

14CV88

(Written way back in 2012, hence some anachronisms)

The Roofers' Epithet

When I was a young man working in East Baltimore, we contracted with an all-white roofing crew to repair the asphalt on a brownstone we were working on. Upon arriving, the head roofer looked around and made a point of locking his generator to the frame of his truck, using the sort of chain I imagine large boats use to weigh anchor. He confided in my boss and me, the local white guys: “there's an awful lot of coons running around here.” We were a little stunned. “Let him say it again,” my boss said grimly.

I remember this moment for two reasons. First of all, it was one of those all-too-rare instances of immediate karmic retribution. We returned from working on another job site to discover that the roofers had been stranded on their roof after a crew of teenagers had stolen their ladder. The kids had then returned with what must have been monstrous bolt cutters, to *slooooooowly* steal the generator as well—all while the roofers watched helplessly from 35 feet up on a freestanding building with no fire escapes.

Secondly, it was the only time in my life I have ever heard anyone explicitly and—in the descriptivist sense of the word—*correctly* use a racial epithet in English. This was not an in-group accolade, or an awkward attempt to *fit* into a group, or a carefully framed attempt to shock or offend someone while maintaining some sort of semantic impunity, or a malaprop by some old man who had missed the last few rounds of connotation decay. Our roofer just didn't like black people, and he wanted to fly that flag high.

Obviously, the fact that I have lived to be 36 while only hearing one such phrase that I can recall, *ever*, means that I am (a) white, and (b) have spent most of my life living with white people who are culturally disposed to choose their words quite carefully. Yet I expect I share that context with most of the people that make up the American media, and they are the group I wish to interrogate over the next few pages.

[Unintelligible]

In the course of the last several weeks [long ago, when I wrote this], there have been two rather high-profile cases of possible racial epithets in the news, and another related instance of a possibly-racist-sentiment. Each of these has garnered at least a modest amount of attention from the media proper, and a great deal more attention from the paramedia of social networking. And the discussion around each of them fits into a similar pattern.

First we had Rick Santorum saying (each of these is per my own transcription of the audio) “I don't want...to to make b...lack people's lives better by giving them somebody else's money. I wanna give them an opportunity to go out and earn the money and provide for themselves and their families.”

More recently, he stammered his way through “We know...we know the candidate Barack Obama what he was like: the anti-war, government nig uh the uh America was a source for division around the world.”

Between those two moments, we have the transcript of Richard Zimmerman's call to 911, which officially is “the back entrance...fucking [unintelligible]”. I hear it as “the back entrance...[unintelligible]”, but many people hear it as a racial slur—though not quite everyone hears the *same* racial slur, tellingly. These cases are hardly unique. The question of whether or not a racial epithet was used appears in the recent Kenneth Chamberlain case as well, and

many others.

A great deal of scrutiny has gone into the syllables above. Santorum argued that his comment about “black people” was “probably a tongue-tied moment as opposed to something that was deliberate” and that what he actually said was “blah people”. Separately, and more plausibly, he has said that his response was indeed about black people, but it was in the context of a question about black people: in particular, the (insidiously awful) documentary *Waiting for Superman*. Absurd as these apologies are, the idea that Santorum was beginning to say “nigger” in a public speech during a political campaign, and then thought better of it, seems even more absurd. In context, my own guess is that he intended to say “big government”, realized that he dropped the word “big”, and stammered for a few seconds before recovering partway through the next sentence.

And it is quite impossible to tell what Zimmerman was saying.

The larger question is why we care. There is no question that Santorum's *policies*, as expressed in his voting history and his *Made in America* platform, were a tidal wave of structural racism, sexism, homophobia, and Christian dominionism. The man spoke fondly of the crusades, and he has a great appetite for the moral condemnation of whole categories of people, a trait he shares with his fundamentalist Islamic nemeses. His presidency would have been a disaster for women, gays, and racial minorities, a fact that he advertised more or less openly. Again, there is no question that Zimmerman shot an unarmed black youth and subsequently received police protections that would have been unthinkable if a black teenager had shot an unarmed white man. We do not need to analyze Santorum's ejaculations or Zimmerman's growling to make up our minds about their larger political valence.

But apparently we can't help it. Indeed, at some level, the possibilities that could be buried within “[unintelligible]” are more interesting than certainties expressed by any long-winded policy document.

14CV88

I am reminded here of an earlier case involving license plates, which I have a kind of pareidolia about. I have always had a secret conviction that *everyone's* license plate is a vanity plate, and I'm simply not familiar with all the references. For instance, “OMG 420” or “BND 007” fit the standard patterns for license plates here in Vermont, but it takes only a cursory knowledge of popular culture to tell that they are vanities. “EEE 333” might not mean anything, but it is probably a vanity plate as well. But what about “SPR 300” or “SNB 322” or “BTK 775” or “JHN 812” or the like?

Vermont has relatively basic license plates. In North Carolina (I believe) the police have to deal with emoticons or worse: “LOL :-D”, “
”. Vanity plates are provided at the discretion of the state, meaning the discretion of some guy in a cubicle at the DMV. Over the years, lists of failed attempts have been circulated a good deal: “ADIOSMF”, “EJAQL8”, “36DCUP,” and so on. But it is always possible to get one past the censors. Famously, “AGINA” in Virginia is on the U-Virginia plate with the big red V on the left, and I understand that several states have “3M TA3” plates, for the benefit of people's rear-view mirrors.

All of which brings me to Virginia's “14CV88.” A picture of a Ford pickup with this plate circulated on the internet for awhile, coupled with complaints about its racism. Notably, every article on the subject took pains to explain exactly *why* “14CV88” was a white supremacist plate, because—pretty clearly—no one who isn't already reading the Klan newsletter would have noticed otherwise. And even then, the explanation is not all that satisfying, but here we go: “14” stands for David Lane's 14-word slogan, “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.” (Alternatively, perhaps it stands for Gandhi's phrase: “A

coward is incapable of exhibiting love, it is the prerogative of the brave." Or perhaps the element silicon.) "CV" stands for "Confederate Veteran," a reference to a fraternal society with an obvious white supremacist position, barely disguised as antebellum nostalgia. More commonly, of course, it means *curriculum vitae*, and until last July it was also CaribeVision Television. "88" is supposed to mean "Heil Hitler", 8 being equivalent to H. It is also the old telegraph code for "Love and Kisses," the orbit of the planet Mercury, the element Radium, and in some versions of numerology it represents the infinite. In most fonts, it's also the only two-digit number that is symmetric in both axes.

So now we are very well informed about this codon, 14CV88.

After pressure from the faceless hordes of the internet, the license plate 14CV88 was revoked. And perhaps this struck some kind of incremental blow against racism, in the sense that the tiny handful of people who directly recognized what it was intended to mean will no longer feel intimidated / empowered by seeing it on the highway. But. Surely this effort was somewhat attenuated by the fact that the truck in question still boasted a huge-ass confederate flag, and another smaller one on the license plate, since the Sons of Confederate Veterans are in fact an entity recognized by the DMV, with their own license plate emblems. Again, the tailgate was painted with a gigantic painting of the twin towers collapsing, emblazoned with the phrase "EVERYTHING I EVER NEEDED TO KNOW ABOUT ISLAM I LEARNED ON 9/11".

Given these rather explicit (and in one case state-sanctioned) displays of intolerance, it begs discussion that popular culture focused its resentment, and eventual writ-of-attainder policy directives, on the nonsense phrase "14CV88". The immediate emotional rationale is clear enough from schoolyard politics. Few things are as aggravating as being mocked in code. Punching a kid in the face or calling them a "jerk" is crude and direct; it lacks the finesse of conspiracy. How much more insidious to call a little girl a "lesbo" with the assurance that she will know she's being insulted, but she won't understand exactly how or why until later. In reverse, the paranoia about being mocked in code has given rise to a tedious parade of conservative bloggers freaking out about Obama supposedly throwing up gang signs during speeches, the Islamic screed on his wedding ring, and so forth.

Lee Atwater, speaking on behalf of Satan, explained the extension of this technique to politics in his charming interview with Alexander Lamis:

You start out in 1954 by saying, "Nigger, nigger, nigger." By 1968 you can't say "nigger" — that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states' rights and all that stuff. You're getting so abstract now you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is blacks get hurt worse than whites.

Atwater seems to have believed that this was essentially a positive shift in focus, and perhaps it is. At the same time, the obvious use of what would later be called "dog whistles" evokes that same schoolyard frustration: all our attention gets focused on the coded license plate, the blurry syllable in a speech, the "[unintelligible]". And it is turned away from the larger evidence of the gestalt.

Innerer Schweinehund

There is a deeper implication of our obsession with these phrases and syllables. It betrays a very common attitude among American whites: that racism essentially exists as a hidden character flaw within one's soul, and can only be truly revealed through a confession,

most damningly some sort of Freudian slip. More specifically, the target of the accusation of racism can look into his or her soul and state that they are not, in Eichmann's words, an "*innerer Schweinehund*", no matter how bad their actions look. As George W. Bush (accidentally echoing Eichmann) replied to Kanye West's accusations after Katrina: "Nobody wants to be called a racist if in your heart you believe in equality of races." Whether it is Eichmann or Bush, the point here is that racism (or the lack of it) can only be truly known through self-disclosure, and no one else is qualified to gainsay that claim.

This notion spans the political spectrum. On the right, we have someone like Paula Smith, selling anti-Obama stickers that say "don't re-nig in 2012", and assuring the press that this is not racist, because she says it isn't. Again, the wonderful Tumblr *yoisthisracist* has flushed out an endless number of people who want to wear blackface(?) or commit various other grotesque cultural offenses, but "not in a racist way." On the left, we have the obsession with whether or not Santorum was going to say "nigger", or the numerous media outlets and blogs who suggested that Zimmerman's guilt hinges on whether or not he used a racial slur.

Again on the left we have a similar but perhaps more subtle set of assumptions, which have mainly taken root among the progressive wing of dominant identity groups. There we find the outrage over 14CV88 and the like. And the implication of that outrage is that it is not enough to observe that someone's policies or opinions tend towards "blacks get hurt worse than whites". You must actually catch them, trip them up into revealing the *innerer schweinehund*. And this bias takes several rather pernicious discursive forms, of which I'll mention two: hate crimes and privilege.

Hate Crimes

The literature on hate crimes legislation contains two rather distinct arguments.

The first is that hate crimes are acts of terrorism aimed at a group as a whole, and ought to be prosecuted as such, even if (especially if) their immediate effect is minimal. To use a classic example, spray-painting a swastika on a Jewish-owned shop's door is at some technical level mere vandalism, but its social significance is considerably larger than any normal act of vandalism, and the law must respond accordingly, or else the law is mocked. Plausibly, it was this line of reasoning that led to the advent of most hate-crime laws, in the wake of Nazism in Europe and white supremacy in the US.

The second possibility is that hate crimes are inherently horrific at a personal level, because they have an exceptional ability to dehumanize their victims, and thus they ought to be punished more sternly, just as we punish rape more sternly than mere battery. Implicitly, this argument would still hold even if the criminal act in question was not calculated to telegraph its message to a wider audience.

In the aftermath of the Tulsa shootings this April, we had a striking example of the tension between these two logics. Two white men had driven through the city shooting black people at random, killing three and wounding two others, and creating a 48-hour-long environment of terror. Nor could anyone be faulted for interpreting the shootings as racialized: the odds of all five victims in Tulsa being black "just by chance" is a little south of ten thousand to one. Yet in the immediate aftermath of England and Watt's arrest, the major news outlets were all devoted to debating whether or not it was a hate crime. Chuck Jordan, the chief of police, said:

"You could look at the facts of the case and certainly come up with what would appear to be a logical theory [of it being a hate crime]. But we're gonna let the evidence take us where we want to go. There are motivations other than race in these kinds of incidents, and we're

gonna look at it.”

The chief piece of evidence, which the media focused on rather obsessively, was England's use of the word “nigger” in a Facebook status. This is an extraordinary sort of logic: by those lights, the major evidence for Hitler's anti-Semitism is *Mein Kampf*, not Auschwitz. Once again, we are looking at a truck covered with wall-to-wall white supremacy, and worrying about what “14CV88” *really* means.

Privilege Discourses

When Peggy McIntosh wrote *Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, back in 1990, she probably did not anticipate that she was creating what is now a burgeoning political genre: the “_____ privilege” checklist. In McIntosh's ur-checklist, 32 of the 50 items dealt with structural, external, inequalities ranging from employment and housing to such minutiae as band-aid color. The other 18 addressed internal/subjective states: either the emotional reality of the subject of the checklist, or the emotions of those around them. Without denigrating the importance of emotions or subjective experience, we can observe that later privilege checklists have gradually come to be dominated by these *inerrant* criteria. For instance, in Shiri Eisner's [checklist for monosexual privilege](#), almost every item is defined in term of subjective experience.

This subjective focus offers new possibilities for those who feel embarrassed by white privilege. As a white man, there is little I can easily do to change, say, housing inequality. Certainly there is nothing much I can do about it in the privacy of my own home (which I “happen to” own free and clear). But I *can* be more aware of the representation of race in advertising. If my lack of awareness in that regard is a defining element of my white privilege, it is fascinating to discover that I can divest myself of that privilege while drinking beer and watching television. All social change should be so easy.

At the same time, conversations among whites about racism have—at least in my experience—become focused almost to exclusion on the refrain that we must “acknowledge our privilege”. This is not bad advice, but it is worth contrasting it with the focus of progressive white folks of earlier eras, for whom the comparable refrain might have been “we must occupy the president's office and force the college to divest from South Africa” or “we must car pool to the deep South to join sit-ins and get beaten up by rednecks” or “we must shelter escaped slaves in our households.” There is absolutely no question that many of the people who signed up for those activities were *not* able to acknowledge their privilege in any way that was particularly self-aware, with resulting tensions in each case, in each generation. And yet perhaps the underground railroad or the civil rights sit-ins or even the kids dying in the mud at Gettysburg were in some sense more consequential than a white investment banker in 2012 tweeting that *Django Unchained* is “problematic”.

The upshot of these two trends is that white conversations about racism tend to open with the gambit that we must all acknowledge white privilege, which is loosely but increasingly equated with thinking racist thoughts. Some guy named Buddy is inevitably stupid enough to reject this assertion, and the entire focus of the conversation then becomes Buddy's mind, or even Buddy's subconscious, either of which Buddy can rightly claim to be the authoritative voice on. Since there is *always* a Buddy, it is hard to know whether or not these conversations were all in fact derailed just before they would have moved to on phase two: “now that we have all acknowledged our white privilege, let's discuss congressional redistricting and critical solidarity with political movements in the developing world.” I tend to doubt it, though, when the possibility to drink beer and watch television in a more self-

aware way is presented as being equally compelling. Indeed, it may be *more* compelling. There are a handful of white men I've known who really put their life's blood on the line towards resolving structural racial inequalities, year after year. None of them would have gotten past round one in our latter-day encounter-group-sessions, because all those guys were racist as fuck in terms of their own opinions, assumptions, and phrasings.

Put even more generally, this inward focus means that questions of prejudice can only be resolved—indeed, can only really be *discussed*—when people specifically admit to being prejudiced. In other words, racism can only be addressed at the leisure of self-identified racists, and to a degree of their choosing.

Conclusion

Americans have always been bad at institutional analysis. Our mythology of independence and personal liberty, glorious and visionary as it is, provides a sort of smokescreen for willful ignorance about the power of systems holistically. We reduce all social trends to atomized individual choices, and treat those in moral terms. For instance, we now have roughly a million black Americans in prison—about 1 in 23 black men, compared to about 1 in 150 white men. It is unusual to see this six-to-one discrepancy discussed in the media at all, but when it is discussed, it is generally described as a lamentable product of the criminal urges of those one million black people. Alternatively, it might be described as a result of the racist attitudes of millions of white people throughout the criminal justice system. What we have a very hard time with is the idea that such a pattern of systemic inequality is both undesirable and remediable, regardless of the hidden moral scorecards within the souls of the people involved.

This mode of analysis is occasionally dropped for pragmatic reasons. (Witness, for instance, the right-wing treatment of secularism and queerness as artificial social trends that cannot possibly be reduced to the level of individual choices or prerogatives.) Nevertheless, it is quite generally prevalent, and it has little to do with political affiliation. For instance, in the wake of Santorum's attack on the welfare benefits given to “blah people”, left-wing news outlets fell over themselves to point out that in Iowa, the majority of welfare recipients are white, not blah. This smug response incorporated a whole stack of basic statistical errors, all of which shifted the discussion away from the level of institutional analysis (Who actually receives welfare benefits? Who ought to receive them? To what end? Are they working?) to some sort of personalized competition (You said team X sucks but nu-uh actually team Y sucks. Go team X!). That this should happen at the level of individual responses to a provocation is entirely understandable. But for journalists to fail on such a simple front as absolute-numbers vs. percentages is worrisome and revealing.

Atwater's interview with Lamis occurred over thirty years ago. Back then, under the betrayed cover of anonymity, he could say: “*you're talking about...totally economic things and a byproduct of them is blacks get hurt worse than whites.*” It is telling that after three decades, such a direct concept of institutional racism has become almost inexpressible in our political dialogue.