

The Word That Must Not Be Named: Confession of a White Anti-Racist

An Essay by Steven Wineman

The play...explores [a] deep-rooted social issue that plagues the urban community: passing curses down to future generations. The text tells us that Oedipus curses his sons and the people of Thebes. He calls them niggas. Some in urban culture argue that they have taken this vile word, changed it and now use it as a term of endearment. I can't think of a better example of a modern-day curse.

-Carl Cofield, Director's Notes to *The Seven*

The remark that did him the most harm at the club was a silly aside to the effect that the so-called white races are really pinko-grey. He only said this to be cheery, but he did not realize that 'white' has no more to do with colour than 'God save the King' has to do with a god, and that it is the height of impropriety to consider what it does connote.

-E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India*

The Seven, a hip-hop adaptation of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, was produced in New York last year as a masters thesis project. (The original production of Will Power's play ran off-Broadway in 2006.) Oedipus, famously the victim of a curse that led him to unwittingly kill his father and marry his mother, is now the perpetrator – strutting, roaring, suffering, cursing his own sons to kill each other. The sons start by agreeing to share power and are progressively overwhelmed by corruption, misunderstanding, self-justification, righteous anger, and the magnetic force of their father's curse. The program tells us that the setting is “Thebes (or Detroit), a once great city.” The unlikely juxtaposition of classical Greek tragedy and the throbbing vernacular of hip-hop tells us that this shit has been going down for a *long* time.

I attended the final performance of a four night run. After the play, most of the cast returned to the stage for an open discussion, with the audience invited to stay. Much of the

discussion among the predominantly African-American actors centered on the use of the word *nigger* (or *nigga*) in the play. What it meant to them in the drama and in their own lives; how they felt about it as actors and as people living in this society; and behind the significance of that specific word, how they understood the passing down of the curse of racism from one black generation to the next. A white actress spoke to say that she had felt particularly uncomfortable with the prominence of *nigger* in the play, and that she appreciated how gracious the other actors had been with her; otherwise she kept quiet.

The black actors talked about how *The Seven's* portrayal of an intergenerational curse spoke to their own lived experience. It was not a discussion about the external truths of racism, its structures and mechanisms in the social and political and economic organization of power, though all its excruciating history and current realities were an unmistakable backdrop. The conversation was about internal experience, what racism did to them as people, how it infected their integrity and self-worth, and how they were trying to respond. A conversation about pain and, though I don't remember anyone using the word, about trauma and how to overcome it. Eventually the actors came around to the critical and deceptively simple idea of making conscious choices about how to live: deceptive because the psychological force of racism can't possibly be overstated; but critical because oppression is all about taking away power, and developing the capacity to consciously choose how to live your life is a fundamental reclaiming of power.

It was a rare moment. Not only because it so seamlessly brought together art and deep

personal experience; but more poignantly because African-Americans were speaking vulnerably about racism in mixed company that included whites in the audience. It's hard to imagine a comparable conversation among white people.

Part and parcel of being the vilest word in our language, *nigger* is also the most highly charged. So much so that a large swath of the public, mostly white, can't say it out loud – not even in quotes; not even in contexts (such as discussions about racism) that might make it clear it's not being used offensively. That's because the use of the word by a white person can so easily be taken as offensive in *any* context. And so we resort to “the N-word,” a type of speech generally reserved for speaking to children (“don't use the F-word”) or to children's literature (“He Who Must Not Be Named”). I don't for one second mean to imply that African-Americans are somehow privileged or enviable because “they” can say *nigger* freely while “we” white people can't; only that there is a vacuum in white language that renders it somewhere between difficult and impossible to make contact with the rawest realities, the actual vileness of racism that comes to life in the speaking of that vile word.

Underneath this vacuum in our language as white people there is a much deeper silence. Thich Nhat Hahn has written that “when you do violence to others, you do violence to yourself.” What is the violence that we as white people have done to ourselves through the perpetration of racism? It's a question that simply doesn't enter our awareness. We don't ask it, so we can't possibly answer it. What is *our* curse here? and how does it pass down from generation to

generation? and what can we do about it? As individuals, as communities, as a white-dominated society, we don't have a clue.

Here is my confession.

In the fall of 1975 my life fell apart. A back-to-the-land venture in Maine failed, relationships ended, friendships crumbled, and I lost my bearings. At the end of the year I retreated to Boston, where for the next six months I lived on unemployment and tried to put myself back together.

Starting in Maine, and then in Boston, I had a number of psychiatric symptoms. I was depressed. I experienced my surroundings as unreal. And I began to have obsessive thoughts. It's the obsessive thoughts that are relevant here. In fact it was one word which, once I started to think it, I could not get out of my head. The word was *nigger*.

I don't remember when or how it started. But once in motion, my *nigger* thoughts took on a life of their own. It became a kind of self-torture. I was twenty-seven years old. I had grown up during the civil rights movement, in a family that professed strong commitment to racial equality. I deeply identified with those values. In college I joined the New Left, took part in protests, saw myself as working for peace and social justice. I took with utmost seriousness the importance of living my life consistently with my beliefs and values. And now this. I was mortified, and for a period of time found myself helpless against this onslaught of alien thoughts, this unending repetition in my brain of the vilest word in the English language.

The thing fed itself, and trying to stop it I became like a serpent biting my own tail. The only tool I knew, my only way of trying to intervene against this horror was to *think* about it, try to make sense of my experience and devise some sort of strategy to steer me in *any* alternate direction. But thinking about it led me straight back to the word itself. I tried to dance around it through a euphemism, labeling it as my *racist phenomenon*. I understood that to have grown up white in our society meant exercising privilege and, inevitably, absorbing some aspects of racism from the surrounding culture. That I could accept. I understood that whites who depicted themselves as having no traces of racial bias were self-deluding; that there is no way to struggle against something you deny. So if all this amounted to was a way of announcing to myself that yes, I do indeed carry racism inside me as a white person living in the United States – that would really just be par for the course.

But it was not only that. The notions that I benefit from race privilege in ways I take for granted; or that I reflexively think of white language and culture as normal; or that I harbor largely unconscious stereotypes about African-Americans that impact my assumptions and behavior in ways I am only dimly aware of – these were benign musings compared to the relentless repetition of *nigger* that was going on inside my head every day, every hour.

The word itself was not directed at or against any specific person. It just hung in my psychic air, taunting, revealing me to myself as something despicable. I endured this in complete isolation. Who was I going to talk to about constantly thinking *nigger*? The most likely candidate would have been a therapist, but I wasn't seeing a therapist – at the time I was

convinced that therapy served the interests of the political status quo, treating personal pain and dysfunction as unrelated to oppressive social conditions. (This was more than a little ironic considering the nature of my own dysfunction, which was hardly a force for social change.) Even later in life, during long stretches when I was in therapy, I never seriously considered bringing up my history of obsessive thoughts. It was my dirty secret.

Lurking barely below the surface of my silence was bonecrushing shame. I remember being out in public, passing strangers of various colors on the street or riding with them on public transportation, the drumbeat of *nigger* pounding in my mind, helpless to stop it, and thinking, *If they knew, if they could read my mind....*It was a sentence that ended in annihilation, not even so much from what those strangers would think of me as from my own judgment of myself, which I could barely tolerate as long as no one knew but would become explosively intolerable if the secret were ever somehow to leak out. So I wrapped myself even tighter and gritted my way through one more day.

After six months I got a job, and going back to work gave me a little relief, allowing me to spend a portion of my days focusing on my responsibilities and shoving my obsessive thoughts into the background. But they were still there. What turned the tide was reading Ted Rosengarten's wonderful book, *All God's Dangers*, the oral history of a black Southern sharecropper. Rosengarten had spent long hours interviewing this old man, taking down his life story, which he compiled and edited. One of the staples in the sharecropper's vocabulary is

nigger.

It's a big book, and I was engrossed by both the story and the voice. Somewhere along the way, something started to shift for me, giving me distance from my obsessive thoughts and a deeper sense of relief. It wasn't a rational process, though that didn't stop me from trying to analyze it and attach reasons for how the book was affecting me. Something to do with a kind of desensitization to *nigger* from seeing it on page after page. Something to do with an easing of my self-castigation, the idea that if a black man could use this awful word so freely, then maybe my just *thinking* it (against my will) did not make me pure evil. Whatever the actual reasons, by the end of the fall my obsessive repetitions of *nigger* had pretty much stopped.

For a long time afterward I thought that this brutal experience left a kind of psychic scar, but now I'm not sure that's the right metaphor. It's more that the beast had crawled into a cage. I have always felt on guard against the possibility of that beast getting out – a murky vigilance, the willful avoidance of something you can't afford to think about, and beneath that the iron grip of shame. And so the agitated silence in which I endured my *nigger* episode lapsed into a deeper silence.

After my father died, one of his possessions that came to me was a nicely framed poster portraying two clasped hands, one black and one white, with the caption “We Shall Overcome.” The hands were positioned vertically, the white hand on top, the black one underneath, giving the impression of the white hand pulling the black hand up. My father and I had shared many

political views, but I had an intense visceral reaction to the poster: *noblesse oblige*. I put it in a closet, where it remains buried.

I suppose there are other ways to look at the poster. You could say that it's only acknowledging the reality of white privilege, the fact of racial power relations as they currently exist. You could say it's depicting what white people should be doing with their privilege. But to me it's about white people's blindness to the implications of privilege, taking for granted that the white hand would be on top, that the role of concerned white people is to help their subordinates and inferiors – which maintains racism in very act of trying to overcome it. And beneath that, an even deeper blind spot to the idea that we as white people might need some pulling up ourselves.

Whites surely need pulling up in the realm of morality, but also in the ways that we carry splintered psyches and lack wholeness of spirit; the ways that our own humanity has been crushed by racism – what Mab Segrest refers to as “the soul-destroying anesthesia necessary to the maintenance of power.” The benefits of race privilege are material and social – wealth, power, status. They are so much woven into the fabric of our daily lives, so much the things we learn to strive for and value, that it becomes almost inescapable for white people to equate rejection of privilege with loss; doing the right thing at the expense of our own self-interest. The ways that we as whites are injured by racism are murky, internal, subjective, psychological, unpleasant, unobservable and all too easy to deny. The notion that deep and pervasive racial equality would limit us materially but benefit us through reclaiming the wholeness of our

humanity – this seems to be unbearably complex. And in any case, it's a complexity we can't even entertain as long as we deny our own injuries from racism.

There must be 50 ways to get racism wrong, and another 50 ways to propose solutions that end up going nowhere. If *noblesse oblige* leaves inequality intact, whites-looking-at-our-own-injuries can lead to a kind of bogus equality which claims that we all suffer equally from racism. We don't. Differences in wealth and power, the daily realities of privilege, systemic police harassment and violence, incarceration rates, the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow, the different degrees of trauma in people's lives – these things matter, and matter a lot. Whites benefit from racism, and suffer from it. People of color suffer from racism, and suffer from it. It's so much more complicated than that, but at least this is a starting point for approaching rather than evading the many layers and levels of complexity; the curses within curses; the interplays of power and powerlessness.

Honestly, it's hard to imagine white people in large numbers revving themselves up to examine how they are injured by racism. I'm not aware of successful social movements organized around slogans like *shed your denial, unearth your suffering*. We have voices like Mab Segrest and Thich Nhat Hahn on the fringes of our discourse about oppression, but in the solid mainstream center there is a vast silence.

But if we were to stretch ourselves, if we *did* imagine white people recognizing our suffering as oppressors, what doors might that open? I'm reminded of Pablo Neruda's beautiful image: “...the man gathering salt / would look at his hurt hands.” Just to stop and look at how

we have hurt ourselves – what an amazing thing that would be!

What if we actually could fill stages with white people opening vulnerably to each other, sharing our deeply held stories about racism and our fractured humanity? What if we could engage in serious cross-race dialogues about shame and splintered selves, about trauma and the transmission of curses from generation to generation – not only on the fringes of public discourse, but in the mainstream center? What if these dialogues were to move white people to redefine “self-interest” to include wholeness of spirit and the healing of psychic wounds? Unlikely – yes; but we *do* have the capacity to make conscious choices about how we construe our self-interest.

“The fundamental condition of peace,” wrote anthropologist Ruth Benedict, “is federation for mutual advantage.” *Racial equality for mutual gain*. Against the long odds of transgenerational curses, that, I think, is the prize.