

## Naming the Title of *White Niggers of America: I Will Die on This Hill*

*Frances Widdowson*

On November 5, 2022, I was fortunate to participate on “The Cost of Academic Dissent” [panel](#) with Joshua Katz, Amy Wax, and Elizabeth Weiss, at Stanford University’s Academic Freedom Conference. In my [presentation](#), I discussed why I was fired from Mount Royal University, the advice I had to offer other professors under fire, and what I thought were some of the things that could be done to push back against the increasing attempts to suppress academic dissent in universities today.

In discussing my firing, I briefly explained why I had turned to “satirical warfare” by transforming my personal Twitter account into the character “[francXs mcgrath \(NOT frances widdowson\)](#)” – billed as the “xister-in-law” of the famous [Titania McGrath](#) (created by the British comedian Andrew Doyle). I told the audience that this was due to the fact that a mob began to form after I [defended](#) the journalist Wendy Mesley, who had her career ended for referring to the book title, *White Niggers of America*, of the famous Québec sovereigntist, Pierre Vallières.

As the Stanford Academic Freedom Conference was intent on opposing the censorship and cancellations that were occurring in universities, I was surprised to receive communication asking how I would feel if my reference to Vallières book title was muted in the video of my talk. A number of people had [complained](#) about my presentation, I was told, and it was feared that this would escalate if my reference to the title was broadcast widely. In response, I stated that I strongly opposed this course of action. I explained that there had been many cases in Canada and the United States where professors had been punished for mentioning or using this racial epithet in an academic context. If the conference wanted to support these professors, I argued, it should stand behind my enunciation of the word and simply explain that it was not “racist” to refer to a book title.

In the end it was decided to mute the title in spite of my objections. When I responded by stating that I would be publicly criticizing this decision, I received an email with a personal opinion from someone associated with the conference. Referring to the title did not concern my academic work, the email incorrectly stated, but was about my desire to engage in provocation. I was then told that the conference was not all about me, and that I should pick my battles and think carefully about not alienating potential allies.

The most bizarre aspect of the email from this individual was that it implied that my decision to refer to the actual word in the book title was irresponsible, and a much better discussion about such controversies had occurred during the Academic Freedom in Law and Legal Education [panel](#). Ironically, this discussion occurred in the question-and-answer period when Nadine Strossen, the former president of the American Civil Liberties Union (and now a [Senior Fellow](#) with FIRE [Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression]), remarked that law students were now demanding censorship in their programs. In her elaboration of this phenomenon, she referred to the [paper](#) “The New Taboo: Quoting Epithets in the Classroom and Beyond” by one of the panellists, Eugene Volokh (which was co-written with Randall Kennedy). Strossen

remarked that she had sent out a draft version of this paper to her student research assistants, as she believed it would be helpful to them, but she then confided: “that was a couple of years ago, I would not do that now...I’ll admit to self-censorship. Even though I think that would be pedagogically valuable it’s just not worth the risk and the firestorm that I know that I would face”. To illustrate the problem, she pointed to a recent incident in the District Attorney’s office in Washington, where interns demanded that a module on epithets and hate crimes be removed because they were offended by “the word” being mentioned. There was agreement on the panel that this would negatively impact the ability of these students to practice law.

The fact that a person interested in upholding open inquiry and academic freedom could think that an admission of self-censorship was more helpful to discussing this issue than my principled decision to enunciate a book title tells us everything we need to know about what is happening in universities. If a former leader of the American Civil Liberties Union is afraid of getting “cancelled” for distributing an academic article written by two distinguished academics, what hope is there for those of us who oppose bowdlerizing speech? We have lost sight of what an academic environment is all about. In order to be an educated person, we need to be able to explore all ideas; this goal is undermined when certain words are ring-fenced and considered taboo.

Although it may seem trivial whether or not we can use or mention the word “nigger” in an academic context, we have to realize that this is ground zero in the debates about free speech. Control over language, and what words can and cannot be uttered, is at the heart of the totalitarian impulse (as an aside, I note that Stanford University has just [come out with](#) “The Elimination of Harmful Language Initiative”). This is why this issue has been a flash point in both Canada and the United States, with controversies involving [Catherine Russell](#), [Verushka Lieutenant-Duval](#), [Mark Mercer](#), [Angelo Corlett](#), and [Greg Patton](#) to name a few. Language, of course, controls thought, and without the freedom to express ourselves in the way that we wish, our ability to think clearly, engage in critical thinking, and put forward a dissenting position will be impeded.

The lack of clarity can be seen in the coerced reference to the abbreviated form “n-word” when one is speaking or writing. Besides having to eventually utter the word [to explain](#) to what “n-word” is referring, there are now several “n-words”; at last count I found seven forbidden words beginning with the letter “n” – n-word#1 (“nigger”), n-word#2 (“negro”), n-word#3 (“nigga”), n-word#4 (“niger” [Spanish]), n-word#5 (“nègre” [French]), n-word#6 (“niggard”), and n-word#7 (“nigah” [Chinese]). Opposition to the terms “niggard” and “nigah” is particularly idiotic because these words don’t have anything to do with race. In the case of “nigah”, for example, it is a filler word in the Chinese language, but since the pronunciation of it is similar to that of “nigger,” a group of students [became upset](#) and the professor discussing it in a lecture was suspended.

The usual reason given for not referring to any of these “n-words” is the “harm” or “hurt” that they supposedly cause. In these discussions, intent doesn’t matter. No distinction is made between hurling a racial slur at someone and referring to a book title. In my case, an anonymous “student-led” initiative said that I was [“spewing hate”](#) and “using racist slurs” that were [“violent”](#). One of my union representatives maintained that I was using [“derogatory language”](#)

that could never be justified and [urged](#) for a code of conduct complaint to be filed against me. One colleague [stated](#) that referring to Vallières book title on Twitter was “a hurtful, irresponsible use of power” and encouraged students to avoid taking my classes. Another provided me with a video clip of Tim Wise [explaining](#) why white people should never refer to the word (because of its historical relationship to oppression), [sneering](#) that even I would be able to understand this because Wise was a white person who used “small words”.

In all of these discussions, it was accepted as self-evident that black people can use or mention “the word”, but this is unacceptable for a white person. I actually witnessed this double standard at an event of the Mount Royal Faculty Association [entitled](#) “Enhancing EDI [Equity, Diversity and Inclusion] in the classroom”. At this event, a student gave a presentation about what he perceived to be examples of racism at MRU. The first “heartbreaking” incident that he recounted was about a professor showing a video about the rap music industry and saying that he could not listen to the songs anymore “because the only thing you hear nowadays is ‘nigger, nigger, nigger’”. This student informed us that he had complained to the administration and wanted the professor to be punished for doing the exact same thing that he had just done in his own presentation – mentioning the word in an anti-racist context. No one at the talk appeared to be bothered by this contradiction.

This raises the question of why it is acceptable for a black person to use or mention “the word”, but it is not for a white person. Often it is claimed that this is what black people are demanding, and it is a way of signalling that one is opposed to racism. But there are many black people who do not share this view and are actually offended that white people are making decisions about what they can or cannot hear. It implies, after all, that a black person is too weak or fragile to hear certain words uttered. Randall Kennedy, for example, [argues](#) against this double standard and states that:

“In the domain of culture there ought be no boundaries that fence out people based on racial identification or ascription. There ought be no words that Blacks are permitted to say but that whites or others are prohibited from saying. While racist use of ‘nigger’ should be condemned no matter the racial identity of the speaker, nonracist deployment of ‘nigger’ should be accepted no matter the racial identity of the speaker”.

If black people have different views on this matter, why should the position of the most irrational be embraced?

But is it really believable that people sincerely accept the view that so much “harm” is caused simply by referring to a book title? What do these sensitive people do when they accidentally come across “the word” on the internet, in the library indexes, or in an old movie? Randall Kennedy is doubtful about the sincerity of these claims:

“I am convinced that in a substantial number of instances these fights are not really over hurt feelings. They are struggles over status and power. Objectors have made avoidance of vocalizing ‘nigger,’ even in the guarded circumstances of classroom instruction, a matter of taboo in which the failure to abide by the rule of avoidance is taken as a sign of disrespect. It is not the word or

the circumstances of its deployment in the classroom that causes anger. What causes anger is the ‘failure’ of the teacher to submit to the objectors’ demand, regardless of the circumstances.”

In [my own case](#), this certainly seemed to be what was happening. After the killing of George Floyd, a kind of hysteria swept across Mount Royal University, and it was demanded that mandatory anti-racism training be instituted for all faculty members. My resistance to this totalitarian impulse led me to be targeted, and my criticism of the Black Lives Matter movement was one of the reasons given for why I should be fired. Essentially, what occurred was a temper tantrum about the fact that I did not take the activist demands seriously. My Tweet mentioning the word “nigger” was for them a “gotcha” moment that they thought would be a handy weapon in their campaign against me.

But when the mob began to form in response to my principled defense of Wendy Mesley, I became even more determined not to give in to these irrational and autocratic demands. Instead, I posted a [Tweet](#) referring to myself as a “cunt” and saying that I would not feed “race hustling crocodiles”. When I used the word “cunt”, I explained that it was in “the liberatory sense, of course” and I posted a link to an [article](#) about how the word was actually empowering to female sexuality and had been suppressed by the patriarchy. The word “crocodiles”, of course, was a reference to a famous Winston Churchill quote: “Each one hopes that if he feeds the crocodile enough, the crocodile will eat him last. All of them hope that the storm will pass before their turn comes to be devoured”. This uncompromising response enraged the mob further, eventually resulting in a [petition](#) demanding that I be fired.

Trying to prohibit people from referring to the title *White Niggers of America* is one of the most idiotic things that I have witnessed in academia, and I have seen more than my share of nonsense. Quoting this title is, in fact, a hill that I will die on. This is because it is a perfect example of censorship having the opposite effect of what it claims it is intending. Because of [my academic work](#) on Quebec nationalism, in which I refer to the book title, I came to understand why Vallières deployed this word. By putting “white” and “niggers” together in the title, Vallières was using the power of the racial epithet to hit home his insight that it is class, not race, that is the important factor in human denigration. He was pointing out very succinctly and poetically that, although the French and English in Quebec were both “white”, the former needed to justify the oppression of the latter by labelling them as inferior. Vallières, therefore, was underlining the common humiliation that workers of all races experience when they are exploited for their labour power.

What “anti-racism” activists are intent on doing is erasing the sophisticated meaning of Vallières and replacing it with their simplistic and divisive obsession with race. This is justified by postmodernism’s blurring of the distinction between the word itself and its meaning. The prizing of subjectivity over objectivity also results in confusion, which enables [race hustlers](#) to push forward with their rent-seeking demands unopposed. Instead of trying to understand the actual causes of oppression, we have become sidetracked into policing the use of words so as to pander to idealogues. This prevents us from appreciating Vallières’ powerful message – that it is the conflicting relationships created by the ownership of productive forces, and not race, that holds the key to why humanity cannot increase cooperation and create a better world for everyone.

*Frances Widdowson ([widdowsonfrances@gmail.com](mailto:widdowsonfrances@gmail.com)), a tenured professor fired from Mont Royal University in December 2021, is a board member of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (<https://safs.ca/>). She is currently working on a manuscript entitled The Woke Academy: How Advocacy Studies are Murdering Scholarship and Effective Policy Development. You can support her appeal by making a donation at [www.fundrazr.com/wokeacademy.info](http://www.fundrazr.com/wokeacademy.info).*