

11 March 2022

An Open Letter to Those Genuinely Interested in What I, Professor J. Angelo Corlett, PhD, REALLY said in my Critical Thinking class on Tuesday 1 March 2022:

Freedom of speech and due process of law are vital for everyone in a decent society. Judging a person on the basis of the mere testimony of another without first fact-checking is a moral and intellectual crime that has gotten so many black people killed or otherwise maltreated in the past, and even today. The answer to such evil is not to prejudge others and listen to rumors about them, but to do our duty in learning for ourselves the facts of another before we make a judgment about them.

Recently, it has been argued that one or two of my students out of about 60 complained against me because, they allege, I said what many refer to as “the n-word” was USED by me in my critical thinking course, and a total of “more than 60 times”! I am unsure how practically possible that is in a mere 75 minute class session given the fact that so many of my students were deeply involved in the discussion, keenly demonstrating how well they understood critical thinking. I estimate that I MENTIONED said word about 10 times at most, possibly fewer times than that. I did so far more than usual this time in order to explain and re-explain the questions that the unnamed visitor (not enrolled in the course) kept raising as he had never previously attended the course and it seemed as though he did not understand the subject matter. So I patiently and repeatedly attempted to assist him and anyone else in the classroom in learning it. But he seemed uninterested in the learning of the point which was to teach students about the logic and linguistic sciences regarding what counts and what does not count as racist language, and why. Normally, I would have MENTIONED the word 2-3 times total (in about 30+ lecture slides pertinent to this lecture series) in part addressing Dave Chappelle’s USE of the word and various reactions to it. Each lecture and discussion of mine on this material differs depending on questions students raise. That day’s session was hardly normal for my classes. I think we did not even cover in full the first slide for that day. I had planned to cover about 6-10 slides and perhaps complete the series.

The use-mention distinction was of crucial importance to my lecture that day, as was the distinction between racial mention v. racist use. Speaker's/writer's intent is vital in determining what counts as racism (See Paul Grice, “Meaning”), despite what some think to the contrary who refuse to accept the sciences of logic and linguistics

on such matters. The necessity of a speaker's/writer's intent for their meaning is a logical and scientific fact about language and its meaning. The use of code words that are said to be synonymous in meaning to the words that are coded are linguistically just as racist as the words they code because they have the same meaning and content. Besides, certain racist groups use racist code words as racist epithets in order to hide their racist language from the rest of us. I want no part of that. Hence, I neither mention nor use code words when I teach because it would confuse students and also be an inaccurate way to make the points I am making, linguistically and logically speaking. I must be accurate in what I teach as San Diego State University is putatively a university of higher learning, even if its administration sometimes behaves as if San Diego State University is a K-12 institution.

That being said, it is also true that my MENTIONING a racial epithet against blacks has triggered pain in some black San Diegans. This pains me. As a person who has since my kindergarten years until now always admired, loved and respected black people, I am very disappointed that anything I would do or say (or even MENTION) would trigger such pain in our black brothers and sisters. That is unacceptable to me. And I have since that Tuesday racked my brain and consulted many philosophers of language and other scholars in order to figure out what to do about it, pedagogically speaking. The lesson must be taught, *but how?* On the one hand, there is the value of academic freedom and more broadly, freedom of expression, which are of fundamental importance to us all, regardless of who and what we are. They are human rights. But just as important to me are our brothers and sisters of the black communities whom I have cared about all of my life. I am the most vociferous voice in all of contemporary philosophy concerning the rights of blacks to compensatory and non-compensatory reparations, for example. [See my books, *Race, Racism and Reparations* (2003) and *Heirs of Oppression* (2010)]. I am proud of that. But in thinking very deeply about this matter, I have reached the conclusion that there is no logical conflict between my respect for our black brothers and sisters, on the one hand, and what I teach about use-mention and racIAL v. racIST language, on the other. And there is, I believe, linguistic privilege such that in-group members only are socially “permitted” to USE racial epithets referring to their own group. This is in part why I never USE racist epithets. Rather, I only sparingly and in higher educational settings MENTION them *in order to argue why we ought not to USE them in a racist manner*. I have two particular slides on this point that I never reached because I was removed from the courses before I could complete the entire set. What

the students saw on the day in question was only one out of about thirty or so slides in the series, hardly in context unless someone was present at the sessions on the topic preceding the day in question. This point was made that day repeatedly by many students enrolled in the course. But the classroom visitor would not listen and kept asking questions that had already been answered in earlier sessions. This seemed to frustrate many students enrolled in the course who had already attended previous sessions and studied the assigned reading (Corlett, “Offensiphobia”) for the lectures in question.

My point in teaching the above material was also in significant part to answer the question many whites have about why they are not socially permitted to say what many call the synonym for “n-word.” (You can already see how this MENTION of “n-word” is already a bit confusing, linguistically.) But I could make the discussion completely stale and less understandable, pedagogically, by simply using placeholder symbols: One has to MENTION X in order to argue why one ought not to USE X in a racist way (with racist intent), where “X” is a racist epithet. Many students who see and hear this version would understand the point less clearly than my MENTIONING real words. (Yet code words are linguistically just as racist as the real thing.) But a problem with this suggestion is that one seems to be forced to think of racist epithets in order to get the point! So it seems self-defeating in terms of offensiveness of language is concerned. But I am willing to give it a try next time and see if it works as it would much better respect the black people who are pained by my original way of teaching the material in question.

But let’s be clear: It is not because of demands that vitiate freedom of expression that I am willing to do this. Rather, it is because I MENTIONED a racial epithet that triggered pain in some of the people in the group that I LOVE and RESPECT so greatly. Being linguistically contemporary (“relevant”) in teaching can often help us professors relate better to young students. But it has its risks. In this way, it is a bit like edgy humor in that it is complicated.

It is worth pointing out that in 2005 when an article of mine on this very topic was published, it was published by two now distinguished black philosophers: Tommy Shelby (Harvard) and Derrick Darby (Rutgers). *At no time did they even mention that my essay on the use-mention distinction in explaining racial v. racist language was racist, and I wrote it then just as I teach it today.* Indeed, the co-editors of the book, *Hip Hop and Philosophy*, strongly encouraged me to entitle my essay as it reads, including a line from a famous Snoop Dogg track. I think it is because they

understand the use-mention distinction and know that unless racIAl language has racIST intent, it cannot be racist. That is a linguistic fact, like it or not.

There is also the completely inaccurate wording misattributed to me about my use of the word “rape” and/or one of its cognates. What I really stated was this. I was explaining to the students that academic freedom and freedom of expression were the primary reasons provided for the institution of tenure back when tenure became an institution. Tenure is not intended to lock in a career for lazy faculty who cease to publish research. Not at all. Nor is it intended to protect criminals. It is to protect faculty from being harassed or fired by those who are offended by what they might say, which is a US federal civil rights violation. **Nobody has either a legal or an ethical right to not be offended.** That point too was central to my lecture that day. So tenure is to protect First Amendment federal civil rights to freedom of expression, as it is designed to do for Public Enemy and NWA and many other hip hop groups when leaders of the democratic and republican parties alike attacked them and sought to censure them. Some rap and hip hop artists back then argued that all they were doing was reporting (MENTIONING) what they see in the hoods from which they proudly hail, not USING or endorsing such words that many found offensive. Without legal free speech protections, the hip hop artists don’t stand a chance against the offensiphobes. Neither do many black comics like Dave Chapelle, Tiffany Haddish, Eddie Griffin, Eddie Murphy, Chris Rock, Key and Peele, Katt Williams, Tracy Morgan, and a host of other highly talented comics. I side with the hip hop artists and comics. So, what I was saying during my lecture in explaining the importance of free speech and tenure for everyone was that tenure is a powerful tool to protect the expression of what often needs to be studied and discussed in higher education. It is so powerful and respected by most in higher education that a tenured faculty member typically must commit an awful crime like murder, rape or sexual harassment or such in order to be fired. This is a fact. However, they cannot be justly fired or even disciplined for merely offending someone. If faculty could be fired for merely offending someone, then there would not be enough faculty to teach as most would express something or other that offends someone at some point. Moreover, there are millions of non-blacks who are, unfortunately, offended by blacks. But should our black brothers and sisters be prohibited in some way from living life? **Of course not.** So offensiveness is not a sufficient reason to silence anyone. And then I stated that I support such a set of laws and policies prohibiting various sexual harassment crimes because no faculty member should have the liberty to commit such crimes and get away with it. THAT is what I said, though not exactly word for

word. I said nothing about myself committing any crime and getting away with it or not as I do not commit crimes or have any desire to do so. The misattributions to me based on second-hand rumors by some sources about such matters is simply inaccurate and disingenuous.

Importantly, I wish to thank my many current and former “mentees of color” and students in general for writing letters and postings to correct falsehoods that were posted about me. (As Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted from the Jewish scriptures in his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, “Truth crushed to Earth will rise again!”) My several teaching awards throughout my career I owe to you. I also wish to thank those who pushed this matter because it fortunately pushed me to re-examine what I did to trigger pain in some people in a group I have always loved and admired. I greatly appreciate this effort on their part, however infelicitous. And it is easy and even common for us non-blacks to ignore or not take sufficiently seriously black voices, especially those of black pain. But if we do not listen carefully to black voices, we will never understand one of the points of Black Lives Matter and Critical Race Theory, namely, that black voices are crucial to understanding the very essence of OUR lives as humans. And that is a vital point indeed! (For my 2016 statement on BLM-related issues, see <https://corlett.sdsu.edu/Corlett/Welcome.html>)

If you wish to not pre-judge me and instead more importantly learn a great deal about black reparations and American Indian reparations, see my philosophy-ethics books, *Race, Racism and Reparations* (2003) and *Heirs of Oppression* (2010). I also have published several essays on the topics if you are interested: on why the **confederate battle flag** should never be displayed as an official government flag because it is a **flag of the enemy of the state and it is antithetical to fundamental US values which condemn racism!**, etc., . I concur with California State law on these points. I am also happy to constructively engage these issues in various person-to-person forums as I am able.

Very sincerely yours,

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website: <https://corlett.sdsu.edu/Corlett/Welcome.html> .

