

Article

# The Word That Dare Not Speak Its Name

Pamela L. Caughie

Professor Emerita, Department of English, Loyola University Chicago, USA;  
pamela.caughie@gmail.com

Submitted: 8 July 2023, accepted: 2 September 2023, published: 31 October 2023

**Abstract:** This essay asks, when does our effort to avoid offending students interfere with our ability to teach them? Rehearsing conflicts over language and terminology, over who can speak and what can be said, from my four-decade career as a literature professor, critical theorist, and gender scholar, I confront contemporary efforts to censor certain words, to prohibit certain kinds of inquiry, and to limit who can speak about certain subjects by placing recent incidents in relation to previous debates in academia and the public sphere. The university classroom and scholarly peer-reviewed journals have long served as spaces where established viewpoints can be questioned, knowledge can be challenged, and identities can be probed. Increasingly, however, we see classroom curricula under attack, books banned, language policed, and viewpoints prohibited, with teachers, students, and scholars self-censoring as a result. What happens when words are prohibited, and research subjects are deemed off limit, because some fear they may harm fragile young students or readers? Refusing to have that conversation, to allow scholars and teachers to debate controversial positions openly, itself does the harm. Through examples drawn from my teaching and scholarship, and drawing on newspaper editorials and academic publications, I model a means for working through this seeming impasse encapsulated by the title phrase, “the word that dare not speak its name.”

**Keywords:** censorship; pedagogy; race; gender; transgender

**How to cite:** Caughie, P.L. The Word That Dare Not Speak Its Name. *Journal of Controversial Ideas* **2023**, 3(2), 2; doi:[10.35995/jci03020002](https://doi.org/10.35995/jci03020002).

©2023 Copyright by the author. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license.



This essay asks, when does our effort to avoid offending students interfere with our ability to teach them? Rehearsing conflicts over language and terminology, over who can speak and what can be said, from my four-decade career as a literature professor, critical theorist, and gender scholar, I confront contemporary efforts to censor certain words, to prohibit certain kinds of inquiry, and to limit who can speak about certain subjects. By placing recent controversies in relation to previous debates in academia and the public sphere, I hope to move us out of the impasse created by prohibitions against speech, histories, and theories coming from across the political spectrum. What happens to knowledge and education when words cannot be spoken, viewpoints cannot be expressed, identities cannot be probed because some fear fragile young students or readers may be harmed?

Refusing to have that conversation, to allow scholars and teachers to debate controversial positions openly, itself does harm.

“racism cannot simply be unsaid”

(Heike Bauer, *The Hirschfeld Archives*)<sup>1</sup>

At the inaugural conference of the Modernist Studies Association in 1999, I presented at a session with Thadious Davis on “Passing as Modernism.” In my paper I made a passing reference to Carl van Vechten’s infamous 1926 novel. A reporter from *Lingua Franca* was in the audience and later published a somewhat scurrilous review of the conference in which they cited my paper as an example of “political correctness” among the new modernist scholars, alleging that I had referred to van Vechten’s novel as “Negro Heaven.” I was pretty certain I had used the published title, but I worried that perhaps, standing beside Thadious and looking at Houston Baker seated in the front row, I had unconsciously censored myself. However, friends in the audience, angered by the reporter’s review, assured me I had used van Vechten’s title. I thus found myself in the awkward position of writing a letter to the editor insisting that I had said the title as published, speaking the offensive word in public. The editor apologized for the aspersion, explaining that the reporter had mixed up my paper with another. In 1999 my alleged offense was not what I said but what I supposedly *didn’t* say in an effort to be politically correct, and I defended my integrity by insisting I had not self-censored and was supported by friends in that defense. Today, nearly a quarter century later, I would likely be excoriated for uttering the first word of that title, with few defenders supporting me. For now that word has become the word that dare not speak its name.

That experience came back to me on two separate occasions recently. In the fall of 2021, graduate faculty members in my department were summoned to a meeting to discuss complaints from graduate students, voiced in a letter to the chairperson and the graduate director, that our classes “perpetuate institutionalized academic racism.” They cited in particular “the use of racial slurs in classrooms, the silencing of perspectives of students of color in classroom discussions, and the omission of writers of color from syllabi and course readings.” The last two issues were ones I and likeminded colleagues had been trying to address for years so I was very sympathetic. But I was shocked by the first claim, having never heard a racial slur uttered by faculty or students in my thirty-five years of teaching at this institution. It turns out, however, that the students were not referring to remarks made by members of the classroom but to words quoted in literature that uses that racist epithet. The students did not want that word uttered when reading passages from assigned literary works.

I would like to say this letter induced a lively intellectual and pedagogical discussion among colleagues, but alas it did not. Instead, it led some colleagues to take the moral high ground, proclaiming their insistence that that word never be uttered in their classrooms even as they taught literature saturated with that word. One younger colleague actually rolled their eyes when I suggested we might benefit from discussing this issue rather than assuming a consensus on the matter. Another colleague, a friend whom

---

<sup>1</sup> Heike Bauer, *The Hirschfeld Archives: Violence, Death, and Modern Queer Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2017). Bauer makes this point in relation to Magnus Hirschfeld’s proposal in his 1935 book, “to eradicate the use of the word ‘race’,” adding the caveat “if it were practicable” (Hirschfeld, *Racism* 97; qtd. 15), to acknowledge that eradicating racism entails more than a matter of not speaking the word.

I greatly admire as a teacher, told an anecdote about the time when they were writing on the board, back to the students, and a student in the class read aloud a passage from the novel they were discussing that included that word. According to this professor, they turned around sharply and chastised the student, “Never use that word in my classroom.” I was horrified by such a retort. How was that poor student to know that language in the assigned text was forbidden from being spoken when reading a passage, unless the professor had stated this restriction explicitly on their syllabus, which apparently they had not. That classroom scene struck me as “a teaching moment,” a time to discuss the history of the word and its sometimes casual use in the literature we love, and an opportunity to hear how students respond when encountering that word in literature. What might compel an award-winning teacher to elide such a discussion and instead respond so harshly other than an academic climate of intolerance that has made many faculty fearful of assigning certain texts, discussing certain issues, or taking on certain research subjects.

The second incident occurred the next semester. A graduate student, one of twelve signatories to that letter to the graduate faculty, made a presentation on Claude McKay in my Queer Modernity seminar for undergraduate majors. At one point, the student referred to Carl van Vechten’s 1926 novel, dubbing the novel “Negro Heaven” – the same euphemistic language I was accused of using in 1999. To be fair, they didn’t know the students in the class and hadn’t broached this issue with me before the presentation, so I understood their caution. Nowadays the use of the original title could have brought an ethics complaint against the student, or me as instructor-of-record. Renaming the title, however, deflects from its referent: the title phrase is Harlem slang for the segregated upper balconies of New York theaters in the 1920s. The cleaned-up language suggests the title refers to a safe space for “Negroes,” conjuring images of some place peaceful and beautiful, whereas the original title carries the racist history that the slang term ironizes. In not speaking the word, we miss an opportunity to discuss the derivation and ironic implications of the title phrase.

Now one could, as a friend argued with me, show the title without pronouncing it. Why do you need to read the word aloud, she asked me? In this case, I agree: it might be best simply to show the title and explain the derivation of the title phrase. No need to speak the word. Other cases are less simple.

Claude McKay’s 1929 novel *Banjo* is a case in point. The novel focuses on a group of hard-drinking, fun-loving vagabonds from the American south, the West Indies, Senegal and elsewhere who spend their days cavorting, panhandling, playing music and pursuing women on the waterfront of 1920s Marseilles. Part way through the novel they are joined by the expatriate writer, Ray, who speaks an educated language in contrast to the colorful vernacular of the beach boys. Teaching *Banjo*, replete with the word that dare not speak its name, one would have to opt not to read aloud most of the dialogue and much of the narration. And in selecting safe passages to read, one might well end up privileging the more refined, intellectual passages and thereby go against the very argument of the novel, the one Ray articulates so thoroughly at the end. In the last chapter, Ray, the intellectual, defends the beach boys’ artistic capacity for coining new words and eliminating “the rotten-dead stock words of the proletariat and replacing them with startling new ones.”<sup>2</sup> But he doesn’t, and couldn’t, praise them for eliminating the word that dare not speak its name, for it’s rampant throughout the boys’ dialogue. Ray goes on in this passage to say: “There were no dots and dashes in their conversation – nothing that could not

---

<sup>2</sup> Claude McKay, *Banjo: A Story without a Plot* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1929), p. 321.

be frankly said and therefore decently” (321). This passage rejects the reticence of so many novels of this time, especially novels of the Black middle-class praised by McKay’s nemesis, W.E.B. DuBois. The paragraph ends: “He [Ray] gained from them finer nuances of the necromancy of language and the wisdom that any word may be right and magical in its proper setting” (321). Any word. And the word that dare not speak its name may be “right,” if not “magical,” in “its proper setting.”

The most profound example of a fitting use of this word is a passage from James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, originally published in 1912 and reissued in 1927, a novel I have frequently taught in classes on modernism, African American literature, and literary theory. In that novel, a young boy who grows up assuming he’s white finds out otherwise in a powerful and disturbing scene on which the rest of the plot turns. In school one day the teacher asks all the white children to stand. When the protagonist rises with the white children, the teacher gently directs him to sit down. At first he doesn’t understand. Stunned and confused, he hardly registers the remark when a white classmate calls him that word. He runs home and confronts himself in the mirror:

I rushed up into my own little room, shut the door, and went quickly to where my looking-glass hung on the wall. For an instant I was afraid to look, but when I did I looked long and earnestly. I had often heard people say to my mother, “What a pretty boy you have.” I was accustomed to hear remarks about my beauty; but, now, for the first time, I became conscious of it, and recognized it. I noticed the ivory whiteness of my skin, the beauty of my mouth, the size and liquid darkness of my eyes, and how the long black lashes that fringed and shaded them produced an effect that was strangely fascinating even to me. I noticed the softness and glossiness of my dark hair that fell in waves over my temples, making my forehead appear whiter than it really was. How long I stood there gazing at my image I do not know. When I came out and reached the head of the stairs, I heard the lady who had been with my mother going out. I ran downstairs, and rushed to where my mother was sitting with a piece of work in her hands. I buried my head in her lap and blurted out, “Mother, mother, tell me, am I a nigger?” I could not see her face, but I knew the piece of work dropped to the floor, and I felt her hands on my head. I looked up into her face and repeated, “Tell me, mother, am I a nigger?” There were tears in her eyes, and I could see that she was suffering for me. And then it was that I looked at her critically for the first time. I had thought of her in a childish way only as the most beautiful woman in the world; now I looked at her searching for defects. I could see that her skin was almost brown, that her hair was not so soft as mine, and that she did differ in some way from the other ladies who came to the house; yet, even so, I could see that she was very beautiful, more beautiful than any of them. She must have felt that I was examining her, for she hid her face in my hair, and said with difficulty, “No, my darling, you are not a nigger.” She went on, “You are as good as anybody; if anyone calls you a nigger don’t notice them.” But the more she talked the less was I reassured, and I stopped her by asking, “Well, mother, am I white? Are you white?” She answered tremblingly, “No, I am not white, but you – your father is one of the greatest men in the country – the best blood of the South is in you—”.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), pp. 17–18.

For me, this is one of the most powerful scenes in modern literature. The protagonist looks in the mirror and sees not a reflection but an illusion, an image of what he will become, not what he is. Tellingly, he is not told what he is, only what he is *not*. From this moment on, the protagonist sets out to discover what it means to be Black in America, what it means to be called that name. Not to say the word is to deprive the passage of its power to wound, both those who hear the word and those who use it, and Johnson's stinging indictment of racism.

But again, one might ask, why do you need to read the passage aloud when students can read it? Why speak the word when they can see it on the page? Why, I would counter, do we read any literary passage aloud? Because students often don't know how to read literature in a way that brings out the evocative effect of a passage. They skim over words, focus more on meaning than affect. By reading aloud, we train students in how to attend to the power of language. My students tend to read over that word because they know it's offensive, whereas Johnson's point hinges on that word precisely because it's offensive. The protagonist doesn't discover he's Black; he discovers he's that name, a socially degraded identity. His persistent questioning forces his mother to use the word, but only to assure him he's not *that*. And she's right, he isn't. It is something you may be called but not something you are or can be.

What disservice do we do the author when we can't read their words in a passage as powerful and pivotal as this one, one crucial to the protagonist's narrative trajectory? In a passage where the word says more about those who use it than those against whom it's used? In a passage where to substitute any other word misses the very point of the passage? Here the word is not descriptive but performative, bringing into being the very subject it names. One might argue, to speak the word ourselves is to redouble the insult, to put us in the position of the racist characters who use it. But is there no difference between using a word and reading a passage? Do we want to collapse that distinction?

Some passages, I suggest, must be read aloud for their message to strike home, for their power and, in some cases, their beauty to come through. This lesson was brought home to me the first time I heard Gwendolyn Brooks recite "We Real Cool" and realized I had been hearing it, and reading it, all wrong. I emphasized "we" in each line – *we* real cool – whereas Brooks's syncopated reading de-accentuated the "we," dropping her voice and skipping on and over it to the next line, pausing slightly after the "we" and emphasizing "real." She pronounced the pronoun "we" not with a long "e" but more like an aspirated "e". Her reading made the poem far more potent than mine. Likewise, our students may need to hear a passage read aloud to feel it. Sometimes a word must speak its name.

In a course on class issues in American literature years ago, I taught the 1934 film "Imitation of Life," starring Louise Beavers as one of the female leads. Beavers plays the maid Delilah, whose daughter, Peola, is light enough to pass. Peola and the mistress's daughter, Jessie, grow up as close friends. Then one day Peola runs to Delilah crying: "Jessie called me black." My students are confused. "But she is Black, right, because her mother is Black?" When I explain that in the novel on which the film is based, Jessie uses the word that dare not speak its name, the import of that scene is clear to them. They feel the gut punch. They realize Jessie wasn't simply identifying Peola's race but ascribing to her a socially degraded identity. I tell them that Beavers fought Hollywood bigwigs to have the offending word replaced, and her career suffered as a consequence. Much as I admire Beavers's courage and integrity as an actress, the fact remains that the scene is less ambiguous and more compelling with the offensive word retained.

When does our effort to avoid offending students interfere with our ability to teach them? If we cannot speak that word, what about the word "Negro"? I once had a student

in an African American literature class, for which Alain Locke's 1925 anthology *The New Negro* was on the syllabus, remark on the first day that she didn't want to hear the word "Negro" used in class. She didn't want to be called a "Negro." I told her rightly so, the term is no longer used, but I explained that in the 1920s, the "new Negro" was a cultural icon, that the word was preferred over "colored" because it designated a heritage, one documented in Locke's anthology, rather than skin tone. I told the class about the ongoing debate in *The Messenger*, a prominent Black magazine, over "Are we Negro or are we colored?"<sup>4</sup> The student was not convinced. She insisted the word not be used. I told her I was sorry but that I couldn't teach that time period in African American literature without using the word and offered to help her find another class. She dropped the course. Was I wrong? Should I have said, of course, if the word offends you, we won't use it. Do I then drop Locke's anthology or refer to it as "the new African American"? Do I also remove Langston Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" from the syllabus, or just read it without saying the word?

That racially charged language can harm students – and I believe it can – makes it all the more imperative to engage in such discussions. Increasingly, however, we call out rather than talk over such uses of language. Consider, for example, the case of the University of Illinois Chicago law professor Jason Kilborn. On an exam, the professor gave the students a scenario that they may well encounter in a courtroom. He created a fictional story with real-life consequences about a Black female manager suing a former employer, charging that she had been fired because of her race and gender. In the scenario, the hypothetical woman alleged that she had been called a "n\_\_\_\_\_" and a "b\_\_\_\_\_" (the actual phrasing used on the exam where the words were not spelled out).<sup>5</sup> As a result of this question, the professor was accused of, and punished for, perpetuating racism. Now other actions or words by this professor may well support that accusation, as some commentators have suggested, but the hypothetical, and tragically realistic, scenario he created on his exam does not in itself justify such a claim.

Our job as academics is to educate students about the histories of terms rather than censoring words to protect students. It's the trigger warning debate all over again, where the professor is supposed to anticipate what might be said in the classroom or what scenes or language in a piece of writing might trigger a student. I teach modernism and the avant-garde, literature and the visual arts that are provocative, often offensive, and force students to struggle with a visual and verbal vocabulary that not only makes them uncomfortable but does so intentionally. I offer a general "disclaimer" on my syllabi:

This class will discuss and examine subjects with explicit sexual themes. Because avant-garde art and literature risks indecency and aims to disturb its audience, readings, lectures, and slides in this class may contain graphic sexual content, offensive language, and disquieting scenes, including sexual assault, sexual jokes, sexual acts, suicide, and racist, misogynist, and transphobic language. Students

---

<sup>4</sup> That debate was inaugurated by W.A. Domingo's "What Are We, Negroes or Colored People?" *The Messenger* 180 (June 1926), p. 187.

<sup>5</sup> George Leef, "Law Student Complains about a Question; Professor Sentenced to Re-education Camp," The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, 2 March 2022, [link to the article](#); and Colleen Flaherty, "Bad Education," *Inside Higher Ed* (9 November 2021), [link to the article](#) (accessed on 24 June 2023). On other law professors called out for using the word in classes, most prominently Geoffrey Stone at University of Chicago who has since stopped speaking the word, see Tom Barlett, "A Professor Has Long Used a Racial Slur in Class to Teach Free-Speech Law. No More, He Says," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (7 March 2019).

should contact the professor if they believe such content affects their ability to learn.

Students can choose whether to stay in the course, forewarned that they may find the material offensive and disturbing. To date, no one has chosen to drop these classes. Students generally have more curiosity, tolerance, distance, and gumption than we often give them credit for.

The problem with protecting students is that we cannot anticipate who our students will be, how they identify, or what they have experienced in their lives.<sup>6</sup> What if, in teaching Djuna Barnes's novel *Nightwood* (1936), in which Robin Vote holds her newborn son above her head as if about to throw the baby to the ground, a student who has suffered postpartum depression were to be "triggered" by that scene? For Robin's words, "I didn't want him,"<sup>7</sup> are commonly uttered by mothers suffering from that syndrome. Can we say that the reading did harm to the student? Or can we use that identification to expand our understanding of the character and to help the student to cope? If we were to argue that Robin may suffer from postpartum depression, then perhaps the novel suggests that insisting a woman accommodate herself to the cultural narrative of motherhood may not be in the best interest of women, or children. Such a reading would do more good, I believe, than removing the novel from the syllabus for fear of harming a certain group of students.<sup>8</sup>

Not wanting to do harm in the classroom is an admirable goal, but learning often hurts insofar as we may cause students to confront some deep-rooted biases that they took to be the status quo. Watching Spike Lee's "Do the Right Thing" in my African American literature class in the mid-1990s, an Italian American male, responding to my question to the class "What did you learn from this film?", lowered his eyes and quietly admitted he had learned he was a racist. I'm sure that realization hurt, but I would argue it did not do harm, though that's the kind of harm some conservative legislators are trying to protect white students from experiencing. Proposed legislation in Florida seeks to restrict what can be taught in the classroom under the banner of protecting students from harm. Young students are not to hear the word "slavery" or "gay," for example, and, at least in early versions of the bills, students were allowed to claim harm if they were required to be in the same classroom as an out transgender student.<sup>9</sup> Much damage is done under the guise of protecting students.

In a new introduction to his 2002 book subtitled *The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, published in 2022, Randall Kennedy acknowledges that people of all backgrounds and racial identities put the word that dare not speak its name "to uses that are enjoyable, instructive, and moving" (xxxix), citing examples from Carl van Vechten, Flannery

---

<sup>6</sup> A standard assignment I often give at the beginning of my classes, especially core classes where the students are more diverse in terms of majors and likely have not had me before, is to request an informal essay in response to the prompt, "What would you like me to know about you that might make me a better teacher?" While some students respond blandly – e.g., I'm a second-year biology major from Cleveland – the assignment invites students to tell me how they identify or what learning problems they have or about traumatic experiences in their lives. Whether and how they choose to share information about themselves is their decision.

<sup>7</sup> Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (New York: New Directions, 2006), p. 53.

<sup>8</sup> Some might quip, what are the chances of that? Given that 15% of women in the U.S. suffer from postpartum depression, according to the National Institute of Mental Health, the prospect is not that far-fetched.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Eesha Pendharkar, "Florida Just Expanded the 'Don't Say Gay' Law," *Education Week* (19 April 2023) and Sarah Fortinsky, "Florida Board of Education approves controversial standards for teaching Black history," *The Hill* (19 July 2023).

O'Connor, and Carl Sandburg, among others. Linguistic policing such as using the "n-word" fails to take into account the context in which the word appears, he argues. And it silences the kinds of discussion educators should be having among ourselves and with our students. As Mychal Denzel Smith notes in a 2022 review of Kennedy's book, "Our debates over the word's use are proxies for the more uncomfortable conversations about race that we tend to shy away from in this country."<sup>10</sup> We must have those conversations and not claim the moral high ground ... or roll our eyes.

I am fully supportive of anti-racist pedagogy. My scholarship on pedagogy confronts head on debates over how to address such contentious issues in the classroom. What I don't support is an anti-racist pedagogy that assumes there is one correct way to be anti-racist and that brooks no discussion of any other. What I also don't support are professors who refuse to engage in discussions of anti-racist pedagogy, who say the word that dare not speak its name in the classroom with the attitude "student responses be damned." Professors should be called to account for why and how they address racist language. As happened to Professor Laurie Sheck of the New School who upset a student in her graduate creative writing class when, during a discussion of a documentary about James Baldwin called "I Am Not Your Negro," Sheck told the class that the film's title modified the original phrase Baldwin had used in an interview. Sheck spoke the word, and a student promptly complained. Sheck was exonerated once the context of her class discussion was made clear.<sup>11</sup> Being reported for inadvertently offending students is not the problem. Students should be able to call professors to account. Shying away from any language or subject that might offend students and put us as educators at risk is the problem, one that puts pedagogy itself at risk.

My pedagogical philosophy would advise that one acknowledge that the word is offensive and hurtful. One must be fully cognizant that one's experience of that word may be shaped very differently than the experience of one's students. One cannot *simply* speak that word, without self-consciousness and without preparing students for the reading. But I don't agree that means one must *never* speak that word. The context and the significance of its use must be a guide as to when to utter the word in reading a passage. And we must address the issue before we do the reading, giving students an opportunity to voice their views.

I confronted many of these issues in my 1999 book *Passing and Pedagogy: The Dynamics of Responsibility*. That book illustrates what I would now call "slow pedagogy," where we don't rush to judgment, where we don't determine what can be said or how something should be taught from the onset, where we patiently, sensitively, and unflinchingly unravel the knotty issues at stake in teaching certain works and topics. It is a pedagogy that accepts the dynamics of responsibility. I welcome an anti-racist pedagogy that is open to debating whether and when a word might speak its name.

---

<sup>10</sup> Mychal Denzel Smith, "Is Using This Word Ever Okay? And Who Has the Power to Decide?" *The Washington Post* (18 February 2022), [link to the article](#) (accessed on 24 June 2023).

<sup>11</sup> Not so for Phillip Adamo, a history professor at Augsburg University, who was suspended after using the word in discussing another passage from James Baldwin. See Zipporah Osei, "Do Racial Epithets Have Any Place in the Classroom? A Professor's Suspension Fuels that Debate," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (8 February 2019). Randall Kennedy discusses Adamo's and Sheck's experiences in his 2022 introduction cited above (xx–xxv).



“there is always a lot at stake politically and socially when you’re talking about transgender”

(Alice Dreger, *Galileo’s Middle Finger*)<sup>12</sup>

If the word that dare not speak its name can harm students simply by being suggested, as on that law exam, or voiced, as in reading a literary passage in the classroom, what about other offensive words. Did the law professor’s use of “b \_\_\_\_\_” on his exam question elicit accusations of misogyny? Likely not since the “b-word” is ubiquitous, used even by feminists and those arguing against speaking the word that dare not speak its name. The eye-rolling colleague in my department meeting may well have used the “b-word” in reference to me.

Some colleagues list on their syllabi words that cannot be spoken, in recognition that there is more than one word that can offend. For often those insisting that one word dare not speak its name fail or refuse to consider other words and the harm they might do. Understandably, coming up with a list of prohibited terms creates all kinds of problems, not the least of which is how many words must we include, and who gets to determine that list. Words like “bitch,” “pervert,” or “fag” might be listed, but then what about words that aren’t, such as “coolie,” “kike,” or “tranny,” which also appear in works I have taught and published on? Are they okay? More to the point, what can’t be taught when we cannot speak certain words? Refusing to have that conversation keeps us from articulating a pedagogical strategy for addressing offensive language, other than claiming to protect students.

In a recent editorial, A.O. Scott warns, “Efforts to protect children – or citizens, for that matter – from the terror of freedom, to cocoon their reading within safe boundaries of vocabulary and representation, will always fail. Reading, like democracy or sexual desire, is an unmanageable, inherently destabilizing force in human life.”<sup>13</sup> These words resonate not only with the discussion above of the word that dare not speak its name, but also with a related issue concerning the language of transgender.

In the 1980s and 90s, before the term “transgender” took hold, the word used by trans scholars and trans persons alike was “transsexuality.” For example, in her 2004 essay, “Transgender Studies: Queer Theory’s Evil Twin,” Susan Stryker writes, “When I came out as transsexual in 1992 ...,” employing the now-dated word.<sup>14</sup> In 1996, feminist scholar Rita Felski published “Fin de Siècle, Fin de Sexe: Transsexuality and the Death of History,” substantially revised for her 2000 book, *Doing Time* in which she acknowledges that in 1996 when she first published the essay, she had little familiarity with transgender scholarship: “My use of ‘transsexual’ and ‘transgender’ echoed the often casual metaphorical usage of these terms by postmodern theorists.”<sup>15</sup> In 2002 Joanne Meyerowitz published *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, in which she cautions against applying contemporary notions of transgender to the past.

---

<sup>12</sup> Alice Dreger, *Galileo’s Middle Finger: Heretics, Activists, and the Search for Justice* (New York: Penguin 2015), p. 65.

<sup>13</sup> A.O. Scott, “Everyone Likes Reading. Why Are We So Afraid of It?” *The New York Times* (21 June 2023), [link to the article](#) (accessed on 21 June 2023).

<sup>14</sup> Susan Stryker, “Transgender Studies: Queer Theory’s Evil Twin,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10 (2004), p. 213.

<sup>15</sup> Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 148–9.

Nowadays, however, “transsexuality” is considered dated, even offensive. Another word that should not be spoken.<sup>16</sup>

According to Meyerowitz, the earliest use of “transsexuality” was by German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld in a 1923 article, though the term he most often used for cross-gender identification was “transvestitism,” as in his 1910 book, *Transvestites: The Erotic Desire to Cross Dress*.<sup>17</sup> The subtitle of Hirschfeld’s book suggests another, even more problematic term for what we now subsume under the word transgender, “autogynephilia.” Introduced in a 1989 article by psychologist Ray Blanchard, who worked with men seeking “sex reassignment surgery,” as it was then called, the term was popularized by J. Michael Bailey in his 2003 book, *The Man Who Would be Queen*, which proffered a theory that for some individuals, transgender isn’t just about gender identity but also, as Hirschfeld’s subtitle suggests, very much about eroticism.<sup>18</sup> That argument nearly cost Bailey his livelihood, and his life (Dreger, 10). As Alice Dreger, a medical historian and intersex activist, writes in her 2015 book that details this controversy, “autogynephilia is perhaps best understood as a love that would really rather we didn’t speak its name” (66).

The fraught history of terminology is covered at length by me and Sabine Meyer in our introduction to the 2020 scholarly edition of *Man into Woman*, a fictionalized life narrative originally published in 1931.<sup>19</sup> The first full-length popular narrative of “genital transformation surgery” (*Genitalumwandlung*), the narrative is a significant, if under-read, work from the modernist archives. Although my co-editor and I resist labels and avoid ascribing contemporary terms to this historical figure, the experience narrated in this work could be said to fit Blanchard’s theory. “At least in fantasy, the typical autogynephile erotically desires a complete identity transformation – *to be a woman*, not to be a transsexual” (Dreger, 66). The subject of this narrative, Lili Elbe, was examined by Hirschfeld in 1930 and later termed an androgyne by Hirschfeld and a trans woman by contemporary scholars, but she, too, resists being seen as a transsexual. In an extant letter, Lili refers to herself simply as “a real girl.”<sup>20</sup>

These debates over language and terminology were on my mind when, in July 2021, I received an email inviting me to contribute to a new blog forum dedicated to feminist and queer modernisms. I wrote and submitted a personal reflection that traces what I have come to learn over my thirty-five-year career writing about transsexuality and transgender and how modernist scholarship on trans issues has evolved over the past four decades. It tells how my reading, teaching, and writing over that time period changed my understanding of the particular trans narrative referred to above as well as my conception of modernism itself. The editor of the blog forum accepted my piece, and on December 30, 2022, she emailed to say my contribution would appear in the winter 2023 issue.

---

<sup>16</sup> In a controversial article, “After Trans Studies,” published in *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* in February 2019, Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager argue for reclaiming the term “transsexual.”

<sup>17</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Ray Blanchard, “The Concept of Autogynephilia and the Typology of Male Gender Dysphoria,” *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases* 177 (1989); J. Michael Bailey, *The Man Who Would be Queen: The Science of Gender-Bending and Transsexualism* (Washington, DC: Joseph Henry Press, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> Pamela L. Caughie and Sabine Meyer, eds., *Man into Woman: A Comparative Scholarly Edition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

<sup>20</sup> Letter to Paul Knudsen, 31 January 1931, [link to the article](#).

So, you can imagine my surprise when, on May 15, 2023, a senior editor of the journal that hosts the blog forum, someone I have known professionally for years, wrote to say she had rejected the piece, presenting an explanation that I found confusing. She wrote:

In the current political climate, where trans lives are increasingly called into question, I cannot publish a piece that works through the process of coming to accept a historical figure who is trans. Knowing you, I know and understand the intentions behind the piece, but I have to think about the potential impact on a young trans reader and on the journal's reputation.

At first I thought that the legislative attacks on transgender people that came fast and furious in the new year meant that this editor was shying away from publishing a piece on transgender. Yet it didn't make sense to me that this particular scholarly journal wouldn't accept a piece on "a historical figure who is trans." It turns out it was "the process of coming to accept" that figure that disturbed this editor, a position I also found baffling. How is acceptance of a trans person's life narrative putting the reputation of the journal and its trans readers at risk? The editor wrote a second email the next day to explain:

My main concern is that the timing is all wrong. I cannot, in this moment of rampant legislation endangering trans lives, publish a piece that has, at its center, your journey to come to accept Lili as a trans person. Acceptance is the bare minimum and I don't think it's the right moment for trans allies to publicly air any private struggles we may have had to understand, accept, and embrace trans figures and trans friends. Moreover, given the relative paucity of scholarship on trans people in our journal, I did not want to highlight a piece that wondered, even retrospectively, about the value of a trans person's life or contribution to literature. If we are to publish on trans issues, I want our publications to explore, interrogate, affirm, and celebrate trans lives. ... [A]s I reflected on the piece, I felt strongly that the time is not right for this post, that its fundamental purpose – to narrate your journey toward embracing Elbe – was not right for this moment.

As the reiteration of the "timing" of the piece suggests, it seems it wasn't the writing itself or my use of sources or my authority to write on this particular subject that was the problem so much as the "political climate" that caused the editor to pull the piece after it was scheduled for publication. What was accepted, and acceptable, in 2022 was politically unacceptable in 2023. In what I saw as a misguided effort to protect some hypothetical "young trans reader," the editor would suppress any writing on the subject that wasn't sufficiently celebratory.

My blog contribution, though, *is* a celebration of a trans figure. I say at the outset that I had much to learn from Lili – that is, from working with her life narrative over the course of a decade – and by the end of the post I have shown how life-affirming the narrative is. As becomes clear in the piece, the trans figure addressed in the essay is a *character* in a fictionalized life narrative, and while she was also a historical figure, the narrative was not written by her. In an anxious effort to protect readers, the editor clearly misread the piece, slipping from my reading of a trans character to my alleged treatment of trans people.<sup>21</sup> My reading of this narrative was never a matter of wondering about "the value

---

<sup>21</sup> The editor chastised me in a third email: "the reference to genital surgery struck me as intrusive and troubling: asking trans people to volunteer the extent of their surgeries and hormonal treatments is rude, and often offensive." I agree. In this narrative, however, the surgeries are its *raison d'être* and thus central to the narrative.

of a trans person's life"; it was questioning the value of a *narrative*, produced by a male editor, that presented the protagonist in a certain way that I came to learn was not how the historical Lili saw herself, and in a narrative form that would strike many modernist scholars as conventional but that I came to understand as innovative.

Being pulled from the publication process due to the "political climate," as I understood her to say, and being rebuked for views attributed to me that I have never held or voiced was shocking enough. Given that I have published in several journals on this same narrative, the editor's action made me want to defend my contribution to the blog series and as a gender scholar. Without my efforts pulling together a team of scholars and students from around the world and across disciplines to produce that 2020 scholarly edition and a companion digital archive, this historical figure would not have the new life we've made available and accessible to everyone. If that's not a labor of love, I retorted, I don't know what is.

What the editor seems to consider incidental, however, are precisely my credentials as a scholar, my authority to write on this subject. The editor's third email to me reveals that she finds offensive the fact that the piece centers on "a straight white woman's journey to accept a trans person" – or rather, I would correct her, to come to terms with a troubling narrative about a trans figure. My identity, as she assumed it to be, was the problem, one she seemed reluctant to admit in her earlier emails. As an editor, she was judging (and misjudging) the character of the writer, not the quality of the writing.<sup>22</sup> She also faulted me for using "dated language" – most likely "transsexualism," a word I used in a 1986 conference paper discussed in the blog post – even though my piece was an historical overview of precisely such terminology. Nonetheless, reading that word, especially when used by a non-trans identified person, and especially in this political climate, the editor fears, would do harm to a young trans reader and thus to the journal's reputation.

Years ago, in response to a question about whether or not white scholars should be teaching and publishing on Black literature, Houston Baker remarked that you earn your right to participate in a discourse. Today, at least for some editors, it seems you don't earn your right to participate in a discourse, you're born to it. Once again I am drawn back to the future. Debates over who can speak were central to the culture wars of the 1980s and 90s. What we can say and who can say it, what we can teach and who can teach it, what we should study and who should study it have always been subject to debate, in the public sphere and in the academy, though the terms of those debates change. To refuse to brook any discussion of issues of terminology and authority in the name of protecting readers is to renege on the very responsibility editors owe to scholarship. How we negotiate these fraught issues in ways that get us out of the initially confining structure that would erroneously pit identity against knowledge, was the subject of *Passing and Pedagogy*.

Here we are again. My authority to write on a trans narrative was questioned by the editor's presumed knowledge of my identity. Should we ask authors to identify themselves according to social categories they may or may not accept before we judge a piece of writing? In an op-ed piece focused on a scientific article rejected by several journals for conclusions that struck one editor as "downright hurtful," and eventually published by this journal, I first learned about the practice of requiring "positionality statements"

---

<sup>22</sup> That point may have been brought to her attention by other members of the editorial board, for in the third email she finally added "the writing is not as crisp and clear as I would like," a statement that covers all sins.

from contributors.<sup>23</sup> These statements require authors to identify themselves according to social categories, such as “cisgender” or “able-bodied,” so that authors own up to implicit biases that might inform their scholarship. How many labels one should provide is not made clear. Such statements, however, would seem to serve as much to discredit certain positions as to make their roots in lived experience transparent. I agree that a person’s lived experiences shape their perspectives, the topics they choose to write on, the works they choose to read, and thus the conclusions they reach, in ways they may not be aware of. I don’t believe, however, it follows inevitably that a person from a certain background will think a certain way. That’s what scholarship and teaching are all about: exposing and disrupting our beliefs and biases, those of the scholar-teachers as well as the reader-students, that have been shaped in part by who we are, where we live, and what we read.

Rather than suppressing particular voices, we should be diversifying the voices we hear. I strongly encourage efforts to request submissions from trans persons writing on transgender to counter the predominance of non-trans voices on the subject, and I offered to suggest names to the editor who lamented the paucity of trans articles in her journal, but not to the exclusion of non-trans scholars working in the field. For learning, as the feminist-deconstructionist scholar Barbara Johnson once stated, begins with the contradiction between teachers, or scholars.<sup>24</sup> The journal that suppressed my blog piece hosts a discussion section that would have provided a forum for debating any contentious issues raised by the essay, and I would have welcomed such a discussion. Let learning begin!

In a 2018 op-ed for *The New York Times*, philosopher and critical race theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah reminds us that “the very word ‘identity’ points toward the trouble.” He continues: “It comes from the Latin *idem*, meaning ‘the same.’ Because members of a given identity group have experiences that depend on a host of other social factors, they’re *not* the same.” “While identity affects your experiences,” he writes, “there’s no guarantee that what you’ve learned from them is going to be the same as what other people of the same identity have learned.”<sup>25</sup> This is the lesson learned from the discussion among Caitlyn Jenner, Kate Bornstein, and Jennifer Finney Boylan over the word “tranny” in a 2016 episode of “I am Cait.” Bornstein accepted the appellation as one created by the trans community itself while Boylan found the word offensive.<sup>26</sup> Herein lies the problem of trying to protect a hypothetical “young trans reader,” the assumption that trans readers

---

<sup>23</sup> Pamela Paul, “A Paper That Says Science Should Be Impartial Was Rejected by Major Journals,” *The New York Times* (4 May 2023), [link to the article](#) (accessed on 5 May 2023); D. Abbot, A. Bikfalvi, A.L. Bleske-Reчек, W. Bodmer, P. Boghossian, C.M. Carvalho, J. Ciccolini, J.A. Coyne, J. Gauss, P.M.W. Gill, et al. “In Defense of Merit in Science,” *Journal of Controversial Ideas* 3 (2023): 1 [link to the article](#) (accessed on 24 June 2023).

<sup>24</sup> Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 85.

<sup>25</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Go Ahead, Speak for Yourself.” *The New York Times* (10 August 2018), [link to the article](#) (accessed on February 2023). Appiah’s argument might seem to support the Supreme Court’s recent decision on affirmative action. As Chief Justice John Roberts wrote in the majority opinion, “The student must be treated based on his or her experiences as an individual – not on the basis of race.” At this writing I have not seen a response to the ruling by Appiah, but I would argue that one can accept his view of identity *and* acknowledge institutionalized racism. To insist on the differences within, not just between, groups is not to deny discrimination against groups. Indeed, the stark differences between the written opinions by the two Black justices on the court support Appiah’s argument.

<sup>26</sup> “I am Cait.” Second episode, season two. Neal Broverman, *Advocate* (11 March 2016), [link to the article](#).

will all respond the same way, or that any potential differences among them must be suppressed to uphold a celebratory notion of their lives.

Appiah explicitly invokes the culture wars of the 1980s and 90s in his editorial, noting that “in the academy during the identity-conscious 1980s, many humanists thought that we’d reached peak ‘as a,’” and “some worried that the locution had devolved into mere prepositional posturing,” a helpful and felicitous phrase.<sup>27</sup> He cites postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak, who thought speaking “as a” created “a distancing from oneself, whereby the speaker became a self-appointed representative of an abstraction.” “For me,” Spivak said, “the question ‘Who should speak?’ is less crucial than ‘Who will listen?’”

The question of who will listen depends, for some, on who is speaking. In a famous 1992 essay, “The Empire Strikes Back,” Sandy Stone expresses many of the same qualms about the trans narrative I was writing on in my blog piece. Stone’s essay responds to Janice Raymond’s 1979 book *The Transsexual Empire*, a book that argues transsexuals are invading women’s spaces and usurping their power, and even compares transsexualism to rape. Stone does not simply refute Raymond, though; she also acknowledges the validity of Raymond’s skepticism about the dominant narrative of transgender. Reading several transsexual memoirs from the 1930s to the 1970s, Stone notes her uneasiness with certain claims that uphold a gender binary and traditional notions of femininity: “All these authors replicate the stereotypical male account of the constitution of woman: Dress, makeup, and delicate fainting at the sight of blood. No wonder feminist theorists have been suspicious,” she quips. “Hell, I’m suspicious.”<sup>28</sup>

Stone’s reading of these trans narratives is far from celebratory. Would her essay be rejected today by the journal that rejected mine? Or would her identity as a trans person allow her to express skepticism where a trans ally cannot? If any time was “[not] the right moment” for such a critique or “to publicly air any private struggles we may have had to understand, accept, and embrace trans figures,” one would think it was the early 1990s when trans people faced hostility even from those who would later become allies. Yet Stone’s manifesto inaugurated a new narrative of trans identity that galvanized transgender studies.

More to the point, Stone raises the “sticky” (her word) question of who is telling these stories and for whom (161). She notes that, just as much writing on women had been done by men (as Virginia Woolf argues in her 1929 essay, *A Room of One’s Own*), much writing on transsexuals prior to 1990 takes them as the subject, not the agent, of discourse. This is the objective of the editor who rejected my essay, to seek contributions from trans persons whose voices have yet to be heard in the pages of the journal she edits. And that is commendable. Reading stories by those whose lives mirror one’s own is how queer folk have long found community and support in an oblivious if not downright hostile environment, whether through reading the case histories of sexologists at the turn of the last century or social media posts today.

Asking, “How, then, can the transsexual speak?,” Stone answers:

I suggest we start by taking Raymond’s accusation that “transsexuals divide women” beyond itself, and turn it into a productive force to multiplicatively divide the old binary discourses of gender – as well as Raymond’s own monistic discourse. To foreground the practices of inscription and reading that are part of this deliberate invocation

---

<sup>27</sup> Some works taking up these debates in the 80s and 90s include Diana Fuss’s *Essentially Speaking* (1989) and *Identification Papers* (1995) and Judith Roof and Robyn Wiegman’s edited collection *Who Can Speak?: Authority and Critical Identity*, also 1995.

of dissonance, I suggest constituting transsexuals not as a class or problematic “third gender,” but rather as a genre – a set of embodied texts whose potential for productive disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored. (164–165)

That productive disruption pertains to any gender binary, such as cis/trans, and any effort to parse identities into discrete categories. To read transsexuals as a genre not a class is to read the writing and not the person. Stone’s argument, I would suggest, queers reading practices. In “Queer Theory for Everyone,” Sharon Marcus makes a related point, noting that the term “queer” emphasizes “affinity and solidarity over identity.” Queer practices are “bonding mechanisms” for forming community, but this bonding is not based on a shared identity but on a shared need.<sup>29</sup> Practices of reading and writing are learned, not innate.

Calling into question commonplace understandings of transsexuals by scholars and trans persons alike, such as the notion of being born into the “wrong body” that has come to define the trans experience for many, Stone writes:

So long as we, whether academics, clinicians, or transsexuals, ontologize both sexuality and transsexuality in this way, we have foreclosed the possibility of analyzing desire and motivational complexity in a manner that adequately describes the multiple contradictions of individual lived experience. (166)

Such contradictions are belied by “positionality statements” and the criteria that writings on trans issues must be celebratory of trans lives.

In her groundbreaking 1989 book *Essentially Speaking*, Diana Fuss rigorously and judiciously interrogates the issue of who can speak, noting that this issue has created an “impasse predicated on the difficulty of theorizing the social in relation to the natural, or the theoretical in relation to the political” (1). Writing on how “identity politics,” especially in the classroom, serves “to both authorize and de-authorize speech,” Fuss notes the slippage between identity and knowledge insofar as “who we are becomes what we know” (113). Fuss does not deny that knowledge is gained from experience but argues that “experience is not the raw material knowledge seeks to understand, but rather knowledge is the active process that produces its own objects of investigation, including empirical facts” (118).<sup>30</sup> This is what Stone does in her reading of trans narratives; she reads them in terms of the cultural assumptions about gender they inadvertently reinforce, rather than taking them at face value, examining, as Fuss does, “the central role social and historical practices play in shaping and producing these narratives” (118). This is an important lesson for a “young trans reader” to learn, and I would suspect, one many *have* learned from trans scholars like Stone.

The irony of an editor who does not identify as trans speaking for and protecting “young trans reader[s]” while rejecting an essay on a trans figure on grounds that the author is not trans was not lost on me. As a non-trans person, I apparently cannot be trusted to speak about a particular trans narrative, even if I co-edited it, but as a non-trans person, the editor trusts her ability to anticipate how “young trans reader[s]” will respond. After all, as she told me several times, she consulted a trans graduate student, who concurred with her decision on my blog post. If one homogenizes trans readers, assuming all trans persons learn the same lessons from their lived experiences, then consulting one

---

<sup>29</sup> Sharon Marcus, “Queer Theory for Everyone,” *Signs* 31 (Autumn 2005), pp. 195–6.

<sup>30</sup> This is the very position the authors of that controversial article rejected by scientific journals counter. By publishing that article, this journal refuses to squelch such debate.

person would suffice, I suppose. What if, however, someone the editor identifies as trans – or straight, for that matter – does not self-identify that way? As Dreger notes in her analysis of the brouhaha ignited by Bailey’s book, to refer to someone with *amour de soi en femme* (autogynephilia) as a trans woman rather than simply a woman “risks questioning her core *self-identity*” (66). In our email exchange, the editor and I both used the shorthand “trans figure” to refer to Lili Elbe, but that is to attribute to her, anachronistically, an identity she did not accept.

Back to the future. My objective in *Passing and Pedagogy* is to name and illustrate a structure of response to this dynamic as it surfaces in classrooms and scholarship alike, a response that doesn’t foreclose on the ethical imperatives and political possibilities of the work we do when we make identity politics the subject of our inquiries. The book is replete with examples of artists and scholars who perform or write across identity boundaries. Examples include American folk artist Michelle Shocked performing the minstrel song “Jump Jim Crow” on her 1992 album “Arkansas Traveler”; comedian Sandra Bernhard performing as Nina Simone in her 1990 film, “Without You I’m Nothing”; Harlan Lane, a hearing person, writing on the deaf community in *The Mask of Benevolence*, criticizing other hearing persons for their paternalistic treatment of the deaf and in turn finding such criticisms leveled at himself; Arnold Krupat writing on Native American culture in *Ethnocriticism* and later receiving an award from an indigenous literatures society that created an awkward moment when the presenters learned Krupat is not Native American. To these I would add the late Eve Sedgwick, dubbed the queen of queer theory, who as a cisgender woman married to a cisgender man made her career writing about gay men and even as a gay man in her essay “White Glasses.”

These forms of critical engagement with cultural experiences that are not one’s own are not all the same. In each case, one must consider the approach taken, the motivation for, and import of the writing or performance. But they all share a common structure and elicit similar kinds of response. And that is what should be continually subject to debate, a debate too often stifled in the name of protecting students or readers.

My recent scholarship on transgender at once extends my earlier writings on race and performativity in *Passing and Pedagogy*, and pushes me to rethink, question, and revise my previous positions. And that kind of self-reflexive, iterative inquiry is where I locate the ethics of scholarship and pedagogy – in the willingness to risk oneself and one’s personal and professional positions, to risk a misstatement or a misperformance by venturing into new terrain, to risk being called to account. That kind of accounting, what I would call an ethics emerging from practices, not professed positions, cannot take place as long as we protect students and readers from contentious debates and words we dare not speak.