

same time, we should distrust as signs of weakness his inflated heroics of rebellion, pitiless cruelty, and daring in the face of the abyss. And this is as it should be, for

Nietzsche did not attempt to produce a system fully defended against attack, but rather a method of attack that would work even against himself. ■

The Uses of Ugliness

By JOHN McWHORTER

Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word by Randall Kennedy

(Pantheon, 226 pp., \$22)

NO WHITE PERSON calls me “nigger,” at least not when I am around. The white people with whom I come into contact seem aware that the word is today “the filthiest, dirtiest, nastiest word in the English language,” as Christopher Darden put it during the O. J. Simpson trial. I know “nigger” mainly as an affectionate in-group term favored especially by black men. Beyond this, “nigger” exists for me largely in euphemism, as what the media calls “the N word,” discussed more than used, the discussion usually exploring the popularity of the word among blacks.

Randall Kennedy’s book starts out with a chronicle of various recorded uses of the word in days gone by. When Booker T. Washington dined with Theodore Roosevelt at the White House, Senator Benjamin Tillman of South Carolina groused that “the action of President Roosevelt in entertaining that nigger will necessitate our killing a thousand niggers in the South before they will learn their place again.” That one hits home in how it casually situates “nigger” in a sentence with such elegant syntax, like a lump of mud set in molded aspic. Harry Truman was polite to Representative Adam Clayton Powell Jr. until Truman’s wife backed the DAR’s refusal to allow Powell’s wife, the acclaimed pianist Hazel Scott, to perform at Constitution Hall; and after Powell attacked Truman’s wife in the press for this, Truman referred to him as “that damned nigger preacher.” In 1947, members of the Philadelphia Phillies yelled the likes of “We don’t want you here, nigger” at Jackie Robinson from the dugout—as if “synchronized by some master conductor,” Kennedy remarks.

Such accounts of the racist epithet usually provoke yet another indignant call to ban “nigger” from American speech,

on the grounds that it is a symbol of the ugliness of the past. But in the second section of his book Kennedy presents an almost numbing parade of uses of “nigger” right here in the present, in our post-Civil Rights Act era, uses that are quite free of euphemism or irony. Illinois, 1977: a black man returns a defective product and the sales clerk writes on the sheet that he asks him to sign “Arrogant nigger refused exchange.” Ohio, 1994: a white employer calls a black employee a “sleazy nigger.” North Carolina, 1995: District Attorney Jerry Spivey sees the Denver Broncos’ Ray Jacobs talking to his wife and, drunk, says, “Look at that nigger hitting on my wife.” Florida, 2000: white high school seniors in a newsletter conclude a violent screed against a black teacher with “Die nigger.”

These observations are urgent, in their way. As increasing numbers of blacks and whites are speaking up against the culture of victimhood that is hobbling black America, it is becoming almost a cliché to chant that racism is not dead, but rarely is that chant bolstered with sustained documentation. It is easy to suppose at this late date that there is barely any overt racism left in the United States, beyond scattered hate-group yahoos whom most of us have never met. Kennedy’s catalog of mundane cases of explicit anti-black prejudice provides ample illustration of what lurks beneath the surface politeness of many whites. The sheer number of Kennedy’s awful examples implies the tip of an iceberg. The cases documented in court records are like the ancient creatures that randomly came to be fossilized: the preserved evidence captures hints of a vaster reality. Much of the reason that I do not get called “nigger” is that such language is especially stigmatized in the academic and artistic realms in which I circulate, which are, after all, the rarefied corners of

a much larger America.

But Kennedy’s book is not just one more book by a black academic dressing up the blame game in its Sunday best. Where many see blacks’ use of “nigger” as evidence of self-hate, Kennedy is heartened by it. He even goes as far as to give his stamp of approval to what we might call “nigger,” stage three—in which whites use the word with their black friends (and sometimes even their white friends) as a term of affection. Even before Kennedy’s book was published, leftist black academics were screaming foul as if “synchronized by some master conductor,” taking the line, common in such circles, that the word must be “stamped out.” The notoriously screechy columnist Julianne Malveaux judged that “you are just giving a whole bunch of racists who love to use the word permission to use it even more.” From Columbia Law School, Patricia Williams ruled that “seeing [‘nigger’] floating abstractly on a bookshelf in a world that is still as polarized as ours makes me cringe.” And of course there was the inevitable accusation of mercenary motivation: Houston Baker Jr. remarked that “I see no reason whatsoever to do this, except to make money.”

SUCH VIEWS ARE founded in an ignorance of the history and the nature of language, and they must be listed in a long line of vain attempts throughout written history to ban the use of words that offend. I do not know of a single recorded instance of a word that was truly driven out of usage by fiat. The most that one can do is drive a word underground—whereupon its taboo status lends it more power rather than less power, rather like the cultural prestige that was conferred upon drinking alcohol by the Volstead Act.

Kennedy’s game tolerance of the extensions of “nigger” among blacks and then back to whites is, linguistically speaking, on the right track. Human speech is intimate, spontaneous, and controlled mostly from the subconscious. It will submit to comment, but not to editing. Kennedy usefully focuses on the black use of “nigger” and on “nigger,” stage three, as evidence of the word’s dynamic transformation over time, even seeing blacks’ adoption of the word as itself the expression of psychological and historical agency, a self-empowering retort to the word’s original use as a slur.

Indeed, not only is it inherent in words to hang around despite attempts to extirpate them, it is also inherent in them to change their meaning over time. And not just the sexy, controversial words. “Silly” began as meaning, of all things, “blessed”; and its evolution into its current mean-

ing was a gradual, incremental process over several centuries. "Innumerable" began in its literal meaning, "unable to be counted"; but since something hard to count is usually numerous, the meaning has slowly evolved into "many." Twists such as these are what make Shakespeare's language so challenging. For him, "wit" meant "knowledge" (preserved in the expression "mother wit"), and not Noel Coward's sense of humor. When Polonius tells Laertes, "And these few precepts in thy memory/Look thou character," by "character" he means "write" or "inscribe." And in the original Shakespeare folios we can still see orthographical echoes of the fact that "Goodbye" began as "God be with you." The ugly nature of the past and present of "nigger" does not exempt the word, then, from this universal process of transformation. Words are like the clump in a lava lamp, and "nigger" is currently squishing around in the little hourglass like all the other words.

KENNEDY IS ESPECIALLY good in situating the campaign against "nigger" in the context of the hate speech movement. He staunchly comes out in favor of treating "nigger" as an example of "mere words" rather than classifying its utterance as a legally prosecutable assault. The policing of language by law encourages deceptive manipulations, such as Tawana Brawley's claim that white police officers raped her and scrawled "nigger" on her body in feces, now proven to be false but enshrined as a symbolic legend by scholars such as Patricia Williams. Also, the trip-wire sensitivity to perceived insult often leads to unjustifiable firings and other moral and legal imbroglios.

Kennedy takes us back to widely covered cases such as the firing of municipal supervisor David Howard in Washington, D.C. when he used the word "niggardly" in discussing a budget, and the dust-up in 1997 over the Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary's definition of "nigger" as "a black person—usu. taken to be offensive." In the latter case, a black computer technician read the definition as implying that all black people are "niggers," and even elicited a boycott threat from Kweisi Mfume. But she was deaf to context: dictionary entries record what a word is used to refer to, and sadly, the original meaning of "nigger" is often intended as a statement about all black people. This is an empirical matter. Kennedy appositely notes that this implies sanction no more than the same dictionary's listing for "honky": "a white person—usu. used disparagingly."

Cases like the dictionary flap are dismaying, given how readily many black thinkers and leaders insist that whites view black misbehavior "in context." One

might argue, in fact, that critical race theory, urging blacks to treat the race's "story" as their own, is based on an over-extension of context in legal and political thought. But then the dictionary case and the general call to classify "nigger" as "hate speech" turn around and propose to under-extend context, in the service of what Kennedy aptly terms "formulaic rage."

Kennedy also casts light on the frequent claims that the use of "nigger" is "on the rise." Julianne Malveaux, for example, recently claimed that the use of the word is "escalating." Kennedy objects that "too often the dramatic retelling of an anecdote is permitted to substitute for a more systematic, quantitative analysis." As always in his writings, especially in his under-read book *Race, Crime, and the Law*, Kennedy's commitment to racial justice is plain, and so is his impatience with the subverting of empiricism by the theatrics of the underdog. He frequently throws the cold water of common sense upon issues that are too often cloaked in glib histrionics: "After all, even when one is able to say that the number of reported incidents in a certain year was greater than the number of reported incidents in another year, there remains the problem of determining whether the reporting itself was a mirror of reality or a result of efforts to elicit from subjects their dissatisfaction with

conduct they perceived to be offensive."

Kennedy's most useful point on the "mere words" issue is not only that the use of the term "nigger" is increasingly infrequent in public, but also that in the end it is less harmful than the subtler operations of racism that really can impede self-realization. Kennedy cites three sterling sentences by Henry Louis Gates Jr. on this theme: "The real power commanded by the racist is likely to vary inversely with the vulgarity with which it is expressed. Black professionals soon learn that it is the socially disenfranchised—the lower class, the homeless—who are more likely to hail them as 'niggers.' The circles of power have long since switched to a vocabulary of indirection." In this way, focusing discussion and legislation on "nigger" channels our attention to the least harmful reflex of racism.

Here is where, once again, many black thinkers misread context in favor of the easy emotional score. In the vein of Kennedy's and Gates's point, I might note that I dissimulated a bit in saying that I have never been called a "nigger" to my face. A hard-drinking, working-class white man in the apartment complex in which I was living once mumbled, "Just a nigger anyway," after we had had an altercation over his screaming at his wife outside my apartment until two in the morning. But this

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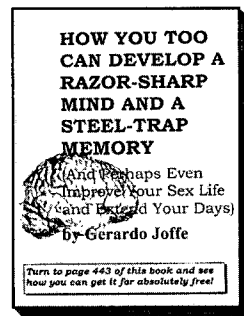
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elicited in me not rage, nor chills, nor tears. It provoked only a sense of victory. After all, I was just out of graduate school and on my way to an interesting career and a comfortable life. He, on the other hand, may very well still be living in that crummy building. He had clearly gotten about as far as he ever would in life. His use of "nigger" was a defensive yelp of last resort.

And so this exchange, for me, did not count as being "called 'nigger.'" The reason the word is such a hot potato is that its use supposedly cuts the African American hearer like a knife, reviving memories of how blacks were treated in decades past, disrupting our allegedly fragile egos. But I cannot say that experiencing this outburst from that man under those circumstances made me feel that Redwood City, California in 1994 was Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 all over again. Frankly, I took it as a musical return to the tonic, a pleasantly unequivocal sign that I had won the fight.

STILL, KENNEDY COULD have gone deeper on the reasons for the evolution of "nigger." Yes, the meanings of words always change, but it does not quite do simply to celebrate black comedians' rampant reveling in the word as a rejection of "boring conventions," as Kennedy puts it. The changing meanings of words do not always indicate progress. The word "hussy," for example, has its roots in the innocent "housewife." (Old English's *huswif* gradually transmogrified into *huzzif* and then *hussy*.)

Many people want "nigger" to disappear, but sometimes a word disappears only because other terms have arisen to convey the same sentiment more surreptitiously. Whatever happened to "token black"? As late as the 1970s, the expression was urgently wielded to call attention to the dehumanization of blacks by placing them in prominent positions as a cynical, quick-fix way of deflecting charges of racism. Today the left sees this very brand of tokenism as the permissible collateral damage of "diversity." Thus "affirmative action" has eased out "token black," distracting many from the fact that too often it is just this that the policy has fostered.

Along similar lines, blacks' in-group use of "nigger" is certainly one part affection, as Kennedy notes. Worldwide, humans recruit disparaging epithets as terms of endearment: humility is a necessary prelude to intimacy. In an episode of *Seinfeld*, George Costanza falls in with a clique of businessmen who refer to one another affectionately as "bastard," and he picks up the habit as he is accepted among them. One often can hear white friends referring

to one another in jocular vein as "mother-fucker." In Russian, the term *muzhik* technically means "peasant," but has evolved into a term of affection, indicating that a man is the "genuine article," a fine fellow. Young white women occasionally recruit "bitch" in this fashion: in the early 1990s at Stanford, a student-written feminist 'zine was called *Critical Bitch*. (The solicitation for submissions read: "Don't just be a bitch—be a critical bitch!")

It is thus no accident that, as Kennedy notes, even Asian teens in California are heard calling each other "nigger," in line with their adoption of hip-hop fashions, musical tastes, and attitudes. More than once in the Bay Area I have thought that I was hearing black teens only to discover that they were Chinese or Filipino. In this way the use of "nigger" by blacks is to an extent a warm and innocent leveler, equivalent to a sense among many people that getting intoxicated together is a kind of initiation of spiritual brotherhood. Among many black men, one has not really arrived as part of the group until one is being called "nigger."

But only briefly does Kennedy acknowledge the substantial role of self-hatred in all this. It is significant that it is this term, among all the odious expressions of racism, that has acquired such cachet. If affection and solidarity were really the only factor, then "motherfucker" could do the trick. But the use of "nigger" by blacks contains an echo of the internalization of the contempt of whites. It conveys not only that you are "a reg'lar fella," but also that you are "nothing but the lower organism that whitey thinks you are." All is not well when an obligato such as this bobs and weaves through casual conversations among black men across the United States.

There are times when this aspect of the word's meaning is painfully clear. Truman's calling Powell "that damned nigger preacher" was ironic when situated within a larger "context." But some years later, as Martin Luther King Jr. began to steal Powell's thunder, Powell dismissively asked: "Who's this nigger preacher?" He was inadvertently in part on King's darker complexion and humbler origins. Powell, by contrast, was a phenotypically near-white scion of bourgeois upbringing. So King was "blacker" than Powell and thus, to Powell, a nigger.

Blacks' use of "nigger" may be affectionate, or creative, or a coping mechanism; but it is certainly more than just a cheeky refusal to be "boring." And this extends to "nigger," stage three. Kennedy actually describes two uses in this vein. One is whites' careful use of the word to their black friends. Kennedy notes a nimble depiction of this in Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled*, where a "down with it" white pro-

ducer cockily prides himself on knowing the taste of "niggers" better than the educated, buttoned-up black protagonist. My feelings about this usage are more ambivalent than Kennedy's, but never mind: overall, it recapitulates the challenging blend of affection and dismissal that Kennedy describes.

But the other convention of "nigger," stage three, is the increasingly prevalent attempts by whites to fashion "nigger" into a reference to people of all races who display inappropriate behavior, weak character, and slovenly speech. The most memorable recent example was Senator Robert Byrd's controversial remark that "I've seen a lot of white niggers in my time." Now, it would be lovely if "nigger" really did shed any association with a particular race, becoming synonymous with "wastrel" or "asshole." But in our moment, alas, this use of "nigger" makes me cringe. What I hear in "white nigger" is "white person who is so disreputable as to compare with the worst among even black people." The subtle implication is that the lowly black person is the lowliest person of all. At the very least it reveals a certain obsession with "the Negro" and his character. After all, why are we not using "wop," "spic," or "kike" in this way? Some might object that these terms are all now a tad archaic, but this only begs the question as to why they were not recruited in such fashion when they were current.

MUCH OF KENNEDY'S book consists of taxonomic outlinings of legal cases in which "nigger" has played a part; the second section particularly shows its roots in the law-review realm. (There is a whiff of Lexis-Nexis throughout the book.) Kennedy is a graceful writer, but finally this is not the full-scale "exploration" of a word and its significance that many readers might wish. Still, the book's brevity is one of its strengths. A plangent three-hundred-page disquisition on the word "nigger" would be a melodramatic, backward endeavor.

The obsession among many people with the word "nigger" boils down to this, roughly: "I am a strong and self-empowered person. Therefore the mere utterance of a racial slur referring to my race will reduce me to tears and helplessness." This is a curious manifesto for a race on the rise, and I suspect that Kennedy would agree. In one of his best passages, he observes: "In stressing the 'terror' of verbal abuse, proponents of hate-speech regulation have, ironically, empowered abusers while simultaneously weakening black students by counseling that they should feel grievously wounded by remarks that their predecessors would have ignored or shaken off." When a white per-

son throws “nigger” at a black person, what he or she is saying is: “You are inferior to me because of your race.” The sad, simple fact is that if a black person can be reduced to sputtering despair by this word, then deep down he or she believes that the charge is true.

Our problem, then, is less linguistic than spiritual, less a word than a self-image. If black Americans truly love

themselves, then Kennedy’s two cents—businesslike, bite-sized, and focused on moving ahead rather than wallowing in the past—is just about all we need on “the N word.” And after we have perused the “Arts & Ideas” page and heard the lively talk-radio shows in the wake of this book’s appearance, let us get back to rebuilding the inner cities and addressing racial profiling. ■

bidden sites overseas and to have located and arrested people who set up forbidden sites within China. In late November, thousands of Internet cafés in China were closed.

Indeed, all the active dissidents inside China seem to have been imprisoned, as far as one can tell from outside. Although new rebels appear from time to time, they usually become known to the outside world only when human rights groups overseas announce their arrest. For dissatisfied workers or angry farmers, the regime has established a tacit ground rule for survival: keep protest non-political. The authorities will consider settling grievances that are couched in strictly local and specific terms, but they quickly enforce the red lines when broader issues such as workers’ rights are raised, or when a local protest makes contact with outside supporters.

The Dissenting Life

By ANDREW J. NATHAN

Bad Elements: Chinese Rebels from Los Angeles to Beijing by Ian Buruma

(Random House, 367 pp., \$27.95)

CHINESE DISSIDENTS WERE glamorous a decade ago. The regime in Beijing was struggling to recover from Tiananmen. A flow of fresh faces reinvigorated the democracy movement in exile. Wei Jingsheng, briefly released from jail in 1993, started contacting other dissidents around the country, signed a contract for a book of prison letters, was reincarcerated, and was regularly rumored as a likely winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. Just as Wei was “China’s Sakharov,” so the movement as a whole—at home and in exile—was seen as a group of staunch witnesses on the Eastern European and Soviet model, living in what Václav Havel called truth, testifying against a regime that was destined for the dustbin of history.

Today the regime has not only survived, it has even prospered. It enjoys the highest economic rate of growth of any major country; it has consolidated its position after September 11 as one of the responsible big powers; and it is displaying what looks like an orderly succession from one generation of leaders to another. Hu Jintao, the designated head of the new leadership (the Chinese call it the “fourth generation” of Chinese Communist leaders), recently completed a tour of European capitals, where he maintained his carefully cultivated—and, inside China, politically

useful—reputation for obscurity.

Meanwhile the dissidents have fallen on hard times. Many of the students who participated in Tiananmen regret that they did so, because they think that they demanded too much and thereby triggered a reversal of reform. They have gone into business in China or abroad, or found religion, or taken up newly popular ideologies such as neo-leftism and neo-conservatism (which, despite their names, mean much the same thing in the Chinese context: support for authoritarianism). In the early 1990s the overseas democratic activists tried to merge their two main organizations, which consisted of pre-June Fourth exiles and post-June Fourth exiles, into a common front; but the attempt failed, and the movement has continued to fragment and re-fragment into an archipelago of jealous groups. The activists’ consensus on peaceful change has also broken down, with small groups emerging that believe in a violent struggle for power, although so far as I know none has accumulated the means to make this vision a reality.

The Internet has provided dissidents with a new means of communication. A daily news service called “VIP Reference” (a sly allusion to the regime’s own classified system of internal “reference news” periodicals) webcasts forbidden information into China from abroad, and Human Rights in China runs a human rights website, and groups such as Falun Gong have used e-mail to coordinate their activities domestically. But in response the regime’s security police have set up their own Internet division, which seems effectively to have blocked most users’ access to for-

THE REGIME HAS also learned to use exile to its advantage. The activists of 1989 had to escape from China, which in some instances required long and hair-raising travels within the country, aided by an underground railway whose character remains mysterious to this day. The Tiananmen student leader Li Lu recalls being left overnight on a small outcropping of rock in the South China Sea waiting for a fishing boat from Hong Kong, which arrived but was scared off by coast guard cutters (either from China or Hong Kong, he doesn’t know). He later escaped another way.

By the early 1990s, the government began to realize that it could achieve more by exiling dissidents than by seizing them. There developed a trade in hostages somewhat less blatant than that which obtained years ago between East Germany and West Germany. Every year, in the lead-up to Congress’s annual review of what were then called China’s “most favored nation” trading privileges, the Chinese government would release into exile a few dissidents at the top of the American government’s wish list. In 1990 they released Fang Lizhi, the astrophysicist and patron saint of the student movement who had taken refuge in the American embassy in Beijing during the June Fourth crackdown. Fang ended up quietly teaching and doing research at the University of Arizona. In 1994 the government forced into exile Wang Juntao, one of the two intellectuals convicted as the main behind-the-scenes manipulators of the students. Wang is now a doctoral student at Columbia. His colleague Chen Ziming, who refused exile, has been bottled up in house arrest, where he is constantly harassed by security forces.

In 1997, the regime sent Wei Jing-

ANDREW J. NATHAN is Class of 1919 Professor of Political Science at Columbia University and, most recently, co-editor of *The Tiananmen Papers* (PublicAffairs).

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