it from related fields, like linguistics or law? Linguists study words, and so do law professors.⁵ The former try to discover the rules governing arrangements and transformations of words when native speakers use them to create meaningful statements. The latter try to narrow the meanings of words to fit rules that restrict or permit human behavior. Students of literature neither determine the rules of language nor fit language to rules. They multiply meanings. And whereas linguists deal with exemplary statements and lawyers with specific laws and legal opinions, students of literature are free to examine any and all arrangements of words in their unique iterations, whether recorded in utterances or written in texts.

When we multiply the meanings of a text as students of literature context is everything. It provides us with our only legitimate source of evidence. This may be limited to a single literary work, as in close reading, or expanded to include what René Welleck and Austin Warren call "extrinsic" factors, like the history of a genre, the biography of an author, or the place and time of composition.⁶ Without context a word is meaningless and any attempt to construe it is built on

⁵ And law professors must contend with the same pedagogical issues regarding N-Word substitution as English professors. See, for instance, Randall Kennedy and Eugene Volokh, "The Case for Quoting the N-Word in University Classrooms," *The Washington Post*, May 13, 2021 at 6:00 a.m. EDT. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/05/13/slurs-classrooms-law-school-taboo/>. However, the controversy over banning racist speech from the classroom has a much longer history in the teaching of literature. See, e.g., Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "War of Words: Critical Race Theory and the First Amendment," in *Speaking of Race, Speaking of Sex: Hate Speech, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties* (New York: NYU Press, 1995), pp. 17-57.

⁶ René Welleck and Austin Warren, "The Extrinsic Approach to the Study of Literature," in *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1949), pp. 65-138. I cite this classic summary of what we profess as students and teachers of literature at the risk of being put out to the same pasture, having been born the year the book was first published.

sand. Even its denotative meaning depends on the context of its familiar use or, in more challenging cases, a dictionary definition and the authority of a lexicographer.

So, if our job is to multiply meanings, why can't we point to the N-word's innate and obvious harmfulness when used in its most "familiar" context, include this baleful effect among its possible meanings, and agree that it should never be used, on any occasion or for any purpose?⁷

Well, we certainly can and, clearly, we have. According to advocates for N-word substitution, the intense emotional harm that merely hearing the word inflicts on Black listeners, unless the person who says it is Black, and on Black people in general, even if none are within earshot, warrants exceptional measures to eliminate it. Ordinary politeness would dictate substituting a euphemism or avoiding any reference to the subject. Even if I believed that the person whose feelings I've hurt or whose dignity I've impugned has misinterpreted what I've said, or that they are reading things into my remark that I didn't intend or that I believe aren't there, the harm would be real, and the proper response should be, "Please forgive me" or "I'm sorry," along with a firm resolve not to do it again. If I'm tempted to add, "I didn't mean to insult you" or the

⁷ Even among linguists the question of whether or not a word's emotional harmfulness should count as perlocutionary (affective), illocutionary (performative), or locutionary—that is, as part of its reference, meaning or "content"—remains unsettled. See, e.g., Chang Liu, "Slurs as Illocutionary Force Indicators," *Philosophia* 49, 1051–1065 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-020-00289-0>. Quotation marks enclosing insulting or otherwise harmful words were once understood to suspend their perlocutionary emotional impact, but linguists are now unsure of their power to act as intended. See, e.g., Stefan Rinner and Alexander Hieke, "Slurs under Quotation," *Philosophical Studies* 179, 1483–1494 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-021-01715-z>.

passive-voiced self-exoneration, "I'm sorry that your feelings were hurt," it would be for my benefit, not theirs.

If ordinary politeness forbids offensive behavior in every other walk of life, why should the teaching of literature be any different? For one thing, because a college classroom should be anything but ordinary. It should be extraordinary: shocking, challenging, revelatory. It should allow both students and teachers the opportunity to examine ordinary situations, practices, and beliefs critically and with a view to expanding our ability to grow and change, often in ways that we may find upsetting, even repugnant and infuriating. Multiplying the meanings of a literary text can lead to discomfort. We should worry if it never does.

Being polite impedes growth and change, in oneself and in others, regardless of venue. Any discussion where a frank exchange of opinions is to be expected, as in a college classroom, requires that civility take the place of politeness. When we discuss our differences of opinion civilly, we don't demean those with whom we disagree, but we don't change the subject to spare their feelings or our own, either, and we don't choose our words solely with the aim of not causing emotional pain or giving offense.

Suppose we decide, nonetheless, to make an exception for the word that "N-word" replaces, citing all the reasons advanced by the advocates of N-word substitution. Fairness would dictate that we show the same politeness to other students who may feel aggrieved or hurt or demeaned by language historically used to denigrate them. If the argument for replacing the N-word rests in large part on a history of genocidal cruelty and abuse, we should expect a Jewish student to feel

equally offended by the "K-word," and equally entitled to protection from auditory insult or offense. And why should an Asian or Asian American student hesitate even a second to cite this country's history of genocidal violence against Chinese and Japanese immigrants as a good reason to ban "chink" and "jap" from classroom discussions as well, regardless of purpose or context? Why confine ourselves to racial slurs? "Cunt," "bitch," "whore" are terms insulting to women. They are widely dispersed throughout the popular genre of crime fiction, which many of us teach on a regular basis, and particularly concentrated in its *noir* subvariant. I've rarely heard the advocates of N-word substitution expressing concern for the emotional well-being of these or other persecuted groups.

Mitchell, to her credit, has risen to the challenge of fairness by circulating a "Class Covenant" at the start of her courses, which often deal with racially offensive materials and terms.⁸ Students who enroll are required to abide by it. The Covenant forbids anyone in class from using the N-word, as well as the "'F' word." Moreover, it states, "Anyone in our intellectual community can suggest an addition; the group will decide to accept, reject, or revise it." But why wait for the suggestion? And why submit it to a vote? If giving the N-word "life" by merely uttering it is painful, offensive, or insulting to Black people, even if no Black person is present to hear it, why shouldn't the same assumption apply with regard to any other derogatory or demeaning term, regardless of whether or not anyone in the class belongs to the group it targets or finds it personally offensive? For that matter, if even a single student is hurt or made uncomfortable by a

⁸ "Class Covenant," in Koritha Mitchell, "Teaching and the N-word: Questions to Consider," March 23, 2018. <https://www.korithamitchell.com/teaching-and-the-n-word/#comments>.

word uttered in class, aren't they entitled to protection by euphemism regardless of anyone else's opinion?

It's easy to see how a well-meaning policy of decency and inclusion, if carried out with scrupulous attention to what might, conceivably, give offense to someone, or anyone, anywhere, could lead to the classroom equivalent of High Tea. But there are additional objections to making politeness rather than civility the rule when we discuss literature in particular.

In her podcast, Mitchell insists that substitutions like hers—she uses "N" instead of "N-word" to make them sound less "clunky" (8:40)—make no difference to classroom discussions of the offending text because everyone knows what these euphemisms stand for and, in any case, everyone is reading the word in question, even if they aren't speaking it. She provides some illustrations from *Huck Finn* (18:40-20:03) to demonstrate that N-substitution poses no hindrance to discussing the things she wants to discuss, like Huck's personality, his fear of his father, or Twain's melding of religious and superstitious themes.

Let's grant that you can do all the things Mitchell says you can do with *Huck Finn*, and more, without ever uttering the word that "N" replaces. What I'm curious to know is what you *can't* do, what it would be *impossible* to do. Since I'm no expert on *Huck Finn*, I'm in no position to itemize these possibilities, as Mitchell does hers. But I'm pretty sure they would have something to do with the sound of the word that's been banned from speech. I'm not just talking about rhythm and alliteration, but let's start with those and examine a genre, poetry, where they are more important and more prominently displayed than in *Huck Finn*, before coming back to a selection of prose more familiar to me.

Consider these three lines from Sylvia Plath's "Ariel":

Nigger-eye

Berries cast dark

Hooks—

"[N-word]-eye/ Berries . . ."? "[N]-eye / Berries"? What's the difference, really? Don't we all know what "N-word" or "N" stands for here?

Yes, of course we do. But if we're going to take seriously the study of literature, which is the study of how to multiply the meanings of words in various contexts, we have to consider every feature that contributes to their complex, often ambiguous, effects. This particular N-word (or "N") substitution distorts the sound and imagery of what Plath wrote, which, as any poet will tell you, together constitute the heart and soul of poetry (and of much prose, for that matter).⁹ It hinders us in our attempts to imagine what "nigger-eye/ Berries" might look like and silences the powerfully alliterative connections of the word it replaces, the sonic "hooks" this word "casts" to the hard "k" sounds in "cast," "dark," and "hooks" in the next two lines. These velar plosives¹⁰ repeat, unvoiced, the voiced "g" at the center or "eye" of the word "nigger" itself. It's not hard to see (literally) how N-word substitution could pose obstacles to the study of genres, like poetry and drama, ideally meant to be spoken aloud as well as read. But Plath is also making a typographical reference to the

⁹ Mitchell's preferred euphemism, "N," is even worse in this case, because, though it may "sound[] less clunky," it distorts the rhythm of the line.

¹⁰ See <https://www.sltinfo.com/consonants/>

visual "dark/ hooks" hanging down from the printed "g"s of the banned word itself, hooks that resemble the plural "hooks" she refers to. The effect is even more noticeable in sans serif typefaces: "nigger." How can we do justice to these auditory features and assess the impact of their visualizations without uttering the word in which they appear? It's like trying to understand Michael Jackson's moonwalk by examining an Arthur Murray step-diagram, without ever seeing a performance.

Finally, and most importantly, bowdlerizing Plath in this way diminishes the vicarious impact of her "quotidian racism," as Sharon Patricia Holland might put it,¹¹ which is rooted in and bound tightly to the specific word the poet chose, as well as to her personal history and the places and times in which she lived and became a poet. That complete vicarious experience—emotional, cognitive, historical, and undistorted by euphemism—is just as much a part of any complete understanding of literature as the dictionary meanings of its words and the patterns of its images and sounds. This is what I mean by "vicarity" and we'll turn our full attention to it in a moment.

Before we do, let's turn to prose, a genre much less tightly bound to its vocalic origins than poetry. In my courses on detective and crime fiction, I would often assign Ernest Hemingway's short story, "The Killers," as an example of American *noir* fiction's fraught engagement with race. Here the word "nigger" appears at least a dozen times in the space of three pages, twice outside the *cordon sanitaire* of quotation marks, which is to say, in the voice of the third-person narrator. For a graduate seminar on race and genre in American interwar crime fiction, I made the story available in its original publication format, as it debuted in the pages of *Scribners Magazine* in March 1927,

¹¹ Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham, NC: Duke U. P., 2012), p. 5.

with a half-page illustration¹² of Sam, the Black cook, captioned "All right, nigger. You stand right there," on page 231.

THE KILLERS

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"Don't go if you don't want to," George said.
 "Mixing up in this ain't going to get you anywhere," the cook said. "You stay out of it."
 "I'll go see him," Nick said to George.
 "Where does he live?"
 The cook turned away.

stairs and back to the end of a corridor. She knocked on the door.
 "Who is it?"
 "It's somebody to see you, Mr. Anderson," the woman said.
 "It's Nick Adams."
 "Come in."
 Nick opened the door and went into the



"All right, nigger. You stand right there."—Page 228.

"Little boys always know what they want to do," he said.
 "He lives up at Hirsch's rooming-house," George said to Nick.
 "I'll go up there."
 Outside the arc-light shone through the bare branches of a tree. Nick walked up the street beside the car-tracks and turned at the next arc-light down a side street. Three houses up the street was Hirsch's rooming-house. Nick walked up the two steps and pushed the bell. A woman came to the door.
 "Is Ole Anderson here?"
 "Do you want to see him?"
 "Yes, if he's in."
 Nick followed the woman up a flight of room. Ole Anderson was lying on the bed with all his clothes on. He had been a heavyweight prizefighter and he was too long for the bed. He lay with his head on two pillows. He did not look at Nick.
 "What was it?" he asked.
 "I was up at Henry's," Nick said, "and two fellows came in and tied up me and the cook, and they said they were going to kill you."
 It sounded silly when he said it. Ole Anderson said nothing.
 "They put us out in the kitchen," Nick went on. "They were going to shoot you when you came in to supper."
 Ole Anderson looked at the wall and did not say anything.

¹² The illustrator was Cyrus Leroy Baldrige, a White artist who dedicated his life to anti-war and anti-racist causes. He was an ardent supporter of the pacifist clergyman and six-time Socialist presidential candidate, Norman Thomas, and of activist and social reformer Jane Addams.

The caption is a quotation from Al, one of two White hitmen waiting to kill an innocent man who is due to arrive for a meal in the diner where Sam works. Of the three illustrations in the story this one alone, taking up half a page and reaching from left to right across both columns of print, features a single character. That character is not just Black. He is also the only one whose life-experience of racial violence has given him the wisdom to understand the foolishness and (in Hemingway's universe) the pointlessness of what White characters like Nick and George propose to do when the intended victim doesn't show up and the hitmen have to leave: warn him that they're coming. The story resumes immediately below this picture, beginning with Sam's authoritative verdict: "Little boys always know what they want to do."

I could try to persuade you that reading the word "nigger" aloud when quoting passages like Al's can help White students in particular to understand, at a visceral and not just intellectual level, the existential depth of Sam's wisdom, and his despair. Or that a close, *viva voce* examination of the two instances where the narrator uses the word offers opportunities not afforded by N-word substitution to explore how relationships between indirect and direct discourse, not to mention word and picture, affect the narrative tone, complicating our understanding of how racism in fiction is promulgated or disowned: was this echo-effect meant to convey solidarity or ironic self-distancing? Is the narrator a version of Hemingway, or something he's constructed to make a point about White racism's "quotidian" reality? The voice inflections we use to convey how these voices sound in our heads might tell us as much about ourselves as about Al or Hemingway.

But even if these two classroom examples did persuade you that there might be some merit to my argument, they would still fall short of the real point, which can be summarized in one simple

question: what doors of perception at so granular a level, in Hemingway's story or Plath's poem, might remain closed if I resorted to euphemism? It's a question that cannot be answered in advance, even by students or professors of color, except by saying, "We don't know."

But What *Is* Lost, Really?

In the study of literature, and in no other field that I can think of, a standard of politeness meant to spare a listener's feelings by banishing from utterance a word or phrase construed, even unanimously, to convey insult or harm also, unavoidably, banishes from discussion an incalculable number of new constructions of meaning. These particular constructions depend on the word's being uttered and heard, and they are incalculable for the simple reason that they are unpredictable. To ban any word from being quoted aloud in classroom discussions of assigned texts subtracts from the methods available to literary study one of its most important tools for multiplying meanings. It also places beyond our students' reach an important source of evidence, particularly in studying literature by and about Black people.¹³ As my readings of Plath and Hemingway suggest, N-word substitution, often promoted as an important weapon against racism, may in fact make discussing certain features of racism in literature more difficult.

¹³ Not to mention titles. And not just by White authors, like Conrad's *The Nigger of the Narcissus* or "Niggers Leap," a protest poem by the White Australian champion of aboriginal rights, Judith Wright. Titles by Black authors could, technically, be subject to the same ban: Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) or Dymond's "I am a nigger" (2006), or David Mills's "The 'Nigger' Top 10," "the most socially redeeming usages of 'nigger' in modern history, ranked according to their cultural importance" https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-nigger-top-10_b_43067 . Or would these latter examples be acceptable because the title was written by Black authors, or if spoken aloud, in class, by Black students?

Because the study of literature demands that we take the meaning of every word seriously, in every way, without substitution, we need to examine very carefully any argument for overriding that demand. A word's meaning is inseparable from its sound, the rhythms and patterns of its iterations, the images it calls to mind, its relationship to other elements in the text (captions and pictures as well as words), the history of its use, and its emotional impact. All of these features contribute to the word's power to excite vicariously, which differs from reader to reader and listener to listener depending on life experience and breadth of knowledge.

That literature's emotional impact is meant to be vicarious is what distinguishes it, as literature, from other forms of discourse like rhetoric or oratory (or insults, for that matter), which aim at stirring up emotions for the purposes of influencing behavior. That is to say, the emotional as well as referential content of *whatever* form of writing or speech literature takes as its object of study, including rhetoric and oratory and everything else that fits under the heading of "what's been said," is bracketed by an unspoken "as-if," or what Samuel Taylor Coleridge called the "willing suspension of disbelief" that literature demands in order to be received *as* literature. This suspension, which has been understood and taken for granted at least since Aristotle's *Poetics*, is what allows us to witness the horror and, yes, obscenity, of Othello's smothering of Desdemona, even as it unfolds before our eyes, without feeling the moral necessity of standing up and yelling "Stop!"

Without literature's "as-if" to protect us, we would become, for all intents and purposes, hysterical: unable to tell illusion from reality or dream from fact, unable to control the emotions that literature evokes in us, unable to separate ourselves from them and, thereby, resist their formative impact on

our personal behavior or attitudes. Most importantly, we would be incapacitated aesthetically. Our emotional response to what we read or hear would occupy the entire field of our awareness to the exclusion not only of reason, as in the most powerful effects of oratory and rhetoric, but also of the capacity for reflection in general, including our ability to examine, as objects of study, formal relationships of every sort: the relationship between one feature in an arrangement of words and another, one context for multiplying meanings and another, or our own imagination and the "who"—whether character, narrator, or author—that we picture on the far side of the text. Call it aesthetic distance or disinterestedness, Aristotelean *catharsis* or a Coleridgean denial that we are willfully (mis)taking as real something we know to be untrue, the vicarious "as-if" enjoined by literature and, at a further remove, by the study of it, is what makes both the reading and the study of words *as* literature possible.

In reading or hearing or witnessing the performance of a literary text, we not only identify, compassionately, with the emotions of characters, speakers, narrators, and even authors. We also adopt, vicariously, their worldview or what some would call the "ideology" that's shaping those emotions, often with the privilege of access to its inevitable blind spots.¹⁴ All the while, we are protected by the invisible shield of the "as-if" against any obligation to act on what we see and hear because, to put it simply, we know it's not really happening. This is not to say that we suspend moral judgment, but that we disengage judgment from action. Like a transmission shifted into neutral, our feelings have been disconnected from our moral drive-train.

¹⁴ We routinely condemn "ideology" without realizing that no one, ourselves included, can make any sense of the world around them without one.

And we're the ones who have disconnected them, who have moved the shift lever, willingly and knowingly. In every moment of reading, or of watching or hearing literature performed, we must sustain our ignorance of—"willingly suspend" our "disbelief" in—the physical media by which what we behold announces itself as imagined. To imagine James Earl Jones "as if" he were Othello we must ignore the proscenium arch, the auditorium, the exit signs glowing in the dark, the person sitting next to us suppressing a cough, and even the obvious fact that the Black person on stage, speaking and gesticulating in these impossibly bright lights, is in reality James Earl Jones. To imagine we are hearing "boxcars, boxcars, boxcars" spoken in the voice of Alan Ginsburg or watching Anna Karenina throw herself in front of a train, we must ignore not only circumambient distractions like these, but also what lies right in front of us, in literal black and white: the words on the page.

To ignore is not to forget. The first requires an act of will, but the second defies our attempts to achieve it and resists our efforts to overcome it. Nor do all acts of will require a sustained consciousness of deliberation, as any literate child knows from their experience of getting "lost in a book." That child's parents might tell you it's dangerous to get lost this way, and moralists from Plato onward have agreed. Once literature's "as if" has persuaded us to shift our moral transmission into neutral, we might find ourselves becoming susceptible to vicarious participation in the emotional lives and outlooks and worldviews and reasoning processes of morally dubious, even disgusting, human beings. Under the spell of the "as-if," we may find Iago's machinations in contriving the downfall of Othello impressive, even admirable, especially given his acuteness in detecting (and adroitness in exploiting) his master's own moral blind spot: a suspicion, born of racial insecurity, that Desdemona has found his complexion repulsive and is seeking a White lover.

Who knows? Once we suspend our disbelief in the reality of what would otherwise impose a moral obligation to act—to denounce what we read and see and hear, or even ban it altogether—Iago might be transformed from the villain of Shakespeare's play into its most insightful critic.

The argument for N-word substitution across the board, however, leaves no room for the suspension of disbelief because the emotional harm of hearing the word that "N-word" replaces is understood to be, from the outset, real and not imaginary. Simply put, the word offers nothing to disbelieve in, and thus, no disbelief to suspend. Like a baleful charm or spell, a "curse" in the archaic sense of the word, its mere utterance is presumed to cause pain, regardless of any context within which a reader or auditor might wish to frame it for the purpose of multiplying its meanings. Formerly made safe for classroom use by literature's "as-if," the word has been weaponized well beyond its original capacity for doing damage.

And that damage is real. I'm not denying the power of this toxic word to cause emotional harm, ranging from feelings of unease to extreme discomfort to outrage. But even Hippocrates understood that his first maxim, "Do no harm," came trailing an exception: "unless it's in the best interest of the patient." I'm urging teachers of literature to help vulnerable students resist and, if possible, try to surmount—should they choose to make the attempt—the pain they feel at hearing or reading this word, or for that matter, any word or topic causing them emotional distress, so that they can begin to approach it as an object of study. Because the life of literature comprises the sum of what's contributed by every word we read or hear, a student who cannot participate vicariously in the full gamut of emotions and views that may emerge when they attempt to multiply the meanings of a word is hampered, precisely to that extent, in their study of literature.

Perhaps N-word substitution will have no appreciable impact on an English major's breadth of knowledge, intellectual or emotional, or on the hermeneutic skill set they bring to the study of words. But how can we know? And in any other curriculum, even Linguistics or Pre-Law, would a similar restriction on what can be said stand so clearly in opposition to what the study of its subject is for?

The loss is magnified at the graduate level, where the teacher is, presumably, training future teachers in the discipline and modeling the skills necessary to pursue a professional career.

A graduate student pursuing an MA, MEd, or PhD in English is attending classes in order to learn not only how to multiply the meanings of words, but also how to pass that skill along to others. My job is to help them acquire that ability, the know-*how* and not just the "know *that*" required by the program they've signed up for. To succeed, I also need to help them overcome whatever stands in their way: not just the practical or economic or social or systemic obstacles posed from without, but any and all obstacles posed from within, psychological and emotional as well as intellectual. N-word substitution, a form of euphemizing however you want to justify it, restricts my opportunities to help vulnerable students, White as well as Black, do that. Rather than encouraging and empowering them to overcome, or even make the effort to withstand, the emotional pain that may interfere with their ability to read or hear this racial slur as an object of study—that is, to receive it in the mode of the imaginary or the "as-if"—N-word substitution valorizes a dubious model of reading in a course where modeling ways to read is part of the curriculum.

What is to be Done?

One possible solution to this conflict between a teacher's Hippocratic and pedagogic obligations will have occurred to many of you already: trigger warnings. Just make sure that any student who wants to sign up for a course where offensive material will be quoted word for word understands what they are in for. True, some courses are required, and sooner or later a student will have no choice but to enroll. But required courses are typically offered each academic year, usually in multiple sections taught by a variety of instructors and with different reading lists or classroom protocols.

In both required and elective courses, however, vulnerable students interested in courses that include offensive material can still find themselves in an exposed position, even if warned what to expect by email or text well before classes begin. They may not know how they'll respond to the reality of what they can only imagine until they encounter it, and by then it may be too late for them to change courses. Or (perhaps the most widespread and intractable problem) they may not have read what we sent them.

So what's a teacher to do?

One solution would be to follow up on timely warnings by repeating them during the first week of class and assigning problematic texts at the first class meeting, or at least well before the college deadline for dropping a course without penalty. That way any student, adequately warned but still curious, will have a chance to test their reaction and decide whether or not to continue.

But is this "welcoming"? Is this what we mean when we say we want to make the classroom a "safer" and "more caring" learning environment for non-White students? No, it's not. The alternative, however, is to let what some students feel to be intolerable—and they are not always students of color—restrict opportunities for other, less vulnerable students to learn. Letting the majority decide, as in Mitchell's Classroom Covenant, doesn't solve this problem, but simply disguises tyranny by the majority as a form of student empowerment. Trigger warnings at least grant students the freedom to decide, individually and independently, whether or not complete *verbatim* fidelity to racially offensive texts is what they want.

Trigger warnings, however, come burdened with problems that should make us hesitate to use them for any purpose. In fact, research has shown they may do more harm than good to those they are meant to protect, and a disservice to those more severely afflicted with clinically diagnosed trauma.

One 2020 study¹⁵ reviewed the experimental evidence, dating as far back as 2006, regarding the impact of trigger warnings on individuals with trauma histories. The consensus was that they are not only "functionally inert" but may "cause small adverse side effects," including "counter-therapeutically reinforce[ing] survivors' view of their trauma as central to their identity." In another study¹⁶ trigger warnings were found to be, likewise, not only ineffective but in some

¹⁵ Jones, P. J., Bellet, B. W., & McNally, R. J. (2020). "Helping or Harming? The Effect of Trigger Warnings on Individuals With Trauma Histories." *Clinical Psychological Science*, 8(5), 905-917. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702620921341>

¹⁶ Bellet, B. W., Jones, P. J., & McNally, R. J. (2018). "Trigger warning: Empirical evidence ahead." *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, 61, 134–141. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbtep.2018.07.002>

cases positively harmful, "undermin[ing] participants' sense of their resilience to potential future traumatic events and their sense of the resilience of others."

In short, trigger warnings can make vulnerable students less inclined than they already are to test the waters of a course where N-word substitution can't reduce the emotional upset they anticipate.

Another study, by Anna Khalid and Jeffrey Aaron Snyder, associate professors at Carleton College,¹⁷ argues that in addition to being useless at best and harmful at worst, the use of trigger warnings is so arbitrary as to be, ironically, "irresponsible to victims of trauma":

[A]pplying trigger warnings to any material that elicits an "uncomfortable emotional response" makes a mockery of the real challenges faced by those suffering from PTSD.

In language echoing Clune's regarding the unsuitability of teaching ethics or morality in courses of literature, the authors add,

We don't think we have the expertise or moral authority to make decisions about what kind of pain — not to mention whose pain — matters most. Indeed we're skeptical that anyone does.

¹⁷ Anna Khalid and Jeffrey Aaron Snyder, "The Data is In: Trigger Warnings Don't Work," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 15, 2021. Online at https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-data-is-in-trigger-warnings-dont-work?sra=true&cid=gen_sign_in

As I asked a moment ago, is it my duty, as a teacher of literature, to enable a student who feels distressed or even insulted at the utterance of a two-syllable word to avoid ever having to hear it? Or is it, instead, to help that student overcome their emotional pain for the real gain of becoming a better reader, and interpreter, of literature?

In lieu of scary trigger warnings, these two authors urge instructors to be more circumstantial and specific in their course descriptions. "There is a world of difference between warning and informing," they write. "Simply using the phrase 'trigger warning' raises the stakes, squeezing course content into a narrow frame defined by trauma and suffering." In addition, itemizing possible sources of emotional pain as dangers to avoid "runs the risk of reducing a complex work of art to a litany of problematic topics, not to mention eliminating the element of surprise that can shock us into a higher consciousness."

I couldn't agree more. But if we want to make "shock" a useful tool for raising our students' awareness of what literature can mean, we can only succeed if we teach them how to buffer it with the "as-if." That means teaching them vicarity. Making students fearful of exposing themselves to anything is a step away from helping them achieve that imaginative *desideratum*. Promising them that they can opt out of lectures or discussions they don't like, or think they won't like, in order to avoid the shock they fear, is no solution and may even reduce their resiliency. A week-long trial period, suitably front-loaded, will give uncertain students more than enough time to determine if your class is for them and, if they decide it isn't, to find an alternative. Let each student make up their own mind. Don't let other students make it up for them.

Pain and Gain

Indisputably, uttering racial slurs aloud, for whatever purpose, can cause emotional pain ranging from discomfort to indignation to outrage and insult, among White students as well as non-White. That's not just a concession I'm making for the purposes of argument. It's something I firmly believe. But how much pain are we talking about?

From their skepticism regarding the "expertise or the moral authority" teachers might claim in determining "what kind of pain," or whose, "matters most," we can assume Khalid and Snyder don't consider this question answerable. There are severe cases, however, that make comparative judgments irrelevant. One harrowing example appears just a minute into Koritha Mitchell's widely distributed, and influential, podcast. It's an audio recording of a confrontation between a White professor who's just uttered the forbidden word for (one hopes) teaching purposes and a Black male student, whose rage is so palpable that, at one point (1:20), you can hear him bumping violently into a desk.¹⁸

Mitchell uses this confrontation as a glaring example of how "smugly" White teachers inflict violence on Black students, with impunity and complete disregard, whenever they utter the word in question, for whatever purpose. The violent affect and behavior of this enraged Black student serves, for Mitchell, as an index of the emotional violence he is suffering at the sound of the word. "He was responding in a way that acknowledged the violence with which he was being engaged,"

¹⁸ "The N-Word in the Classroom: Just Say NO." <https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/c19-america-in-the/s02e06-the-n-word-in-the-XktP8LKMGB0/>

she says (11:20). Because White teachers work for "institutions" that are "literally built on denigrating and diminishing people of color," she adds, they "do not have to seem aggressive in order to do great violence" (11:25).

In short, Mitchell is calling out White teachers for their culpable negligence on this issue and asking them to live up to their "responsibilities" (1:30). To judge from the Classroom Covenant she distributes to her students in lieu of a trigger warning, these include the same criteria for good teaching summarized by Giwa's keywords: mutual respect among students and between students and instructor, and a safe and welcoming classroom environment where emotional "gut punch[es]" are not tolerated.¹⁹ "I don't want to hear that word in my workplace," Mitchell says in her podcast (10:32).

Well, who would?

No one, unless other workplace responsibilities made persuasive competing claims. Who would want to expose themselves to nuclear contamination, unless their job—say, cancer treatment--required them to handle radioactive material? Perhaps more to the point, who would want to fill a tooth, knowing that even massive doses of Novocain can't block the mental pain some patients might feel at the mere sound of the drill? Ask a dentist and they'll tell you they understand—viscerally, not just intellectually—the near-crippling anxiety that prevents some patients from ever

¹⁹ Koritha Mitchell, "Teaching & the N-word: Questions to Consider." At <https://www.korithamitchell.com/teaching-and-the-n-word/>

darkening their door, even for a checkup. As for those who do, how can we not admire their courage, stamina, and will power?

I'd like to think the White teacher in Mitchell's exemplary audio clip would have shown as much sympathy as your ordinary dentist if he hadn't been put so firmly and, yes, violently, on the defensive. Be that as it may, when he keeps trying to reason this young man out of feeling enraged, while repeating over and over the word that ignites his explosive outbursts, it's like a dentist telling the patient writhing and screaming in the chair, "You shouldn't be feeling any pain," when clearly the anesthetic isn't working. And then diving right back in.

I don't know how I'd have responded if I were in that teacher's place. I would hope the course description in my syllabus would have deterred this young man from enrolling in my class to begin with. In any case, the first thing I'd do is stop repeating the word that's igniting his fury. The second is apologize and express my concern. The third, supposing we'd both managed to calm down, is urge him to put himself out of harm's way by dropping the class. If the only exception to "Do no harm" is "unless it's in the best interest of the patient," then nothing can be gained by subjecting a student like this to a level of pain so overwhelming as to make any benefit he might obtain by remaining in my class impossible for him to receive. Only then, and only if the student was willing to entertain the idea, would I explain why I felt it necessary to quote literally from texts I'd assigned for the course.

That explanation would comprise a competing list of responsibilities to those Mitchell has in mind, responsibilities I feel compelled to fulfill in my own "workplace," where all words have a place

providing they serve the purpose that teaching and interpreting literature is for, namely, multiplying the meanings of the text under discussion. "Is anything taken away," asks Mitchell, "because the word isn't uttered while everyone is looking at it? Has learning been compromised?"²⁰ I think I've shown it can be. Her students, she says, can still cite a passage containing the offensive term without having to "skip the word or treat it as if it's too powerful to be approached" (23:25). "At the same time," she adds, by using "N" rather than "N-word" as a substitute for the forbidden term,

we're avoiding giving it life in our learning environment, but not in a clunky way, so that we end up bringing unnecessary and distracting attention to it. (23:25-23:33)

Which is, I believe, a big part of the problem. In any attempt to keep from uttering the forbidden word or to keep others from doing so, Mitchell's less "clunky" "N"-substitution, even more than "N-word" substitution, naturalizes euphemism as a standard literary practice, erasing from the reader's awareness its own erasure of the text. To resort to any form of euphemism is, in fact, to "skip" what is not spoken, and there is no clearer indication that a word is "too powerful to be approached"—that it has, in effect, acquired the power of an incantation, curse, or charm—than to refuse to speak it aloud for fear of "giving it life."

How can I tell, ahead of time, what insights—tonal, discursive, rhythmic, and yes, emotional—"giving the word life" might provoke in any given listener? That avenue to enlightenment will have been blocked by my decision not just to refrain from uttering the word, but also, if I'm embracing

²⁰ Koritha Mitchell, "Teaching & the N-word: Questions to Consider." At <https://www.korithamitchell.com/teaching-and-the-n-word/>

Mitchell's Classroom Covenant, to forbid anyone else in the classroom from doing so, even for the purpose of making it an object of study.

Vicarity? Or Precarity?

It doesn't take long, when listening to Mitchell's podcast, to recognize how big a role her White colleagues have played in prompting her strenuous advocacy of N-word substitution in the classroom. "So few white people think about these issues" (7:45), she says, and, when they do, they speak from an unacknowledged position of privilege that takes Whiteness as the norm. As a result, we are "structurally" held to "incredibly low standards" of behavior (2:50), in and outside the classroom. We "demonize" our Black students "every time they ask for a little decency" (15:27), in large part because White teachers just "don't reflect on how they are doing their jobs."

Much has changed in the seven years since May 2017, when Mitchell recorded the confrontation between an angry Black student and his "smugly" oblivious instructor. In that span of time, White teachers like me have had a chance to reflect a great deal about these issues, including how we are doing our jobs. If we've become more sensitive, more aware, more anxious to prevent the hurt we may unconsciously inflict—and I think we have—it's because, to their credit, Mitchell, Giwa, and numerous others have made a concerted effort to raise the awareness of their White colleagues by disseminating podcasts like this one, along with essays and lectures, describing and explaining in detail Black people's pain at hearing the N-word spoken aloud. Clearly, that effort has paid off. There's hardly a literature program in the country where you will not find unanimous agreement that the word "nigger" should never be introduced to classroom discussion, for any reason. Whether

that outcome reflects White instructors' heightened awareness and powers of empathy or their fear of being interrupted by the chants of campus demonstrators outside their windows, classrooms across the country are now "safer," "more welcoming," and far more polite workplaces for students of color to learn in and for their professors of color to teach in.

In this process of self-transformation, however, I fear we have replaced vicarity with precarity as our central focus in the teaching of literature. White teachers have learned (at least, those of us who didn't already know how) to feel the pain of our Black students, and to better understand the sources of their emotional disequilibrium. But in doing so we've put on hold our primary mission: impressing on all our students, White and non-White, the crucial importance of the imaginative "as if," that vicarious participation in what we "give life to" that makes the experience of literature, *as literature*, possible. By doing so, we have also made it more difficult for us to help them achieve it.

I'm not saying N-word substitution should be abandoned in any and all classroom discussions of literature. I'm saying that an exception should be made when the specific interpretive point at issue requires speaking aloud the word that "N-word" replaces. Vicarity, not precarity, should be our first concern, and in situations where the two conflict, where worries over emotional harm may get in the way of achieving the mental distance necessary to make any text a dispassionate object of literary study, students should be informed and allowed to choose for themselves, not invited to set classroom policy for their teacher and their peers.

If I cannot persuade you of the value of the practice I'm advocating, I can at least try to remove the institutional and social impediments that make life difficult for those who would adopt it. I ask you

who are in the opposition camp to trust your colleagues' professional expertise and good will, and their good sense as to where and when it would be appropriate to quote racist texts *verbatim*, depending on course level and subject matter and the specific interpretive point at issue.

And it's not only trust in your colleagues that I'm asking for. It's trust in your students, and in yourself. I ask you to trust that your students are in the best position to determine how much emotional pain they can stand, and of what kind. Until they experience what they can only imagine, they cannot know, for certain, either one. Nor can they assess whether or not the goal you point to was worth the cost until they've reached it, which means you need to trust your own ability to make it desirable, and attainable. If you decide to adopt the strict *verbatim* policy advocated here, you can make it safer for them to test themselves by announcing that policy early and by giving them a taste of what they're in for on the first day of class. Remind them that they are free to enroll in a different class if they find yours too painful to endure; promise you'll do all in your power to make it endurable should they choose to stay; and if you really believe in what you're doing, don't back down. No student, however vulnerable, should have the power to decide what their classmates can or cannot withstand.²¹

²¹ Setting up bias-diversity teams to police classroom speech only creates more problems than it solves. See, e.g., Christopher J. Ferguson, "Bias-Response Teams are a Bad Idea," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 5, 2023. "Designed to reduce anxiety among people who experience what they feel are bias incidents," writes Ferguson, bias-response teams "are in effect a mental-health intervention, acquiring the liabilities associated with any such intervention. It is hard to find any evidence that they work." Coupled with anonymous reporting and confidential hearings, they are particularly toxic to classroom morale and student-teacher trust: "I can't think of a worse way to create camaraderie among a diverse group of students than to institute an anonymous snitch system whereby they can aggressively police one another's speech."

I began this essay indicating that, before I finished, I'd address the relevance of my remarks to public discourse. I'll begin with an issue that many of my colleagues will feel has been little attention to this point, namely, the crucial importance of giving our students the tools to fight the injustices that persist and, in increasing number, prevail outside the classroom, where they will have to live the rest of their lives after graduation. We cannot do this unless we enforce in our classrooms the standards of behavior we wish to see practiced in that wider world. On this we all agree.

If I thought for even a second that imposing N-word substitution on the teaching of literature, across the board and without exception, would have any appreciable impact on the dire political situation in which we find ourselves today, or help to advance the cause of social justice or make racists more caring, welcoming, and polite toward people of color, I wouldn't be writing this essay. I'd be more than willing to sacrifice vicarity on the altar of precarity.

However, I don't believe making our classrooms safer, more welcoming, or more polite can have any but a cosmetic impact on the public sphere unless our students, including those (White as well as Black) whose emotional pain we are so anxious to allay, do something to make substantive progress possible. That requires more than banding together with college educated, professionalized, middle-to-high-earning, and N-word opposed citizens like themselves, White or non-White. It means making bridges to Americans who differ from them in these and other important respects, even to the point of offending them, but who are necessary to move the needle

forward along that "moral arc of the universe" that Martin Luther King believed "bends towards justice." Otherwise, we are only teaching our students how to make perfection the enemy of good.

Vicarity is a virtue and an asset in every walk of life and every day of our lives, not just in the literature classroom. It's what enables us to empathize—to understand emotionally—as well as to sympathize—to compassionate—with real people as well as fictional ones. "I feel your pain" cannot be meant or taken literally. Otherwise, the dentist wielding the drill would be writhing on the floor. The only difference between identifying with real people and a character in a poem, book, or play is that the first doesn't require you to suspend disbelief or disengage your moral transmission. In fact, you want your shift lever firmly in "Drive".

Vicarity is easy with those who are like us, especially if we know, from personal experience, the suffering they've seen. But even having experienced it, there's no way we can feel or fully understand, in each unique encounter, the suffering of another person unless we listen carefully to what they say and *imagine* it. Our real challenge lies in imagining the pain of someone not like us, to the point of feeling it, or at least understanding its origins, as we do with members of our own race, gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, or nation. Insofar as we let vicarity atrophy, we move closer to becoming sociopaths. We weaken, in Percy Shelley's words, "the creative faculty to imagine that which we know."

Reading literature is an opportunity to exercise that imaginative muscle, and teaching students how to read vicariously is an opportunity to help them practice doing so with the most benefit to their imaginative health. It's teaching them how to fall in love with a way of reading and listening that

strengthens their powers of vicarity to the point of enabling them to overcome their feelings of precarity, not just in the classroom but in life.

Not to think alike, but to walk together. Champions of vicarity would add: "in another's shoes."

That's not morality or ethics, but neither is it a bad lesson for teachers of literature to convey. In any case, it's the one that holds the most promise for making our nation a better place in which to live for all our citizens.