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Outrages from All Over: A Semi-Annual Compendium

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Offenses of the Month, February to July

February

If You Can't Say Something that Cannot Possibly Be Misinterpreted, Don't

The story is as short as it is brutal. On a Monday in late February, Dr. Jeffrey Lieberman, chairman of Columbia University's Department of Psychiatry, happened on a tweet depicting an American model of South Sudanese descent, Nyakim Gatwech. The tweet erroneously claimed that Ms. Gatwech was listed in the Guinness Book of Records as having the "darkest skin ever seen on earth." (Guinness has never assessed skin tones.) Ms. Gatwech has a considerable following, especially on Instagram, where she

is known as the Queen of Dark. The tweeter trumpeted her not as “a work of art made of black stone or granite” but as “the most beautiful among the black beauties.”

For reasons as yet unexplained, Dr. Lieberman (no relation to me), who is “considered one of the leading psychiatrists in the nation,” according to *The New York Times* account, decided to respond. He tweeted out this line: “Whether a work of art or a freak of nature she’s a beautiful sight to behold.”

The next day Dr. Lieberman furiously backpedaled. Emailing his Columbia colleagues, he apologized for his tweet, which he called “racist and sexist,” and confessed to being “deeply ashamed” of his “prejudices and stereotypical assumptions.” His email struck the usual chords: “An apology from me to the Black community, to women, and to all of you is not enough. I’ve hurt many, and I am beginning to understand the work ahead to make needed personal changes and over time to regain your trust.”

That evening, he stepped down as executive director of the New York State Psychiatric Institute. The following day his Twitter account vanished. That same afternoon he was fired from his position as psychiatrist-in-chief at Columbia’s Irving Medical Center/ New York-Presbyterian Hospital. For good measure, he was then suspended from his departmental chairmanship. The critics piled on. The head of the university hospital called the offending tweet “outrageous,” according to the *Times*. Others decried the depth and pervasiveness of “our own unconscious biases.” A Twitter thread condemned the “harmful” racist language and said Dr. Lieberman had revealed himself to be “unqualified to be a psychiatrist at all.”

As so often happens, the outcry revolved around the difficulties of language. “Freak of nature” sounds bad, doesn’t it? Free advice for prudent tweeters, good for later situations: avoid the phrase. Partly it’s the word “freak,” which in one of its uses refers to a person obsessed with or enthusiastic about something — a “control freak,” a “movie freak.” Partly it’s the phrase in its entirety, connoting something out of the ordinary, “abnormal.” The problem is that the phrase is judgmentally ambiguous. It might be disparaging, but frequently it’s used in exactly the opposite way. Celebrated athletes often bear the label, with no comment and no heat from readers of the sports pages—for instance, Dustin Johnson, the American professional golfer, and LeBron James, the basketball great, have been called freaks of nature without anyone supposing the writer meant to insult or demean them. Still, in this new age of No Second Chances, despite decades of dedicated service and anguished apologies, a three-second turn down the wrong linguistic path (how much better to have said “force of nature”) may have ended another career. Beware the Temptations of Tweeting. Someone is bound to be more tone deaf than you.

March

Dear Mr. Putin: We’re Canceling Karl Marx
Were you offended at Czar Putin’s invasion of Ukraine? Want to do something about it? Here’s a suggestion from the University of Florida: rename a library study room. The Karl Marx Group Study Room, one of many study rooms in the university’s George A. Smathers Libraries, was stripped of its nameplate after the Russian invasion. According to Hessa Fernandez, university director of strategic communications, “Given current events in Ukraine and elsewhere in the world, we determined it was appropriate to remove the name of Karl Marx that was placed on a group

study room at the University of Florida in 2014.” That may not be the sole explanation for the name’s removal. Campus Reform, a conservative online website, ran a story misleadingly headlined “University of Florida names study room after Karl Marx,” when in fact the name had been in use for eight years; evidently this rediscovered medallion rattled some students. The names of other historical figures in literature, science, philosophy, and politics remain on study room plaques, including Benjamin Franklin, Frederick Douglas, Martin Luther King Jr., Jane Austen, William Shakespeare, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Mahatma Gandhi, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Abraham H. Maslow, Albert Camus, Michel Foucault, and Margaret Mead. Oh, and the new name of the former Karl Marx room: Group Study Room 229. Bravely done!

April

Twitter Dustup: Marjorie Taylor Greene Is Affronted

A mild Twitter storm in early April. Jimmy Kimmel told his late-night audience that Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.) had called out three of her fellow Republicans as “pedophiles” for voting to confirm Katanji Brown Jackson to the Supreme Court. Kimmel joked, “Where is Will Smith when you need him?” A day later Greene tweeted that she had reported “this threat of violence against me” to the Capitol police. Kimmel countered that he then tweeted back to the police: “Officer, I’d like to report a joke.” Her dander up, Greene persisted, tweeting anew that “you weren’t joking. You hide your misogyny and your racism behind your ‘jokes’ on @ABC. This was a dog whistle to the violent left to assault me or worse.” This from a candidate who, before being elected in 2020, had endorsed calls to execute Democratic politicians. Kimmel delivered the final round of

the dustup, calling Greene a “snociopath,” because “she’s a snowflake and a sociopath at the same time.” He announced he’d be turning her in to Batman. Proving that the answer to bad speech is more speech.

May

The Apologetics of Murk

It’s commencement season, and with it the annual pollution of graduation talks. The spotlight here is on U.S. Senator Cynthia Lummis (R-Wyo.), who told University of Wyoming graduates and their families in Laramie that constitutional rights are under attack and that “even fundamental scientific truths such as the existence of two sexes, male and female, are subject to challenge these days.” For these remarks she was roundly booed. Two days later she offered this apology for her comments: “I share the fundamental belief that women and men are equal, but also acknowledge that there are biological differences and circumstances in which these differences need to be recognized. That being said, it was never my intention to make anyone feel un-welcomed or disrespected, and for that I apologize.” Translated, the statement amounts to this: “I stand by the substance of my remarks. I apologize if I was inept in making you think I intended to disrespect you by forcefully stating my views.” Or, in pithier form: “Go to hell. No disrespect.”

The day after commencement, Ed Seidel, the university president, posted a statement, saying in part: “One of our speakers made remarks regarding biological sex that many on campus take issue with. While we respect the right of all to express their views, from students to elected officials, we unequivocally state that UW is an institution that supports and celebrates its diverse communities that collectively make us the wonderful place that

we are.” If you’ll allow me the usual poetic license, his statement amounts to this: “As long as no disrespect is intended, we support and celebrate our diversity by allowing a speaker to tell any particular group to go to hell.”

A glorious resolution of an otherwise murky springtime academic controversy.

June

Smoke Marijuana All You Want, Just Don’t Use the Word

Washington State legislators may no longer use the word “marijuana.” A bill signed by Governor Jay Inslee in March took effect in June, deleting the word “marijuana” from all state laws. Henceforth, the proper substitute term is “cannabis,” the scientific name for pot and the word most commonly used to refer to it until “marijuana” came into use in the 20th century. Melanie Morgan, a state representative, said the word marijuana is “pejorative and racist” and is “negatively associated with Mexican immigrants.” The story of cannabis’s linguistic transformations is too tangled for this brief column, but it’s worth noting that over the years the drug has been honored with many names, including reefer, pot, weed, hashish, dope, and ganja. The story of its criminalization is well known, as is the effect of the selective enforcement of drug laws, but I remain unlearned in the mystery of how a less offensive name will affect the legal status of the drug or its rate of use and distribution. Recreational use of cannabis in the Evergreen State has been lawful for the past ten years.

July

See You Next Tuesday? Not If the Judge Can Help It

Here’s one for the dwindling band of language reformers who still think the thing to do is enact a list of hateful words and offensive phrases

that people ought to be called to account for using. Timothy A. Scott, a personal injury lawyer in San Diego, filed suit against the local Metropolitan Transit System. At a hearing, San Diego County Superior Court Judge Eddie C. Sturgeon granted a defense motion to dismiss the case. Scott then wished court staff and the attorneys “a good weekend.” Turning to his adversaries, counsel for the transit system Traci Lagasse and Kimberly Oberrecht, he added, “See you next Tuesday.” Judge Sturgeon commented: “How kind.” Not quite. Lagasse approached Judge Sturgeon shortly thereafter to teach His Honor a bit of urban slang. What Lagasse revealed to the unsuspecting jurist is a phrase apparently far more well-known to female lawyers than male judges (or me, until I read about the case this week). In its offensive form, the statement is spelled “C U Next Tuesday,” an indirect way of voicing the “C-word.” At a conference in chambers the following week, Scott admitted that his was no inadvertent blunder. He well knew the meaning of the phrase, calling it an “inside joke.” Judge Sturgeon was unamused. “It is not a joke to this Court that Mr. Scott made this egregious and offensive insult intentionally to two female attorneys via a coded message.” Scott’s apology resorted to the time-worn paradox: “This was not consistent with my values.” He did graciously forswear offering any excuses. The judge announced he’d be referring the matter to the disciplinary arm of the California State Bar. Perhaps the disciplinarians will also consider the age at which the maker of a Forbidden Words List should be disqualified.