Remarks for a Panel on Flannery O'Connor and Race

These remarks were delivered at a panel on "Flannery O'Connor and Race" at the June 2021 "Flannery O'Connor and Families" Conference in Savannah, Georgia. The panel had been sparked by the appearance of *Radical Ambivalence: Race in Flannery O'Connor* by Angela Alaimo O'Donnel and the *New Yorker* essay by Paul Elie it sparked, "How Racist was Flannery O'Connor?"

While preparing the remarks I am about to present to you I kept imagining myself in the shoes of the attorney preparing to argue *Cohen v. California* before the Supreme Courts.[*] I say that both to warn you that I will be uttering words that may be offensive and to make sure you're googling your Supreme Court transcripts while I do it.

1. I am afraid that a movement has a good deal of power in America universities may make reading and discussing O'Connor's works in the classroom impossible. That movement will not allow the very mention of the language used by her characters. At many universities—not just those that have been covered the papers—uttering sounds even vaguely similar to the word "nigger" will get a professor suspended. If we cannot read O'Connor's work aloud without "bleeping" parts of her characters' speech and if we cannot discuss and repeat the locutions she has her characters use, we can hardly discuss her work at all.

It seems that both teachers and students need to be reminded of the difference between "using" a word and "mentioning" a word. I would never *use* foul language of any sort in class—or anywhere else, but that's just me. I will, though, not be squeamish about reading Philip Larkin's "This Be the Verse"—"They fuck you up, your mum and dad." In the same way, I will read the word "nigger" in teaching Twain or O'Connor or Ellison and *mention* the word in the discussion. (Why does the note Ellison's hero carries say, "Keep this nigger boy running," not "keep this boy running"?) It has become commonplace to say that teachers should avoid anything that might make the student feel uncomfortable. I don't think that is a reasonable rule. If taken seriously, it would forbid not just the mention of certain words, but of whole topics. (I

have had white students complain that the discussion of race made them uncomfortable: should their squeamishness forbid the discussion of racism?) If approaching the texts frankly causes discomfort in the classroom, build on it. I have corrected students who have called Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* "the nigger" in class discussion, going on to say that while we can *mention* that word in class, we will not *use* it. We will call the character Jim.

I think we also need to combat the idea that any word is un-sayable. The evil is not in the sound: it is in the intention or negligence of the person who utters it. And if there is evil in the intention or negligence, we cannot fight it by treating it as something too powerful to even discuss. The "n-word" is not Lord Voldemort and we should not be, like be the craven characters in a children's book, afraid to mention The-Word-that-Must-Not-Be-Said. Let's at least be Dumbledore and mention the word that seems so powerful.

2. Much of the case for O'Connor's racism is based on her private letters, not on the works she prepared for publication. I am not saying authors should get a complete pass for what they say in private, but I would argue that we must consider how private conversation works. One goal of a private talk or a private letter is to establish intimacy. There are various ways of doing that. But one of the most common in 20th-century and contemporary speech is to be transgressive, often in play. You show your intimacy with your friend by using the very language that you do *not* use in public. You strike outrageous poses, not because they reveal the "real" you, but because your friend will know that they are not. The transgressive language that serves as an intimacy-marker is often obscene or scatological, but it can be racist just as easily—and as the obscene or scatological become commonplace, the racist or sexist becomes a better marker, because it is more transgressive. To see how this works, one need only read the letters between Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis or listen to a group of young black men happily calling their

intimates “nigger.”

Let me add again that I object to the *use* of foul language, though I am not afraid to *mention* it. I object to it because is resent the forced intimacy. I don’t want to be made to hear the words “fuck” or “shit”, just as I wouldn’t have wanted to be one of the aides Lyndon Johnson made watch him use the toilet or one of the employees that Louis C.K. made watch him masturbate. Don’t force what is essentially private on me, especially if you are in a position of power over me. To move back from the profoundly creepy to the pedagogical, I think that it is wrong for any teacher, not just strait-laced ones like me, to *use* foul language of any kind in the classroom. That forced intimacy is a crossing of boundaries that every teacher should avoid.

To return to O’Connor’s private letters, there are also things that we can say in private conversation that we might say only with a lot of hedging and qualification in public. What do you say about your students in the faculty lounge or over lunch with a single colleague? Would you repeat it all in print? Are there even things that you have put as delicately as possible in private that you wouldn’t want to see blasted across the Internet? I think of the case of the two Georgetown Law adjunct faculty who lost their jobs after admitting on a Zoom session that was recorded and made public that many of their weaker students are Black. Have none of you made the same statement, not out of racism, but to acknowledge a problem and speculate on how to fix it? Having taught for many years at a university that draws students from East St. Louis, I will admit that I have. I hope hearing that you will not simply tune me out, but instead charitably consider the possibility that I said that, not out of racism, but because I wondered what we could do to help students coming from a racially isolated community that was also afflicted by extreme poverty and a culture that gave little support to educational aspirations.

I also hope that we can read even O’Connor’s most extreme statements with charity. I

think that is more productive than simply joining in the game of Racial Gotcha! that has become so popular. (It strikes me as a racialized revival of the Another One to Cross Off Your List game disciples of F.R. Leavis played.) Let's look at one of the hitherto unpublished passages from a letter to Maryat Lee quoted in O'Donnell's *Racial Ambivalence*:

> You know, I'm an integrationist by principle and a segregationist by taste, anyway. I don't *like* negroes. They all give me a pain & the more of them I see, the less and less I like them. Particularly the new kind. (qtd. In O'Donnell 19; italics O'Connor's.)

Yes, there is enough here to convict, if we set ourselves up as a court. But it might be more useful to ask *why* O'Connor would say such a thing. Yes, she should have liked Negroes, we all should like African Americans. But which African Americans was she supposed to like? The wary, covertly hostile ones? The deferential ones? The ones on the news reminding her how wicked the society she lives in was? Was there a black person in Milledgeville whom she might have gotten to know and *like* as a social equal? Can someone who has never experienced integration develop a real *taste* for? And who are the "new kind" of Negroes? Is she talking about what we might now call traditional Civil Rights leaders or about the separatist, violent leaders who appeared in the later 60's? To judge fairly, you would have look at what was in the news the week O'Connor wrote that letter.

3. My third point is that there is a political animus behind recent attacks on writers like O'Connor. It seems to me to be part of an effort to remove any conventionally religious authors from our public discussion, just as conventionally religious people are airbrushed out of our television programs. I could present this idea in the form of a question. Why does the *New Yorker* ask "How Racist Was Flannery O'Connor?" while it does *not* ask, say, "How Much of a Pedophile Was Oscar Wilde"? (Lord Alfred Douglas was underage when his relationship with Wilde began, and they frequented brothels staffed by "boys.") You could ask the same question about Auden and Isherwood and many other authors from ancient times forward. Is the sexual

exploitation of minors less heinous than racism? Is it somehow less relevant to an author's work than racism is?

4. But that question leads to the final point: does the life of the artist that is not present in the artwork undermine the value of the work? I would say that a literary critic may judge (to use Iser's term) the *implied author*, but that judging the real author is work for the pharisee and the literary gossip. I share O'Connor's answer, which she takes from scholasticism. Art does not require "rectitude of the appetite." Bad people can make good art. And that is because the artist's focus, in so far as he is an artist, is "on the good of the thing made." The thing made, not the maker, is the object of critical judgement.

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[*]One of my brother's law professors was the appellant's lawyer when *Cohen v. California* when argued before the Supreme Court . . . .

From Wikipedia:

At the beginning of oral argument, Chief Justice Warren Burger advised [appellant's counsel Melville] Nimmer that it would not be necessary to "dwell on the facts," effectively stating that Nimmer should not state the word on the jacket.[15] Seconds later, Nimmer did exactly that, stating that "What this young man did was to walk through a courthouse corridor wearing a jacket on which were inscribed the words, 'Fuck the Draft.'"[16] Nimmer believed that if he did not say the word, it would concede that there are some places that certain words cannot be uttered and the case would be lost.[17]

[15] *Oral argument*, Cohen v. California, Oyez (last visited Aug 3, 2019) (hereinafter cited as "Oral argument"); Thomas G. Krattenmaker, "Looking Back at *Cohen v. California*: A 40 Year Retrospective from Inside the Court, 20 *William & Mary Bill of Rights Journal* 654–55 (2012).

[16] Oral argument; Bob Woodward and Scott Armstrong, *The Brethren: Inside the Supreme Court* 153 (2011).

[17] Woodward, *The Brethren* 153.