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1

Derogatory Terms

Racism, Sexism, and the
Inferential Role Theory of Meaning

> "When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."
> "The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."
> "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master— that's all." [1]

Mary Catherine Bateson recounts a conversation with Johnetta Cole, president of Spelman College, who said " 'I found out about race very early. I have a recollection from when I was three or four years old of a kid calling me nigger.' I asked her how she knew 'nigger' was a bad word. 'The tone of voice,' she retorted, provoked by the question, 'and the rocks that are being thrown—they tell you that "nigger" is an insult.' " [2]

In the familiar debate between Humpty Dumpty and Alice, most of us side with Alice, maintaining that speakers have little or no power to change socially recognized meanings of words on our own. This paper about derogatory terms is also about speaker meaning, the role of community norms in establishing meaning, and more generally, the question of which is to be master. An analysis of derogatory terms helps show why individual speakers cannot escape

the socially established meaning of their utterances, except occasionally by the grace of the communities in which they live and speak. Derogatory terms are rich with their own history and reflect (in some sense) the history of the community in which they have meaning, and they are profoundly normative. This chapter introduces a richer way of thinking about what is wrong with derogatory terms than simply labelling them as biased (citing problems with connotation, as some do) or saying they fail to refer (citing problems with denotation). Neither approach is satisfactory, for much more is at issue than bad attitudes and referential misfires. What is at issue between those who use the terms and those who attack their use is the legitimacy of the expressive commitment of the terms; what is at issue is a commitment to the viability and value of a particular mode of discourse or way of talking. Such modes of discourse are themselves social practices, and they are closely tied to other, nondiscursive social practices that give them their force. So, at issue is the legitimacy of a set of linguistic practices as well as the legitimacy of the social practices they support and by which they are supported.

After briefly presenting the framework of my analysis in terms of linguistic commitments, I shall offer a characterization of two opposing positions on the problem of derogatory terms. Both the Absolutist and the Reclaimer hold that such terms are undesirable, and both engage in active attempts to change the social practices in which these terms are embedded. The Absolutist thinks that the terms we are considering are ineradicably derogatory, and hence thinks that to undermine the social practices behind them (racism, sexism, homophobia) we must eradicate the terms from our available repertoires. The Reclaimer, on the other hand, thinks that the terms mark important features of the target group's social history, and that reclaiming the term—making it nonderogatory—is both possible and desirable. It is possible, she argues, because we can detach the semantic content of the term from its pragmatic role of derogation, and it is desirable because doing so would take a weapon away from those who would wield it and would empower those who had formerly been victims. The struggle between the Absolutist and the Reclaimer illustrates the importance of a focus on linguistic commitments to developing a social practice approach to derogatory terms. This chapter represents such an approach.

The Problem

Consider two true stories:

> While driving home from his office one evening, a dark-skinned African-American man, George, inadvertently irritates a neighboring car by staying within the speed limit despite the other driver's close tailgating and honking. Harry, the white man driving the other car, pulls up beside George and shouts, "GET OFF THE ROAD, NIGGER!"

> Ethel, Fred, and Lucy are summer help at a seaside resort. Fred admires Ethel's independence and assertiveness, and, knowing that Ethel and Lucy are friends, he asks Lucy whether she thinks Ethel would go out with him on a date. Lucy knows that Ethel despises Fred, so she gives him an emphatic "no." Convinced of his own worthiness, Fred is perplexed, and after finding out from Lucy that Ethel is not involved with another man, Fred finally says, "Oh, I get it—she's a dyke!"

These stories are nasty and their language is meant to be hostile and rude. The first case involves an insult hurled directly at its target. Both involve reductive classification.[3] Pragmatically, the perlocutionary effect of these utterances is clear: they are angry put-downs that attempt to reduce the person to one real or imagined feature of who they are. Sandra Bartky calls the catcalls men hurl at women on the street "rituals of subjugation"; something similar occurs in these stories.[4] This inquiry, in the borderland between semantics and pragmatics, asks how the semantics of derogatory terms contribute to these pragmatic effects, and how these pragmatic effects contribute to the very meanings of the terms.[5]

My concern is with a particular kind of derogatory term used to refer to people. To call someone tall or short seems to be straightforward description, but to call someone "a runt" is to use a derogatory term. Using "runt" to describe a person invokes stereotypes associated with being small, adding the hostile implication that this is someone who should not have been allowed to grow up. Even when used without hostility, there is still the associated inferential consequence that runts should be killed soon after birth. The derogatory terms used in our opening stories are even worse than

"runt," for they are tied to frameworks of sexist and racist oppression. They have a rich and twisted history within American culture, and that history created a network of nasty inferences now associated with the terms. On the other hand, these two terms are also the subject of political reclamation projects; they are sometimes adopted as positive in-group terms by those at whom they have been hurled as epithets. Such reclamation projects defy any attempt to simplify the pragmatics of these terms. Because of this rich embeddedness, and because their social roles prohibit oversimplification, I'm going to focus on these two deeply derogatory terms.

Philosophers may be inclined to think that I am adding another chapter to the discussion of the general significance of what have come to be called "thick" terms—terms or expressions that carry with them or convey an attitude, an approval or a disapproval. Thick terms are those in which the description and the attitude "form a compound or amalgam, rather than a mixture: the attitude and the description infuse each other, so that in the end, in the repertoire of the mature speaker, the two elements are no longer distinguishable."[6] Clearly derogatory terms are thick in an important sense, but the issue of attitude, the psychological states and stance of the actual speaker, is one that is best set aside. Attributions of attitude may be made on the basis of a speaker's use of such terms, among other things, but it is not simply because this particular speaker has this particular attitude that the term is offensive, insulting, or harmful. A speaker's attitude may be quite at odds with what he or she actually says on any given occasion, due to a variety of ways we can misfire, obfuscate, or dissimulate. The discussion that follows will have some significance for those who want a theory of thick terms in ethics, but I will not make such an application. Rather, I shall show that a proper understanding of derogatory terms illustrates the importance of a proper understanding of expressive and other linguistic commitments.

Contextualism: An Inferential Role Theory of Meaning

Trying to figure out what exactly "nigger" means, I turned to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* which lists "nigger" as synonymous with "Negro," "black," "African American," and "third-world woman/man,"

noting that it is colloquial "and usually contemptuous."[7] The *OED* misses the mark here, for "nigger" is *not* synonymous with these terms. The racial designation is often taken to be central to the meaning of the term,[8] but in fact the heart of the expression is its designating the person as subordinate. Expressions like "white nigger," which was commonly used in the 1850s to denote "white workers in arduous unskilled jobs or subservient positions,"[9] show that the subservience aspect of the term is crucial and that the racial element may be less central than one might think.[10] The history of the term is tied to its consistent use against American blacks, but the term's extension has broadened and its intension has shifted since then. Historically, slavery in the United States established a dominance/subordination relation between Americans of European descent and those of African descent, marked most prominently by darkness of skin. As the term took hold, the roots set out in the ante-bellum period grew to support the development and maintenance of a black underclass that still exists. To call someone "a nigger" today is at minimum to attribute a second-class status to him or her, usually on the basis of race and, arguably, to take that lower status to be deserved.

So why, then, does the *OED* say that the term is "usually contemptuous" and not "always"? Perhaps its editors were considering a case like the following: When my elderly white neighbor said that she needed to find a "yard nigger," *she* did not think her words conveyed contempt for the black men in our North Carolina town who do yard work. (This was 1992.) What she intended was to let me know that she wanted someone to do her yard work who is, above all else, cheap labor. Her intention carried no explicit contempt, and when asked, she might reply that she sincerely shows respect to African Americans. What she does not think about, but what such words do convey and depend upon, is that the black man she seeks *is* cheap labor because of an oppressive racist social and economic structure that holds him in contempt. Her purportedly neutral intention in using the term is not sufficient for overcoming its socially and historically conferred derogatory power.[11] What both my former neighbor and the *OED* miss is that the term carries contempt even when the speaker does not.

Racism is often taken to be an attitude, a mental state, a matter of individuals harboring and acting upon prejudices. This characterization is consistent with racism's being primarily a matter of

individual private judgments and preferences. In contrast, I take racism to be a structure of social practices that supports and enforces the subordination of the well-being of members of some races to the well-being of members other races.[12] Intentions, on this view, are derivative of these social practices.[13] Racist language is significant only within a context that sanctions wide varieties of disparate treatment of members of races deemed lesser, including social and economic isolation, harassment, violence, and even genocide. These practices are the core—the threat and the reality—of racism. Without their cultural and material "back-up," words like the derogatory terms we are considering would not have the force they do.[14] Taking just such a contextualist position, legal scholar Richard Delgado argues that racial slurs "conjure up the entire history of racial discrimination in this country."[15] This claim is too sweeping and too mentalisitic, but it is clear that derogatory terms for African Americans cannot be significantly distanced from the history of the enslavement of Africans in the United States and the mistreatment of blacks at the hands of whites since then. As Wittgensteinians are fond of reminding us: a language is a way of life. Without the way of life, the language is just so much wind.

This language/culture holism is nicely complemented by an inferential role theory of meaning, which offers a powerful conceptual framework for analyzing the social problems reflected in and the linguistic problems created by derogatory terms.[16] According to this view, the meaning of a sentence is a matter of its place in a pattern of inferences. The meaning of a word or expression is a matter of its various actual and possible sentential roles. These patterns of inference are governed by commitments, which are a matter of speakers issuing licenses and undertaking responsibilities. Which commitments a speaker may make depends on the speaker's social, cultural, and linguistic context. The speaker's social and linguistic community *licenses* or *entitles* nearly all its members to make certain kinds of basic linguistic commitments, such as "it's a sunny day today" or "if this is Roxbury, we must be in Boston." Specialization of labor and discrete distribution of authority in many communities results in those communities licensing only certain speakers to make certain kinds of commitments. Sometimes we give explicit licenses, as we do in allowing only certain people to prescribe and dispense drugs. Most linguistic licenses tend to be less explicit, but similarly effective.

The sorts of very basic linguistic commitments made by any speaker making an assertion can be seen by considering Lucy's assertion, "Ethel danced in the play but refused to dance at the party." Applying Robert Brandom's account of asserting, we find that Lucy undertakes two sorts of commitments in asserting this claim: an *identificatory* commitment and an *assertional* commitment.[17] Each commitment carries an associated *task-responsibility*. Here Lucy's identificatory commitment requires her to identify which Ethel, which play, or which party, if her audience is confused about them. Lucy's assertional commitment carries a responsibility to justify the claim if it should be challenged, and issues an inference license to her audience. Lucy's justification may be a matter of providing further claims that constitute evidence of her own (as in, "I saw Ethel dancing onstage, and I watched her the whole night at the party") or it may be a matter of deferring to another speaker (as in, "Fred told me"). An inference license entitles the audience to use the claim as a premise in arguments of their own while deferring justification for the claim back to the person who issued the license. When Lucy defers her justification back to Fred, she relies on a license Fred issued in saying what he did about Ethel. Then the listener in search of evidence has to go to Fred. When Lucy makes the claim about Ethel, she (*qua* asserter) must supply the antecedent inferential links (in justifying) and license others to use consequent inferential links.[18]

In addition to assertional and identificatory commitments, speakers undertake expressive commitments as well. An expressive commitment is a commitment to the viability and value of a particular way of talking. This concept was first developed to account for the way that metaphorical interpretation involves not only what is said but also how it is said and how that method of presentation influences both the assertional and the identificatory commitments associated with the expression.[19] When Romeo says, "But soft, what light through yonder window breaks/ It is the east, and Juliet is the sun," he undertakes a commitment to the viability and value of using sun-talk to talk about Juliet. The task-responsibility incurred by an expressive commitment is a matter of showing to the audience, if asked, that this way of talking really is viable and valuable. In the case of metaphors, we do this by extending the metaphor. Showing viability requires showing that the metaphor can be extended; showing value takes much more. Value is usually

judged by assessing the utility of the extended metaphor to the goals of the discourse. In general, to judge whether a given mode of discourse is viable or valuable, one has to establish the goals of the discursive practice. Sometimes that goal will be seeking truth, sometimes it will be seeking power, and often it will be some species or combination of these.[20]

Ordinarily, one supports one's expressive commitment by supporting enough of the assertional commitments of the expression to show that the way of talking in which the expression fits is indeed viable and valuable. The assertional commitments of "nigger" are illustrated by Jerry Farber's attempt to make the case that "students are niggers."[21] Farber's contrast class is the faculty, and he cites segregated dining facilities, segregated lavatory facilities, segregated sleeping facilities, and anti-miscegenation rules between the classes as but partial evidence of his claim. He adds that "students . . . are politically disenfranchised" within the academic system and a good student, "like a good nigger," is "expected to know his place." Farber further suggests that students have "the slave mentality: obliging and ingratiating on the surface but hostile and resistant underneath." Each of these features represents one assertional commitment of the term. ("If X is a nigger, then there is a set of Ys such that Xs and Ys cannot sleep in the same facility"; similarly for each of the other features.) We now have a partial list of the elements in the inferential role of the term: the referent is a being defined in reference to others to whom she is considered subservient, from whom she must be kept separate, by whom she may be exploited, and so on.

Spelling out some of the assertional commitments here gives us a sketch of the inferential role of the term and shows its viability. Sometimes viability alone is enough to show value, since we may find some value in the term's power to communicate all that it does. In cases like this one, however, more needs to be said. Opponents to all uses of this term, Absolutists, would urge that simply showing us *some* of the semantic features of the term does not show *enough* value to overcome the devastating pragmatic force of the term. The Absolutist holds that the term's subordinating assertional commitments ultimately undermine the general value of the term. When expressive commitment is controversial, then a thorough exploration of the assertional commitments is in order.

While this example from Farber illustrates that the assertional commitments associated with the term supply what is usually called its semantic content, it also illustrates that this so-called "semantic" dimension cannot be separated from the pragmatic history and force of the term. Each specification of an associated trait here marks an inference licensed by the assertion of the term, and shows the central importance of the social practices in which the term took hold. The social, psychological, and economic practices of treating dark-skinned African Americans as less valuable than light-skinned European Americans give content and force to the term *nigger*. So, Harry's hurling this term at George on the highway *must* be considered in light of the social history of the term and the classes it has been used to maintain. Harry cannot hide behind the Humpty Dumpty defense: "When I use a term, . . . it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."[22]

With respect to the politics of discourse, attention to different aspects of a speaker's linguistic commitments raises the question of what the speaker endorses, and what those endorsements mean to the listener. Referential commitments made possible by the term show the term's extensional range. Assertional commitments made possible by the term show what can be said about and done to those in the extension of the term. Since the expressive commitment carried by the term is a rather global commitment to the viability and value of the assertional and referential commitments that constitute the mode of discourse, the expressive commitment, independent of any special contextual limitations, shows a range of what speakers *can* endorse with that term.

If I say nothing about her words when my neighbor says "nigger," then although I haven't explicitly sanctioned the term and its expressive commitment, I have done nothing explicit to challenge it either. Challenges have three basic types. Some deny that the referential commitment can be fulfilled: "There aren't any such folk."[23] Others address the assertional commitment by making undesirable inferential consequences apparent. Finally, some challenges make explicit the structure and function of the expressive commitment; I can ask my neighbor whether she means to be participating in linguistic conventions that at least mirror and reinforce and at worst *create* social inequalities and injustices. These latter challenges— which demand that the speaker show that the way of talking is

viable and valuable on a very large scale—make most explicit what is at stake between those who engage in the mode of discourse and those who attack it.

It is worth noting that the derogatoriness of a term in its sentential context is not a function of whether the term is asserted. Embedding the term in the antecedent or consequent of a conditional does not take away the derogatoriness of the term. If my neighbor says, "If a nigger buys the house down the street I'll sell mine," she is as responsible for justifying the expressive commitment of the derogatory term (for justifying "nigger"-talk) as if she had said, "A nigger just bought the house down the street so I'm selling mine." Similarly, the logician's distinction between use and mention does not help us here. Consider a sentence that an academic David Dukes might utter: " 'Nigger' is a great word, for it keeps us all aware of who belongs where in the social order." The derogatory term is mentioned, not used, but the sentential context supports the derogatoriness of the term and so the mentioning does not wipe it away. Even though the term is not doing any specific referential work here, and even though its status as mentioned raises the question whether the speaker endorses its use, nevertheless the content of the rest of the sentence settles the question of speaker endorsement. Now consider, "Fred is wrong to call blacks 'niggers' because there are no niggers—only black citizens." The first instance of the derogatory term is mentioned, and the second is used. Despite this use of the derogatory term, we would not ordinarily call the claim racist or derogatory since the sentential context condemns the derogatory aspect of the term. We would, however, justly wonder about the felicity of the second occurrence of the derogatory term, for the speaker could just as well have said "there aren't any" without gratuitous repetition of the term.

Expressive commitment is neither attitude nor connotation, although it may enable us to make inferences about each.[24] Despite her self-described positive attitude toward African Americans, my neighbor's use of the derogatory term carries with it a commitment to the derogation thus effected. This commitment is not *acceptance* of the derogation, for she need not even recognize the derogation, much less accept it. Her psychological states are distinct from what the language presupposes and entails about the world and about itself. So, for example, whether one uses "dyke" pejoratively or admiringly, one undertakes an expressive commitment to the vi-

ability and value of "dyke"-talk. As we shall soon see, the detractor and the admirer may differ in their accounts of what the expressive commitment is a commitment to, but both are committed to showing any challenger the viability and especially the value of such talk. The arguments offered by activists who seek to eliminate or rehabilitate these terms, are, on my view, struggles over whether we as a community want to sanction expressive commitments like those associated with these terms. Their arguments show that we would do well to take a social practice view of fights over words in our community.

Social Context: An Absolutist Position Concerning Groups, Labels, and Power

The Absolutist begins with the empirical claim that derogatory terms are harmful to those whom they purport to denote. Motivated by a conviction that the harms done by derogatory terms are both avoidable and unjust, the Absolutist argues that such words should be eradicated from our available repertoire and often argues further that there should be sanctions against their use.[25] Richard Delgado claims, for example, that "words such as 'nigger' and 'spick' are badges of degradation even when used between friends; these words have no other connotation."[26] Taking such an Absolutist position is taking a stance toward the expressive commitment of the terms. The Absolutist position depends on the sort of holism, or contextualism, discussed in the previous section. For the holist, a sign design is a word only in the context of a language, and a language has significance only in the rich context of culture. Social context is especially important in the case of derogatory terms, so it is important to attend to the social dynamics that lend derogatory terms their power. These social dynamics also constitute in part the assertional commitments that make up what philosophers usually identify as the semantic content of the term.

Recognizing that harms may be done even where the victim is unaware of any hurt, social scientists have catalogued a long list of harms resulting from racial stigmatization.[27] Clearly, racist derogatory terms contribute to racial stigmatization, so they have some power to harm their victims. A derogatory term labels a person *qua* member of a group, bringing the person under any stereotypes

associated with the group, and thus sanctions inferences about the person that ought not be so sanctioned.[28] So, one way that derogatory terms harm is through their association with stereotypes. Stereotypes oversimplify the diversity that exists within the group, they tend to concern behaviors or psychological traits, and, most importantly, they are difficult to empirically falsify.[29] Stereotypes are rigid, and their implication that the traits attributed are natural suggests that the possession of these traits by most members of the group is inevitable.[30] The assertional commitments associated with derogatory terms are *constituted* in large part by these stereotypes.

Articulating an important tenet of most versions of Absolutism, Greenberg, Kirkland and Pyszczynski claim that derogatory ethnic labels

> *come to symbolize all the negative stereotypic beliefs associated with the group.* Because DELs [derogatory ethnic labels] have the power to communicate *all* the negative beliefs about a given group in a single word, they are likely to be extremely potent communicative devices. Words have the power to make a concept seem like something that actually exists in the world. For example, there are negative beliefs about blacks in the United States, but *the term "nigger" crystallizes these beliefs into a concept or prototype* that has a sense of concrete reality to those who use the term. (my italics)[31]

The claim that the derogatory term has "the power to communicate *all* the negative beliefs about a given group in a single word" may just amount to saying that the association of a term with a stereotype is an all-or-nothing matter.[32] The Absolutist takes the assertional commitments of the derogatory term, which would be used to justify the expressive commitment, to be *nondetachable*. The Absolutist holds that a speaker who uses a derogatory term invokes the *entire* inferential role of the term and undertakes a global expressive commitment to that way of talking. That's a holist point. The Absolutist is a holist of a particular sort: she holds that specific inferential consequences are nondetachable from derogatory terms because of their social and historical embeddedness.[33]

The nondetachability of the assertional commitments of these derogatory terms, if indeed they are nondetachable, is due in part to the fact that they are constituted largely by stereotypes, which

are notoriously rigid. This nondetachability may also be due to the covertly prescriptive nature of these concepts. The assertional commitments of these terms tell members of the target group how they *ought* to be, under the guise of describing how they *are*. Sarah Hoagland has argued that attributions of femininity to women function prescriptively rather than descriptively, since the claim that women are feminine is not, in practice, empirically falsified by the numerous unfeminine women among us. Instead, those women are labelled "deviant," "abnormal," or, even worse, it is said that they are "really men trapped in women's bodies."[34] When such conceptual and social gerrymandering goes on, one must ask what is at stake. Hoagland notes that the trappings of femininity are indeed traps, and argues that some of the behaviors classically labelled feminine are actually resistance to those traps. Similarly, Frantz Fanon argues that "the black man is supposed to be a good nigger; once this has been laid down the rest follows of itself."[35] Fanon's view, in my terms, is that the inferential role of the term *nigger* is prescriptive; its job is to prescribe a way of being for those to whom it is applied.

It is important to look at the function of the name calling on the level of social practices, not just on the level of what Fred is trying to do to Ethel. Fred's calling Ethel "a dyke" works between them only if there is a more general set of practices within which it fits. The rather obvious politics of name calling is neatly summed up by sociologist Irving Allen, who writes,

> Words are weapons; and "hurling" epithets is a universal feature of hostile intergroup relations. *Outgroup nicknames are preeminently a political vocabulary*. Name calling is a technique by which outgroups are defined as legitimate targets of aggression and is an effort to control outgroups by neutralizing their efforts to gain resources and influence values. (my italics)[36]

Pragmatically, a derogatory term: (1) may do the relatively external job of reminding the person of the social sanction of their status as lesser; (2) may do the more "internal" job of instilling psychological oppression, convincing the person that her socially sanctioned status is really deserved (as when it is suggested that it has biological roots, for instance); or (3) may accomplish both.[37]

Against such an explicitly political interpretation of derogatory terms, Richard Delgado argues that a racial insult "is not political speech" since "its perpetrator intends not to discover truth or advocate social action but to injure the victim."[38] Denying that the terms are political paves the way for the legal redress that Delgado seeks, but Delgado overlooks the fact that such terms serve to reinforce a political structure, a structure that settles who has power and who has resources. Although they may advocate no particular social action on a particular occasion, these terms advocate the division of society into separate and unequal classes according to skin color, sex, sexual preference, and the like. Only an excessively narrow construal of the political would rule these terms out. *These terms are enforcers of a system that keeps some people from full participation in their communities, that keeps some voices from being heard.*[39] Clearly, the derogatory terms under consideration are political speech. They don't convince by rational argument, but they do bully us into adopting or maintaining certain broadly political commitments and they support the social practices that support these commitments.

Delgado further argues that "the characteristic most significant in determining the value of racial insults is that they are not intended to inform or convince the listener. Racial insults invite no discourse, and no speech in response can cure the inflicted harm."[40] Although such expressions do not convince by rational argument, by giving and asking for reasons, we know that they do inform. As Johnetta Cole's early experience shows, they teach the targeted person about the social hierarchy and her designated place in it; they inform about the power structure.[41] Accordingly, I suggest that explicitly addressing particular uses of the term, making the expression itself the subject of rational discussion, goes some way toward ameliorating the harms of the term and toward weakening its potential to harm again. Making explicit the expressive commitment also makes explicit the political dimension of the term, both in its assertional commitments' being rife with rigid—perhaps nondetachable—prescriptive stereotypic traits and in the social function of the distinctions made therein.

Once the Absolutist claims that (in our terms) the expressive commitment of "nigger" is unacceptable because it carries with it an nondetachable commitment to assertions that depend on all the horrible elements of the history of the culture in which the term

gained currency, he or she must explain and evaluate specific uses of the term and its associates. In a useful botanization of the philosophical literature, Simon Blackburn presents four different approaches relevant to questions about the meaning and value of areas of discourse, such as those being considered here. Against the background of the inferential role theory, these approaches can be seen as ways of challenging the expressive commitment of the term. Blackburn suggests that we could (1) reject the whole area of discourse "advocating that people no longer speak or think in the terms that seem problematic," or (2) give a reductive analysis of the objectionable area of discourse to an unobjectionable discourse, or (3) see the beliefs associated with that discourse as not carrying truth values at all but simply as expressions of attitude,[42] or (4) see them as "mind-dependent—not really describing a mind-independent reality at all, but as in some sense creating the reality they describe."[43] The Absolutist combines these strategies, for she seeks to reject the whole area of discourse on the grounds that there is no adequate reduction of the objectionable area of discourse to an unobjectionable area, and on the grounds that the beliefs do not carry truth values although they may be perceived as doing so. What the derogatory terms and their inferentially linked practices do is to create a social and material reality that oppresses those targeted by the terms.

Blackburn's characterization of the philosophical positions generally embraced is fair, but it, like the strategies it botanizes, it is importantly incomplete. The social and material reality created by commitment to and practice of the modes of discourse in which these derogatory terms gain their purchase is not captured here. That social reality is in some sense dependent (at least during some parts of its history) on the beliefs and attitudes of at least some of the members of the society. But the social reality outstrips the particular beliefs of particular individuals, and so cannot be considered mind-dependent in Blackburn's sense. Redlining neighborhoods may begin with perceptions on the parts of certain bank officers about property value depending on the racial makeup of the community, but it does not end there. The reality of the beliefs is cashed out in cold economic terms, which may then create policies that in turn are carried out by people who may not share the beliefs of those who instituted the policies. The fifth approach, missing from Blackburn's list, takes beliefs as creating and being

created by social (and institutional) realities that can be evaluated independently of the intentions of those who participate in them. This fifth approach takes social practices seriously in its analysis of derogatory terms.

Challenges to the expressive commitments of these derogatory terms are challenges to the viability and value of the modes of discourse of which they are part. Such modes of discourse are specified in two ways: structurally by their inferential networks, and functionally by their goals and practices. Two major goals we adopt in our various social practices are the acquisition of truth and the acquisition of power. With derogatory terms, these goals clash, and the quest for power takes precedence over any pretense of seeking or speaking truth. The Absolutist demands that we make power serve truth, and not vice versa.

The Absolutist begins with the empirical claim that derogatory terms cause unjust and unnecessary harm to those they label. Since the assertional commitments of the term largely represent stereotypically assigned traits and relations, and since stereotypes are notoriously rigid, prescriptive, and difficult or impossible to undermine, the Absolutist holds that the assertional commitments of the derogatory terms are nondetachable. To stop the harms caused by the terms we would have to detach at least some of the stereotyped assertional commitments, but since these are nondetachable, there is no rehabilitating the term. Without rehabilitation, any use of the term is racist, sexist, heterosexist, or whatever, and so promotes injustice. So the Absolutist holds that since we cannot drop the derogation from the term, we should drop the term.

The Reclamation Project: Reclaiming Labels, Regaining Power

Proponents of reclamation projects would be quick to deny Delgado's claim that the derogatory terms we are considering are always "badges of degradation even when used between friends." They say that sometimes when used by members of the in-group the term is a badge of pride that recognizes an important history of degradation without endorsing its continuation. Some African Americans say that they can use "nigger" as a term of endearment, and some lesbians now use "dyke" as a term of pride. Such reclamations are self-conscious attempts to change the meanings of these terms

through subversive uses within the sub-community. The strategy is straightforward although far from simple: give the subcommunity jurisdiction over the expressive commitments of its own self-referring labels. Change the norms that settle the assertional commitments of the term within the subcommunity, and ultimately within the larger community, and in so doing you change the very meaning of the term.

Even within one linguistic and social community, even without reclamation, the pragmatic function of a derogatory term may vary depending on the speaker's relation to the target group. Irving Allen suggests that for members of the dominant group the use of derogatory terms helps to maintain their privilege and "justifies inequality and discrimination by sanctioning invidious cultural comparisons." On the other hand, for those derogated by the terms, their own use of such terms often redresses "social injustices and dignifies an imposed minority status and thus is sometimes," Allen writes, "a form of accommodation to conflict."[44] When, in Faulkner's short story "That Evening Sun," Nancy says over and over again, "I ain't nothin' but a nigger," we should not hear this as an *endorsement* of her situation but as an *accommodation* to it, a resignation to her assigned status,[45] which is underscored by her adding, "It ain't none of my fault."[46] Nancy's utterances are unreclaimed, and yet their pragmatic function is different from the uses of the term by whites in the story. Resignation like Nancy's is nowhere present in Johnetta Cole's account of the reclamation project. Cole says "the reason for taking such a term and making it a term of endearment is to soften the intensity of that pain [of others using it against you], so that 'my main nigger' becomes 'my best friend.' It's compensatory because it is so very powerful."[47] The reclamation project is linguistic aikido; it tries to use the power of the term to benefit those who were formerly harmed by it.

Reclamation depends upon the possibility of somehow severing the derogation from the term, although not upon the possibility of severing the history of the derogation *via* the term.[48] This flies in the face of the Absolutist's nondetachability thesis; some specific assertional commitments are dropped, others are relocated within the inferential network, and some stay the same but have different justifications or consequences. Made explicit, the Reclaimer's argument goes as follows: The *OED* is right—"Nigger" is just a word synonymous with "Negro," "colored person," "person of color," etc.

except that "nigger" captures a history of derogation that the others miss. When it is used to derogate, the derogation is a pragmatic effect, not a semantic aspect of the term. If the derogation were a semantic aspect of the term, then there could be no non-derogatory use of it. But there *is* a non-derogatory use: some African Americans use the term as an in-group term of endearment. So, the derogation is not built into the semantics. The pragmatic effect is a matter of the relation between the speaker's in-group and the referent's in-group, at least. When African Americans use the term among themselves it is *possible* for the term not to carry derogation, and this shows that group membership can enable disaffiliation from the common derogation.[49] Further, it may be that when others besides African Americans use the term it is *impossible* for the term *not* to carry derogation. If so, then if one is not a member of the group targeted by the term, one's use cannot disaffiliate. So, there are non-derogatory uses of the term, and pragmatic factors are the means by which the derogation is detached.

There is much that is right in the *spirit* of this argument, but it has several important weaknesses.[50] I will mention just three. The first two weaknesses work together: first, the argument treats the difference between the reclaimed and the unreclaimed term as merely pragmatic, and second, it erroneously takes this point to be shown by the presence of pragmatic triggers for detachment. Surely there are contextual features that trigger the audience to interpret the term as reclaimed or not, but these triggers do not *constitute* the difference between the terms. That difference is in the assertional commitments—in the inferential relations between claims made with this term and other claims. Writers on this topic like to think of the project as one of changing the connotation, but it is important to recognize that reclaiming the term results in changed assertional commitments, which bring with them changes in denotation.[51] Consider just one point: if it is a consequent of both reclaimed terms that the persons so labelled be resistant to the social system that defines them with the unreclaimed terms, then this changes who is included in the extension of each term. Unreclaimed "nigger↓" implies a kind of subservience, a recognized and resigned lower status, which reclaimed "nigger↑" overturns. So while pragmatic factors may trigger such detachments, we must ask what those detachments change in the assertional and referential commitments associated with the term.[52]

In addition, the argument depends upon, but does not argue for, the claim that the derogation has been successfully detached within the sub-group. Significantly, not all members of these sub-groups agree about the power of the sub-group to detach the derogation. There is considerable controversy among African Americans about which terms are appropriate group labels, and "nigger" is usually not even considered as a viable alternative. One might think that "dyke" has been more successfully reclaimed within its sub-group, but this is probably also false.[53] Consider a typical exchange from the pages of the journal *Lesbian Tide,* where a letter to the editors begins "I am not a dyke . . ."[54] The writer, Ginny Ray, does not deny being a lesbian but takes issue with the appropriateness of this term, even when uttered by lesbians. She continues,

> To me, the term "dyke," because of its common or street meaning, (which is that a dyke is a woman who is trying to act tough like a man) is on the consciousness level of "chick" or "nigger." People in the hippy [*sic*] and black subcultures told us that it was "correct" to use these terms and that we all knew that they were our words now. I never got it. I still don't. When Richard Pryor says nigger I don't laugh. When the hippy [*sic*] up the street calls her friend a chick I don't say cool. . . . I fought since 1969 to be called a woman and you are not going to stick some other dumb label on me in the name of politics.[55]

Ginny Ray joins the Absolutist in suggesting that the stereotype associated with the derogatory term is too powerful (perhaps too central) to be detached. Rejecting the stereotype, she rejects the term.

In response, the editors invoke the long history of using "dyke" to derogate mannish women—citing Radclyffe Hall and Gertrude Stein as but two examples—and they say that as a term of derogation there is more than an element of truth to it. Not only do they grant the term a truth-value, but they enlarge its scope beyond women who engage in lesbian sexual practices or who look unfeminine. Calling the term "a badge of honor" for women, to be "used for someone who refuses to be beaten down," the editors write that they "are proud to use the word 'dyke,' in loyalty and love for all the women who, in so many different and difficult ways, held strong."[56] They write,

The very power and destructiveness of the word "dyke" as men use it comes from its connotations of aggressiveness and independence—qualities men have always found ugly or threatening in women though highly valued in themselves. What men have meant when they call us dykes is true: we ARE uncompromising (where loving women is concerned), we ARE ugly (when beauty is measured in rigid stereotypes or in passivity), we ARE frightening (to those who fear independent women), we ARE unpleasant (when silence and smiles are pleasing).[57]

The editors' response shows that the reclamation project need not deny the core assertional commitments of the term in order to change the justifiability of the expressive commitment. The core assertional commitments are the same, but the next layer out is different. The first set of inferences licensed by "dyke" is still licensed: a dyke is aggressive, independent, uncompromising, ugly, frightening, and unpleasant. The editors' parenthetical remarks show that the next layer of assertional commitments, those that support these stereotypical traits, has changed. Those second-layer assertional commitments show the difference between the word's role in the discursive practices of one community and its role in the discursive practices of another community, the difference between "dyke↓" and "dyke↑." Ultimately, "dyke↑," reclaimed, would no longer sanction many of the inferences of "dyke↓." For instance, because it is considered good to be a dyke, and because she is uncompromising—with respect to loving women—then in the reclaimed scheme we would lose the inference, commonly associated with "dyke↓," that somebody better find the dyke a good man so that he can convert her to heterosexuality. We would not, however, lose the inference that the dyke is a woman who does not serve men.

Successful reclamation requires a reorganization of the inferential structure associated with the term. Some inferences will be eliminated, some antecedents will be changed, and some consequents will be changed.[58] This results in the rehabilitation of the expressive commitment of the term; now, with the rehabilitated term, what the expressive commitment is a commitment *to* has changed. It is the same word, with the same history, but with a new future. If, as I've been suggesting, the inferential role is what