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## Words Matter: “Scratching” the Surface of

### American Racism



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a 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.”

– Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass

“No matter the relationship, and no matter the motivation, there is no place on this campus for words or actions that demean, degrade, or marginalize based on one’s identity and history.”

– Bob Juliano, Gettysburg College President

On September 12, 1973, Gerald Penny, a black [1] freshman at my alma mater, Amherst College, drowned taking a mandatory swimming test required of all students. Penny, who had grown up in an America where public swimming pools and beaches were still largely segregated, could not swim. He dove in anyway. Minutes later, a lifeguard pulled his body from the pool. In 1979, the editorial wordsmiths at the *Amherst Student*, the college paper, bestowed its so-called Homunculi award to a failed peer counseling program as the “Winner of the Gerald Penny Swim Contest.” Although the college has memorialized Perry’s death, this ugly, sophomoric jape remains as a reminder of the college’s troubled history of racism, as today it continues to celebrate its liberal ideals, even as those ideals have been eroded by the Supreme Court’s dismantling of affirmative action.

Perry’s death was an accident, the result of systemic racism – so systemic that its human impact went unnoticed until it claimed a black life (Amherst discontinued the swimming test requirement later that year) and six years later served as the basis for a racist stunt. But accidents like these keep happening when black and brown people enter white spaces. And sometimes they aren’t accidents. Sometimes they are hate crimes, though the language those in positions of authority use to describe them often obfuscates their animus behind neutered, ostensibly “non-triggering,” circumlocutions and redactive asterisk-punctuated, exposition, or newwrite, the twenty-first century’s answer to 1984’s newspeak.

On September 23, a black member of Pennsylvania’s Gettysburg College swimming team was the victim of an alleged hate crime. According to the family statement published in the *Gettysburgian*, the college newspaper, the assailant, a white teammate, “used a box cutter to etch the N-word [2] across [their son’s] chest.” The article says the slur was “cut” into his chest.

The college’s official statement is more vague, minimizing the incident to the point of SNL parody: “A racial slur [was] *scratched* onto a student using a *plastic or ceramic tool* (emphasis mine).”

CNN reports that the “N-word” was “etched.” ABC, NBC, and NPR use the more invasive “carved.” CBS also uses “carved” in its search engine results snippet but “scratched” in the actual article. Another CBS article, after quoting the family statement, goes on to state that “It was not immediately clear how the slur was allegedly scratched on the student’s chest. Neither the school administrators nor the family elaborated in their statements.”

It would appear that CBS prefers the college’s verb over the more explicit one used in the family’s statement. One is left to fathom how it could be uncertain about the “how” of the

incident given its specificity. This is a textbook example of journalism serving as stenographer to power, for the CBS article has chosen vagueness over clarity. CBS, however, is not the only one muddling the waters. Adding insult to the injury, two Canadian news websites, [cripsie.ca](http://cripsie.ca) and [cafrd.ca](http://cafrd.ca), reposted a *Newsweek* article on the incident, replacing the original headline's "Swimmer who scratched teammate no longer enrolled in college" with "criticized." (The sites' URLs now link to a different news site that does not carry the article.) "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." Well, maybe not, if they aren't painfully "etched," "scratched," "carved," or somehow "criticized" into one's flesh. Certainly not when, following the descriptive literalism of college officials, sticks are described as "thin pieces of wood" and rocks as "solid, non-metallic mineral matter."

More troubling, the victim's family apparently feels compelled to explain why they have come forward to report the incident:

We have come forward now with this statement in the expectation that it will add clarity, not stir controversy as we struggle to comprehend the nightmare that haunts our son and our family. We remain hopeful that Gettysburg College officials will maintain transparency and execute a just application of its rules.

They then point to the treatment their son received at the hands – not of a "plastic or ceramic tool" wielding racist student but college officials who "less than 48 hours" after interviewing him "summarily dismissed" him from the swim team, a decision which, according to the family, violated the college's own policies. In fact, the media initially reported that the college barred the victim of the attack from participating on the swim team and dismissed him, *not* his attacker. Other outlets have since reported that the college suspended both the victim and his attacker. The latest reports indicate that the alleged assailant is no longer enrolled at the college, not that he was expelled. There is no word on the current status of the victim.

After the incident gained national media attention, college officials released statements that seemed bent on protecting the swim team and the college's reputation rather than addressing the causes of an incident it appeared to downplay. These issues may be clarified when the college releases the results of its investigation.

The family has also filed complaints against the college with the NAACP Pennsylvania Commission on Human Relations, though they have refrained from pressing criminal charges. Surprisingly, having presented their version of the incident, the family somehow feels compelled to apologize, fearing perhaps that their personal "nightmare" will offend

those who blindly embrace the American Dream or, given the violent realities of MAGA America, to preserve their safety.

Our family apologizes in advance if this statement offends anyone. We seek forgiveness if what we believe to be true is perceived as bearing false witness. This is not our intent. Rather, our intent is that – in some small way – a heinous act can serve as a transformative moment for Gettysburg College to live up to its ideals of diversity, inclusion and justice; to celebrate the College’s maxim to: “Do Great Work.” We pray that together we can arouse a collective conscience promoting healing and help bring about justice for our son and the rest of the Gettysburg College community.

Move along folks. Nothing to see here.

Elsewhere in Pennsylvania, tenured University of Pennsylvania law professor Amy Wax – the erstwhile Robert Mundheim Professor of Law at the University of Pennsylvania Law School – has been demoted and suspended for making racist, sexist, xenophobic, and homophobic statements. Wax is a recidivist racist. Honestly, is there any other kind?

In 2017, in an interview with black conservative Glenn Loury, Wax falsely stated she had not “ever seen a black student graduate in the top quarter of the [Penn Law School] class and rarely, rarely in the top half” [YouTube, 49:10-49:19], a claim disputed by Law School Dean Theodore Ruger. Of course, in the semantic wiggle room provided by elite academic institutions, Wax might have defended her statement by arguing that she meant only that in her personal experience she had never seen one, not that they don’t exist, though her explicitly racist statements on black intellectual inferiority cast doubt on that line of defense.

In 2019, she stated that the United States “will be better off with more whites and fewer non-whites.” In 2021 and 2023, she invited *American Renaissance* founder Jared Taylor [3], a white supremacist and self-avowed “racial realist” who maintains that blacks are genetically intellectually inferior to whites, to speak to her classes.

In 2022, she referred to her Indian American colleagues as coming from a “shithole” country (“shithole” being the smear of choice among Trumpists and their flatulent, diapered diva who, when they aren’t tossing word salads, weaponize words against those they perceive as poisoning the gene pool of their longed-for heteronormative, white ethno-Eden) and spew racist vitriol against people of color. Wax’s racism prompted Ruger to condemn her statements as xenophobic and white supremacist.

In 2023, she opined: “I often chuckle at the ads on TV which show a Black man married to a white woman in an upper-class picket-fence house. They never show Blacks the way they

really are: a bunch of single moms with a bunch of guys who float in and out. Kids by different men.”

In a 2022 conversation with Glenn Loury, Wax expressed irritation about not being allowed to say “derogatory things” about universities – and, given the comments outlined above, melanated people as well. Mocking the objections of her critics, she tells Loury:

“Oh, she’s a racist; she’s sexist; she can’t say derogatory things. That’s hurtful, that harmful.”

I mean, think about this, uh, Glenn. Define racist, define sexist. They just decide that certain political, moral, cultural critiques and comments of, you know, the values and the policies they favor are off-limits now. I mean, where does this rule come from? You can’t say derogatory things [or etch them into someone’s chest] about what your university is doing. You can’t criticize what your university is up to. That is a made-up rule. It is totally made up, and if it is taken seriously, it is the death of academic freedom, the death of dissent. It imposes this pall of orthodoxy, which, of course, you know, can be defined and redefined at any time and then retroactively applied on every member of the university. And I just say that is illegitimate, and it is completely unwise as well. What this boils down to, Glenn, is the reaction of students, mainly untutored reactions and fears that have no basis, that are completely made up, to get back at and bully people and faculty that they disagree with. Those reactions now have been elevated to paramount, unquestioned status. And what’s really going on...let me just step back, and give you the overview, Glenn, and tell me if you agree with this. The private universities are making this big play to consolidate the absolute control of far-left woke ideology over our most prestigious universities. They want to banish and punish and exclude anyone who is a cuckoo in the nest who dares to dissent, who dares to expose students to different ideas (YouTube, 13:20-15:42).

She confesses:

And these are ideas that are commonplace out there in the real world. I mean, I go to gatherings all the time where ideas and notions and objections are expressed on a routine basis that would never be allowed in the university and that the university is determined to banish all together, okay? And I just think that is a really dangerous and pernicious trend, but I am now this warrior, this culture warrior, this kind of roadkill in this process, uh, one of the few, because I’m one of the few who’s actually willing to speak out. Everybody else at this point is completely intimidated. The students tell me this on a routine basis (YouTube, 15:43-16:36).

Spoken like a true Trumpster.

A quick Google search reveals the kind of gatherings Wax does go to: the National Conservatism conference, The Federalist Society, and Taylor's American Renaissance (AmRen) conference, where, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, "racist intellectuals rub shoulders with Klansmen, neo-Nazis and other white supremacists."

Unlike Gettysburg College, at UPenn, Wax's classroom would seem to be a place "for words or actions that demean, degrade, or marginalize based on one's identity and history."

Wax has her defenders. Bestselling contrarian Lionel Shriver has defended Wax and her choice of guest lecturers:

As for Amy's bringing in Jared Taylor, the founder of American Renaissance, to speak to her class on conservative thought, I know little about this outfit. [Maybe she should learn.] Maybe in this political moment any organisation defending the interests of Americans of European descent is necessarily 'white supremacist.' But introducing students studying conservatism to the right-wing fringe is hardly to endorse that fringe but to expose it to interrogation. In higher education, ideas don't require the quarantine of communicable disease.

Unless, of course, the host shares the views of "that "fringe," a fringe that every day creeps closer to the center, and that possesses a virulence as potent as any communicable disease spread by baneful immigrants as imagined by a delirious JD Vance. However, instead of this contagion being seen as toxic, it is viewed as a tonic that restores American greatness. Then again, Shriver has also criticized Penguin Books over an inclusion policy that aims for its staff and authors to reflect the diversity of the UK, arguing that such a policy hurts the quality of the books it publishes.

Perhaps we should take comfort in the fact Wax's assaults are merely verbal, (pseudo)intellectual, not physical. And, as that childhood rhyme reminds us, words can't hurt us. After all, Wax did not etch "nigger" or some other epithet into her non-white students' chests but instead confined her "criticism" to their race and nationality and the damage she believes they inflict upon white America. However, for minority students on the receiving end of such specious attacks conveyed in the hallowed halls of academia her introduction of "conservative thought" was reportedly painful. Not because they did not expect to encounter it in MAGA-deluded America but because, perhaps naively, they did not expect to find it so blatantly expressed in the classroom by a professor who apparently not only shares those thoughts but cherishes them. This is an all too familiar pattern. Gerald Penny did not expect to take a swim test; the unnamed black Gettysburg College swim team member did not expect to have a slur carved into his chest.

Still, the right prioritizes the fragile psyches of white students, shielding them from the traumatizing, unexpurgated past that “woke ideologues” have foisted upon them. The psyches of students of color from “shithole” countries or who are the children of “single moms with a bunch of black guys who float in and out” who attend her classes (or who had to when they were required) be damned. Speech is free in America, but it comes at a cost. Will students of color who elect not to take her classes be seen by their white peers as lacking the discipline and intellectual acuity to pass them or graduate in the top percentile of her students? Did Wax’s black students fail to pass muster because their “culture warrior” instructor embraces “commonplace” ideas about their intellectual inferiority and conceivably deploys those ideas when she evaluates them? Do I detect the pungent stench of a self-fulfilling prophecy? Who is the “roadkill” here? What price does the free marketplace of ideas place on black lives?

A highly exorbitant one.

As Thanksgiving approaches, I shall keep this semantic fluidity in mind as I send out invitations to celebrate the holiday. Perhaps this year, I’ll “scratch” the turkey. Or maybe I’ll just “criticize” it instead.

#### **Notes.**

1. Unless used in a direct quote, I have chosen not to capitalize “black” until there is substantive reform of American police enforcement and the criminal justice system that results in the criminal prosecution of those who use excessive force and a systemic, long-term reduction in the number of police killings and brutalization of black people.

2. At the risk of being pedantic, why do most news outlets capitalize the “n” in “N-word”? Is it done out of respect for the black people, a recognition of ethnic identity, even as that identity is slurred? When carving the unbowdlerized epithet in his victim’s chest, did the assailant capitalize it? Did he capitalize all six letters?

3. Taylor’s renown extends beyond UPenn classrooms and white supremacist conferences in the U.S. and Europe. Born in and raised in Japan until he was sixteen and fluent in Japanese, Taylor, the author of *Shadows on the Rising Sun: A Critical View of the Japanese Miracle* (Quill, 1983) – which, ironically, describes the Japanese as “some of the most painfully race-conscious people on earth” (p. 60) – *Paved with Good Intentions: The Failure of Race Relations in Contemporary America* (Carroll and Graf, 1993), and *White Identity: Racial Consciousness in the Twenty-First Century* (New Century Books, 2011), has appeared on numerous reputable Japanese news programs where he has been asked to comment on Trump’s presidency and American race relations and allowed to espouse his antiblack rhetoric without being challenged by his Japanese interlocutors.