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## When is a slur not a slur? The use of nigger in 'Pulp Fiction'

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## ABSTRACT

Slurs are defined and shown to be determined by context of use and not lexical form. It has been proposed that words like *nigger* should be eradicated from the English language on the presupposition that the word itself is a slur and its eradication will eliminate the slur against African-Americans. This presumption is demonstrably false and in any case eradication of slurs is shown to be an unrealistic goal. In order to understand why *nigger* counts as a slur, the dysphemistic properties attributed to the word and its typical referents are described. Communities which are the target of a slurring term sometimes adopt that term as a mark of in-group solidarity and camaraderie; this has happened with *nigger*. It is against this background that I scrutinize the function of each occurrence of the word *nigger* within the film script of Quentin Tarantino's 'Pulp Fiction'. I closely examine the style of language used within the film script, taking account of other potential slurs, obscenities, and instances of banter and repartee in order to judge if Tarantino uses *nigger* as a reasonable instrument within the development of a character and/or to make a dramatic point or, instead, whether the word occurs gratuitously in order to shock or cause offense. I conclude that in 'Pulp Fiction' most occurrences of *nigger* are uttered by one African-American to or about another in the spirit of camaraderie (what Australians would call 'mateship'). Where it is uttered by a white to a black friend it is also of this nature. The two instances where *nigger* is used by one white to another do show disrespect towards African-Americans but not malice, and they serve to make a dramatic point.

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## 1. Prologue

I know that some people will be offended by the salient word in the title of this essay: if you are one of those affronted, I apologize for that fact. The history of racism, lynchings and less extreme mistreatments catalogued in *The N Word: Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn't, and Why* (Asim, 2007) – and in many other places of course – affords an explanation for your dismay, even disgust, but I ask you to put this aside to consider the arguments presented in this essay that seek to justify the occurrences of the word *nigger* in Quentin Tarantino's film 'Pulp Fiction'.

## 2. What is a slur?

For my purpose here, a slur is an expression of disparagement that discredits, slights, smears, stains, besmirches or sullies what it is applied to (cf. the *Oxford English Dictionary*). A slur is not simply the lexical form (or forms) in a language expression but the perlocutionary effect of that language expression, an effect which can only be determined from the context of

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utterance – i.e. its co-text and the situations of its utterance and of its reception (cf. Austin, 1962; Bach and Harnish, 1979; Allan, 1994). Typically a slur is deliberate: a deliberate slur results from the perlocutionary intention of the speaker/writer, i.e. the intention to bring about a particular perlocutionary effect on the hearer/reader by saying what is said.<sup>1</sup> Accidental, unintended slurs occur, and often these are hardly less offensive than an intended slur (Anderson and Lepore, 2013; Kennedy, 2003). Broadly speaking, slurs are tabooed, i.e. they are proscribed behaviour for a specifiable community of one or more persons at a specifiable time in specifiable contexts (Allan and Burridge, 2006: 11).

There are people who would like to erase obscene terms like *shit*, *cunt* and *fuck* and slurs like *idiot*, *bitch* and *nigger* from the English language. A reflective person will recognize that eradication is a wish impossible to grant: for a start, when these words were coined they were not taboo. Such words exist in the English lexicon: if you don't want to use them, don't. If you don't want to hear or read them, avoid likely sources where you might do so. But these potential dysphemisms will be used from time to time. Censoring<sup>2</sup> the use of such terms will have minimal effect (for detailed substantiation of this claim see Allan and Burridge (2006): 12–28). As African-American law professor Randall Kennedy recognizes (in *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, Kennedy, 2003) and also writer Jabari Asim (in Asim (2007)) *nigger* cannot be eradicated from the English language. The eradicationist presupposes that the word *nigger* is itself a slur and its eradication will eliminate the slur against African-Americans. Black commentator Ta-Nehisi Coates recognizes the problem with this in a *New York Times* article 'In defense of a loaded word' (November 23, 2013):

But “nigger” endures – in our most popular music, in our most provocative films and on the lips of more black people (like me) than would like to admit it. Black critics, not unjustly, note the specific trauma that accompanies the word. For some the mere mention of “nigger” conjures up memories of lynchings and bombings. But there's more here – a deep fear of what our use of the word “nigger” communicates to white people. “If you call yourself the n-word,” said the Rev. Al Sharpton, “you can't get mad when someone treats you like that.”

This is the politics of respectability – an attempt to raise black people to a superhuman standard. In this case it means exempting black people from a basic rule of communication – that words take on meaning from context and relationship. (Coates, 2013)

Coates is right about the crucial significance of context and relationship. In fact it is the way that certain people use the N word in a given context that actually discredits, slights, smears, stains, besmirches or sullies the referent. It is people's behaviour that is truly significant and not the language expression itself. Thus, to quote black<sup>3</sup> comedian Dave Chappelle: “If people stop saying the N-word, is everything going to be equal? Is a rainbow going to come out of the sky, and all of a sudden things will be better for black people?” (Ogunnaike, 2004). Of course not.<sup>4</sup>

Something to bear in mind is that what counts as ‘taboo’ changes over time. So far as English goes, until the nineteenth century (or even later) religious taboos were the most offensive kind and sometimes punishable by law; there is a hangover from this in euphemised expletives like *gee*, *golly*, *jeepers*, *tarnation*. Since the early modern period, certain words evoking sex, urination, and defecation were condemned in polite society giving rise to euphemisms such as *fiddlededee*, *shucks*, *pee*, *poo*. By the late twentieth century, taboo terms like *shit*, *cunt* and *fuck* had come to be quite commonplace in radio, film and television soaps and dramas and occasionally in broadcast live interviews; this is concomitant with the taboos on their use being lessened and a greater taboo being placed on slurring the physical and mental person, which has led to the creation of so-called ‘politically correct’ euphemisms such as *mentally challenged*, *heavily built*, and *the N word*.

### 3. The N word

Until the late eighteenth century *nig(g)er* was synonymous with *Negro* (see *exx* in the *OED*); thereafter and until the second half of the twentieth century the term *nigger* was essentially a colloquial synonym for *Negro*. Because it was colloquial it was more appropriate for use as a racial slur than was *Negro* – though use of the latter was no guarantee against racism. Although Charles Darwin (1809–1892) was not spitefully racist he was reflecting the racial stereotyping of his era when he wrote of the cultural superiority of Caucasians and the evolutionary proximity of Negroes and Australian aborigines to gorillas.

At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world. At the same time the anthropomorphous apes [...] will no doubt be exterminated. The break between man and his nearest allies will then be wider, for it will intervene between man in a more civilised state, as we may hope, even than the Caucasian, and some ape as low as a baboon, instead of as now between the negro or Australian and the gorilla. (Darwin, 1871: 201)

<sup>1</sup> The term ‘perlocutionary intention’ is shorthand for an illocutionary intention to have the hearer/reader recognize the illocutionary point of the utterance (the message) in order to achieve a certain perlocutionary (cognitive/behavioural) effect.

<sup>2</sup> The censoring of language is the proscription of language expressions that are taboo for the censor at a given time in contexts which are specified or specifiable because those proscribed language expressions are condemned for being subversive of the good of some specified, specifiable or contextually identifiable community – irrespective of whether the censor has any institutional status (Allan and Burridge, 2006: 27).

<sup>3</sup> There is a case for all of Black, White, and Nigger to be awarded an initial capital letter (like *Negro*). However, I follow Asim and Kennedy among many others in not taking this option except in direct quotations.

<sup>4</sup> See also John McWhorter (2002, 2010).

Abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896) almost certainly shared a similar view as is seen from her depiction of African-Americans in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Stowe 1852).

Asim (2007) criticizes dysphemistic uses of *nigger* by authors such as James Fennimore Cooper (1789–1851), John Pendleton Kennedy (1795–1870), Joel Chandler Harris (1845–1908), and Margaret Munnerlyn Mitchell (1900–1949) but forgives its use in the work of Samuel Langhorne Clemens aka Mark Twain (1835–1910). In Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: (Tom Sawyer's comrade): Scene, the Mississippi Valley: Time, forty to fifty years ago* (Twain, 1884) use of terms like *Injun* and *nigger* are unequivocally suited to the context of the book. In 1885 *Huckleberry Finn* was not deprecated for the use of racial slurs but because the humour is "of a very coarse type". The work was regarded as "the veriest trash [...] rough, coarse, and inelegant, dealing with a series of experiences not elevating, the whole book being more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people" (*Boston Evening Transcript* March 17, 1885, p.6). It was castigated for being "couched in the language of a rough, ignorant dialect" and "all through its pages there is a systematic use of bad grammar and an employment of inelegant expressions" (*The New York Herald*, March 18, 1885, p.6). For instance, Twain revised the opening line from

You will not know about me.

to

You don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer"; but that ain't no matter.

To get additional flavour of the colloquial style of *Huckleberry Finn*, the opening text continues:

That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied, one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary. (Twain, 1884: 2)

The compound noun *African-American* did not exist in the 1880s and, given the style of language being used, there can be no doubt that *nigger* was an appropriate term to use in the context of the book. By all accounts, Samuel Clemens had African-American friends and thought highly of them (Fishkin, 1993); he was no racist (cf. Kennedy, 2003: 109f, Asim, 2007: 107; McWhorter, 2011). Although some of the characters in *Huckleberry Finn* are racist, so was much of white America, and for them (as for too many people today) *nigger* is an expression of disparagement that discredits, slights, smears, stains, and besmirches African-Americans. But whereas some of the characters created by author Mark Twain employed *nigger* as a slur, his alter ego Samuel Clemens deplored such practice.

In the early twentieth century there were products such as Nigger Brown Boot Polish and Nigger-Hair Tobacco where the primary purpose of the word *nigger* was descriptive rather than racist. Within the expression of the dominant social attitudes there was no more sensitivity to the feelings of minorities than there had been in Darwin's time. In the 1920s Edwin S. Brown (1898–1974), a white Australian rugby player was nicknamed 'Nigger Brown' because of his fair skin (it's Australian humour: red-haired people are nicknamed 'Blue', short people 'Lofty'); in the 1960s a grandstand in his town Toowoomba was named 'The ES Nigger Brown Stand'. When used of Brown and the stand named for him the word "Nigger" was not intended as a racial slur; it is unlikely that anyone involved even considered it possible that the term could be offensive. Nonetheless, people gradually came to see each of these occurrences of *nigger* as racial slurs, albeit unintended. Attitudes have changed, and for several decades *nigger* has been widely condemned as a racial slur (though condemnation by certain individuals was registered much further back in time). There are consequences of this revised outlook: after a long campaign against its name, the grandstand named for sportsman Brown was demolished in 2008; more controversially, the text of *Huckleberry Finn* has been bowdlerised, for instance, with *slave* substituted for *nigger* and *Injun* omitted (Twain, 2011a) and with *nigger* replaced by *hipster* but *Injun* retained (Twain, 2011b).<sup>5</sup>

On July 5, 2014 James Lincoln Collier, a white writing for the *WestView News* in New York City, railed against white racists who denounce US President Barack Obama on grounds not of policy but of race. The piece is confrontationally titled 'The Nigger in the White House' which has been condemned despite the content protesting that racial slur. *WestView News* printed the article (p.15), but did not post it on their website. Also, they printed below Collier's article a riposte by black writer Alvin Hall headed 'The Headline Offends Me' – which succinctly captures his point. Like many African-Americans, Hall finds the N word itself offensive because it "evokes and provokes the underlying, almost entitled bigotry that still pervades the racial attitudes of far too many Americans, both actively and passively".<sup>6</sup>

Within many minorities and oppressed groups a term of abuse used by outsiders is reclaimed to wear as a badge of honour to mark identification with and camaraderie within the in-group (what Australians call 'mateship', see Rendle-Short (2009)). To this end many African-Americans have adopted the term *nigger*, often respelled *nigga* though pronounced identically

<sup>5</sup> See McWhorter (2011). David O. Selznick removed use of *nigger* from the film 'Gone with the Wind' (1939) although it frequently occurs in Mitchell's novel (Mitchell, 1936); Joseph Conrad's *Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897) was banned from some libraries even under the title *Children of the Sea* (1898) because of the many occurrences of *nigger* in the text; a school edition of Kinnian Rawlings' *The Yearling* omitted two passages that referred to niggers; Agatha Christie's *Ten Little Niggers* was renamed *Ten Little Injuns* and later *And Then There Were None*. See Kennedy 2003: 90–91.

<sup>6</sup> Both articles can be retrieved from <http://nypost.com/2014/07/06/obama-called-the-n-word-in-west-village-newspapers-headline>.

(Allan and Burridge, 1991, 2006; Asim, 2007; Croom, 2013; Folb, 1980; Kennedy, 2000, 2003; Rahman, 2012; inter alios).<sup>7</sup> Curiously, this innocuous use is rarely addressed to females (Rahman, 2012).<sup>8</sup> The question arises as to what the term *nigger* means when used as an in-group marker. It is that the speaker identifies as a person who has attracted or might attract the slur *nigger*: in other words s/he trades on the hurtful, contemptuous connotation and subverts it (cf. Hornsby, 2001: 134). Just what this might involve I'll elucidate in the course of this essay.

The N word (a phrase that puts it on recognisability par with *the F word* and *the C word*)<sup>9</sup> has generated a vast literature over the past few years. Very balanced and comprehensive is Randall L. Kennedy's *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* (Kennedy, 2003). A somewhat more affecting yet extensive and enlightening survey is Jabari Asim's *The N Word: Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn't, and Why* (Asim, 2007).

Croom (2011, 2013) argues that the use of *nigger* both as a slur and in-group marker of camaraderie can be accommodated if the meaning is expressed as a cluster of properties applicable to the referent, not all of which need to be present in the referent on a particular occasion. The properties Croom identifies are based on what American speakers report of the meaning of *nigger* in the works cited in the quote where, of course, X is the referent.

C: N (Nigger)

P1. X is African American (Frederickson, 1971, p. 41; Asim, 2007, p. 12; Williamson, 2009)

P2. X is prone to laziness (Asim, 2007, p. 27)

P3. X is subservient (Frederickson, 1971, p. 41; Asim, 2007, p. 12)

P4. X is commonly the recipient of poor treatment (Frederickson, 1971, p. 41; Asim, 2007, p. 12)

P5. X is athletic and musical (Alim et al., 2010, p. 128)

P6. X is sexually liberal or licentious (Asim, 2007, p. 27)

P7. X is simple-minded (Asim, 2007, p. 27)

P8. X is emotionally shallow (Asim, 2007, p. 27)

P9. X is a survivor, tough, or prone to violence (Anderson, 1999, p. 50; Rahman, 2012)

P10. X is loud and excessively noisy (Anderson, 1999, p. 50) (Croom, 2013: 199)

We find in this quote a mix of semantics and pragmatics: there is far more connotation (pragmatics, cf. Allan, 2007) than denotation (semantics) – which is limited to P1. P1 is, by the way, incorrect in that *nigger* denotes anyone of black African descent, not only African-Americans.<sup>10</sup> Of the connoted properties only one, P5, is positive and all the others are derogatory or potentially so.<sup>11</sup> Asim (2007): 85 lists in a glossary of disdainful expressions for his race: “beastlike, depraved, inferior, childlike, menacing, lazy, small-brained” and there are quotations that confirm these. Asim (2007): 146 quarries from Reddick (1944) the following properties found in portrayals of African-Americans in media, films, and books; I have grouped them into three classes. Positive: natural-born cook, natural-born musician, perfect entertainer, sexual superman, superior athlete. Somewhat dismissive: chicken and watermelon eater, devoted servant, happy slave, unhappy non-white, superstitious churchgoer, uninhibited expressionist. Negative: corrupt politician, irresponsible citizen, mental inferior, petty thief, savage African, social delinquent, vicious criminal, razor and knife toter.

Against the frequently negative catalogue of putative characteristics presented by Reddick and Croom, there is *nigger/nigga* used as a mark of in-group camaraderie identified by Kennedy (2000, 2003), Asim (2007) and especially Rahman (2012) that is based on the positive connotation of self-identification with a fellow member of a community which perceives itself to be oppressed, disparaged and discriminated against. This is the subversion of the hurtful, insulting, viciously offensive connotations of *nigger*.<sup>12</sup>

Having raised issues associated with perceptions of the N word, in the remainder of this essay I examine the eighteen occurrences of *nigger* as a descriptive or term of address in Quentin Tarantino's 'Pulp Fiction' and compare it with the deployment of other potentially offensive language in the film.

<sup>7</sup> One reviewer of this essay claimed that when used as a term of camaraderie the spelling is invariably *nigga* but this is demonstrably false as a glance at any of the black authors cited here proves.

<sup>8</sup> Rahman's point, questioned by a reviewer, is confirmed by African-Americans I have asked. It is worth noting that in Tarantino's 'Jackie Brown', Ordell never addresses nor speaks of Jackie this way though he uses the word freely to and of black males.

<sup>9</sup> Despite the thousands of English words beginning with 'c', 'f' and 'n' there is no doubt about what these initials stand for, even though *the C word* is occasionally a euphemism for *cancer*.

<sup>10</sup> It is sometimes extended to other peoples of dark complexion, too. Etymologically it derives from Latin *niger* 'black, dark, unlucky' which extended in late Latin to 'black person'.

<sup>11</sup> A reviewer suggests that P9 is positive, but it couples being tough and a survivor, with being prone to violence, which is normally regarded as a negative.

<sup>12</sup> The self-identification as *nigger* by certain white, Asian, Filipino, and Hispanic young people (among others) probably stems from this same cause. Some whites among these might also refer to themselves or be derogatorily described as *wigger* (I am grateful to several members of the audience at Taboo Conference II, Durham University September 2014 for introducing me to this term).

#### 4. Pulp Fiction: three stories about one story

Twenty years on, Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* has been rereleased in cinemas, and it looks as mesmeric and mad as ever. (Peter Bradshaw *The Guardian*, Friday 16 May 2014)

The 1994 film 'Pulp fiction' was co-written by Quentin Tarantino and Roger Avary and directed by Tarantino. The narrative is composed of three distinct but interrelated storylines presented out of chronological sequence. Since race is significant in this movie, it is indicated in my synopsis. The principal in the first story is contract killer Vincent Vega (white). Vincent's partner is Jules Winnfield (black), and they work for gangster millionaire Marsellus Wallace (black). After liquidating some junkies who have appropriated a briefcase belonging to Wallace, Vincent is instructed by Marsellus Wallace to entertain his wife Mia (white). Returning from a night out with Vincent, Mia overdoses on heroin that she has snorted, mistaking it for cocaine. Vincent saves her life by injecting adrenaline into her heart. The principal in the second story is prize-fighter Butch Coolidge (white) whom Marsellus pays to lose a fight; instead Butch kills his (black) opponent. Marsellus sends Vincent to kill Butch, but the latter shoots Vincent dead with Vincent's gun which he has left in the kitchen while he is using the toilet. Butch then runs Marsellus over and, recovering, Marsellus starts shooting at him. They end up captured by two hillbillies, one of whom rapes Marsellus. Butch escapes, Marsellus is freed, and the hillbillies are wounded and facing worse. The third story picks up the tale from story one, just before the murder of the junkies (so Vincent is still alive). Quoting Ezekiel 25:17, Jules shoots two of the junkies, but another bursts out from a bathroom and sprays bullets at the gangsters. He gets shot but no bullet has struck either Vincent or Jules, an outcome that Jules believes is a miracle and it decides him to retire from being a hit-man. Travelling away from the murder scene Vincent accidentally shoots their associate Marvin (black) whose brains spatter all over the inside of their car. To clean up the mess they visit Jules' white friend Jimmie Dimmick. Helped by fixer Winston Wolf (white) they clean themselves and the car which is subsequently disposed of. We hear where these two bad-ass dudes live: Vincent in a predominantly white area of Los Angeles (as does Jimmie) and Jules in a black area. Wearing "UC Santa Cruz and 'I'm with Stupid' tee-shirts, swim trunks, thongs and packing .45 automatics" (Tarantino, 1999: 187) Jules and Vincent enter a diner. The film had opened in this diner (before the credits ran) and a male-female couple of young white hoods hold it up and rob the customers. Now we return to this scene and find Vincent is again in the john and Jules determined to retire from crime. Jules gives the hoods his money (so as to buy his redemption) but won't hand over Marsellus' briefcase – the contents of which are never revealed. Jules succeeds in brow-beating the hoods and sends them on their way with their ill-gotten gains. The film ends with Jules and Vincent heading off to the action in story two.<sup>13</sup>

This synopsis reveals fertile ground for banter, for insult, and perhaps racism. There is an awareness of ethnicity and race throughout 'Pulp Fiction'. And, though my synopsis doesn't mention it, the film is a black comedy that is often very funny. Where possible, quotations from 'Pulp Fiction' are cited from the screenplay published in Tarantino (1999); but the words used in the film do not always appear in this printed script and occasionally I have to cite the time in the film at which "nigger" occurs (in the form [hour:minute:second]). I don't know whether these are ad-libs from the actors or have some other source.

'Pulp Fiction' opens with the two (white) hoods planning to hold-up the diner. As robbers these two are, on their own account, unsuccessful and would have been again on this occasion if Jules, believing his life had been saved by a miracle, hadn't decided to act magnanimously towards them. In the course of discussion the young (British English) Man<sup>14</sup> makes the following racist remarks:

MAN: Too many foreigners own liquor stores. Vietnamese, Koreans, they can't fuckin' speak English. You tell 'em: 'Empty out the register,' and they don't know what it fuckin' means. They make it too personal. We keep on, one of those gook motherfuckers' gonna make us kill 'em.

WOMAN: I'm not gonna kill anybody.

MAN: I don't wanna kill anybody either. But they'll probably put us in a situation where it's us or them. And if it's not the gooks, it's these old fuckin' Jews who've owned the store for fifteen fuckin' generations. You got Grandpa Irving sittin' behind the counter with a fuckin' Magnum. Try walkin' into one of those stores with nothin' but a telephone, see how far it gets you. Fuck it, forget it, we're out of it. (Tarantino, 1999: 10)

The Man utters racial slurs against Vietnamese and Korean shopkeepers, calling them "gooks" unable to understand English. His tirade against Jewish shopkeepers, on the other hand, seems tinged with respect because they are willing to shoot at people like him.

In 'Pulp Fiction' the term *nigger* is mostly used by blacks of or to other blacks – as in the following, from story one:

JULES: You remember Antwan Rockamora? Halfblack, half-Samoan, usta call him Tony Rocky Horror.

VINCENT: Yeah maybe, fat right?

<sup>13</sup> Stories one and three were mostly written by Tarantino and story two mostly by Avary.

<sup>14</sup> Played by British actor Tim Roth. The Man is "Pumpkin" to his girlfriend and later (in story three) "Ringo" to Jules. The Woman is "Honey Bunny" to the Man and later "Yolanda" to Jules.



JULES: I wouldn't go so far as to call the brother fat. He's got a weight problem. What's the **nigger** gonna do, he's Samoan. (Tarantino, 1999: 18, bolding added)

This use of *nigger* is clearly not a racial slur. For a start Jules is black and he's addressing a white guy while speaking of a shared acquaintance who is a half-black half-Samoan<sup>15</sup> and who counts as one of Jules' in-group of black 'brothers'. Secondly, Jules thinks well enough of Antwan to be kindly euphemistic about his size. So when he says "What's the nigger gonna do, he's Samoan" he is using *nigger* as a colloquial descriptive. Colloquial language uses informal and intimate styles (cf. Joos, 1961); it includes, but is not identical with, slang (see Allan and Burridge (2006)). So we have *nigger* used as an in-group marker, here referring to a man described as "Samoan", although he is also described as "half-black". Jules clearly has no malice towards this black brother of whom *nigger* is surely used in the sympathetic spirit of camaraderie.

One objection to the use of *nigger* here is that author Quentin Tarantino is white and as a white has no right or sanction to have the word *nigger* uttered by anyone. Two such complainants are Spike Lee (*Variety* December 16, 1997) and Morris O'Kelly (*Huffington Post* January 22, 2013). Samuel L. Jackson, who played Jules in 'Pulp Fiction' and has worked in other Tarantino films in which his character utters *nigger*, doesn't agree that Tarantino should be forbidden to use the word if it is appropriate to the character who utters it (Cummins, 2013). A number of other African-Americans agree with Jackson, e.g. Kennedy (2000, 2003). If Tarantino's scripts offend you, don't watch his films. Spike Lee has said "I have a definite problem with Quentin Tarantino's excessive use of the N-word. And let the record state that I never said he can not use that word – I've used that word in many of my films [e.g. 'Bamboozled' 2000]" (Fuchs, 2002: 151). This should allow black characters to use the term in a drama or fiction if the circumstances depict a situation where *nigger/nigga* might be heard in real life – which is the case for all occurrences of *nigger* in 'Pulp Fiction'. It is ironic that African-Americans such as Spike Lee advance the racist argument that it is ok for blacks to use *nigger* but whites should be prohibited from doing so (see Coates (2013, 2014)). Nevertheless the prejudice is explicable as analogous to the situation in which you as an in-grouper can criticise your own mother but if an out-grouper does it you feel hurt, offended, and maybe angry.

In 'Pulp Fiction', Antwan Rockamora is referred to as a nigger a couple more times when his alleged fate after falling foul of Marsellus is further elaborated by Jules. I'll quote more of the script to illustrate the kind of language being used as co-text to the occurrences of *nigger* because it shows that the use of *nigger* is appropriate in the context of the drama. This quote begins immediately following on from the one above.

VINCENT: I think I know who you mean, what about him?

JULES: Well, Marsellus fucked his ass up good. And word around the campfire, it was on account of Marsellus Wallace's wife.

VINCENT: What'd he do, fuck her?

JULES: No no no no no no no, nothin' that bad.

VINCENT: Well what then?

JULES: He gave her a foot massage.

VINCENT: A foot massage? (JULES nods his head: "Yes".) That's all? (JULES nods his head: "Yes".) What did Marsellus do?

JULES: Sent a couple of guys over to his place. They took him out on the patio of his apartment, threw his ass over the balcony. **Nigger** fell four stories. They had this garden at the bottom, enclosed in glass, like one of them greenhouses – **nigger** fell through that. Since then, he's kinda developed a speech impediment.

VINCENT: That's a damn shame. Still I hafta say, play with matches, ya get burned.

JULES: Whaddya mean?

VINCENT: You don't be givin' Marsellus Wallace's new bride a foot massage.

JULES: You don't think he overreacted?

VINCENT: Antwan probably didn't expect Marsellus to react like he did, but he had to expect a reaction.

JULES: It was a foot massage, a foot massage is nothing, I give my mother a foot massage.

VINCENT: It's laying hands on Marsellus Wallace's new wife in a familiar way. Is it as bad as eatin' her out – no, but you're in the same fuckin' ballpark.

Jules stops Vincent.

<sup>15</sup> The family name, Rockamora, looks more Samoan than African-American, but I don't give that speculation much weight. Samoans are very occasionally called niggers, see [www.chimpout.com/forum/showthread.php?148142-niggers-and-punk-samoan-nigger-wannabes-keepin-it-real&s=0a13f2a019b536ce61b0dd68c7ce9c8](http://www.chimpout.com/forum/showthread.php?148142-niggers-and-punk-samoan-nigger-wannabes-keepin-it-real&s=0a13f2a019b536ce61b0dd68c7ce9c8).

JULES: Whoa ... whoa ... whoa ... stop right there. Eatin' a bitch out, and givin' a bitch a foot massage ain't even the same fuckin' thing.

VINCENT: Not the same thing, the same ballpark.

JULES: It ain't no ballpark either. Look maybe your method of massage differs from mine, but touchin' his lady's feet, and stickin' your tongue in her holiest of holies, ain't the same ballpark, ain't the same league, ain't even the same fuckin' sport. Foot massages don't mean shit.

VINCENT: Have you ever given a foot massage?

JULES: Don't be tellin' me about foot massages – I'm the foot fuckin' master.

(Tarantino, 1999: 18–20, bolding added)

Later on, Mia denies the truth of this rumour. But note the highly colourful colloquial language. It includes (see Quang Phuc Dong (1971)) the literal *fuck*<sub>1</sub> (“What'd he do, fuck her?”) and the nonliteral *fuck*<sub>2</sub> (all other occurrences); references to cunnilingus in the colloquial and graphic “Eatin' a bitch out” and “stickin' your tongue in her holiest of holies”; and, finally, the much milder “Foot massages don't mean shit”. Given this style of language it would be stylistic violation to use *African-American* or *Negro* instead of *nigger* and it would bleach the colourful language to have *black* in place of *nigger*. Furthermore, given that in this particular context Rockamora is “the recipient of poor treatment” he qualifies to be called *nigger* under P4 of the characterisation of the word quoted above from Croom 2013: 199 (though, as was pointed out earlier, this is not a sufficient or even necessary property for Jules' referent)

The next instance of *nigger* in ‘Pulp Fiction’ is also from the discussion of Rockamora's fate; it comes a few turns after the end of the previous quote.

JULES: ... Look, just because I wouldn't give no man a foot massage, [Vincent had jokingly asked for one] don't make it right for Marsellus to throw Antwan off a building into a glassmotherfuckin'-house, fuckin' up the way the **nigger** talks. That ain't right, man. Motherfucker do that to me, he better paralyze my ass, 'cause I'd kill a motherfucker, you know what I'm saying? (Tarantino, 1999: 21–22, bolding added)

Here, once again, Rockamora is named as a *nigger* in the context of Jules strongly empathising with him.

The next occurrence of *nigger* in the film does not appear in the published script. It is uttered by Marsellus to Butch as he hands Butch the bribe to go down in the fifth round of his bout with Floyd Wilson (black).

MARSELLUS: [...] How many fights d'you think you got in you anyway? Mhm? Two? Boxers don't have an Old Timers Place. You came close but you never made it. And if you were gonna make it, you would've made it before now. (*Holds out the envelope of cash to Butch, but just out of his reach.*) You're my **nigger**. [0:22:45]

BUTCH: Certainly appears so.

Here is an exquisite social irony in that a powerful African-American is calling a white man “my *nigger*”. This is not a racial slur as such, but it does play on the slur because it invokes the sense of *nigger* as an inferior and servant, Croom's property P3. It is well-documented that *nigger* is used among African-Americans to disparage people as well as its being in other contexts a term of camaraderie and banter.

The next scene in which *nigger* is used takes place in a topless bar near LAX owned by Marsellus and run by English Dave: “Dave isn't really English, he's a young black man from Baldwin Park” goes the stage direction; why he's called “English” Dave is as much a mystery as the contents of Marsellus' briefcase. Vincent and Jules present themselves:

ENGLISH DAVE: Vincent Vega, our man in Amsterdam. Jules Winnfield, our man in Inglewood. Git your asses on in here. (*Vincent and Jules, wearing shorts and T-shirts, step inside.*) Goddam, **nigger**, what's up with them clothes?

JULES: You don't even want to know. (Tarantino, 1999: 35–36, bolding added)

Clearly this is an instance of banter in which an African-American is razzing a black colleague who is wearing unusual clothing (the explanation for which is not revealed to the audience until towards the end of story three; at this stage in the film we are left as ignorant as English Dave). The banter certainly reveals Dave's critical view of the hit-men's outfits but the use of *nigger* is in the spirit of camaraderie and not malevolence. Used as an in-group term of address, *nigger* has much in common with the British and Australian address term *mate* (see Rendle-Short (2009)) or American *bud(dy)* even though neither *bud(dy)* nor *mate* has the negative connotations of *nigger*.

The next use of *nigger* is uttered by a white and it is undoubtedly dysphemistic. Vincent is visiting his drug dealer Lance (white).

LANCE: Now this is Panda, from Mexico. Very good stuff. This is Bava, different, but equally good. And this is Chaco from the Hartz Mountains of Germany. Now the first two are the same, forty-five an ounce – those are friend prices – but this one ... (*pointing to the Chaco*) ... this one's a little more expensive. It's fifty-five. But when you shoot it, you'll know where that extra money went. Nothing wrong with the first two. It's real, real, real, good shit. But this one's a fuckin' madman.

VINCENT: Remember, I just got back from Amsterdam.

LANCE: Am I a **nigger**? Are you in Inglewood? No. You're in my house. White people who know the difference between good shit and bad shit, this is the house they come to. My shit, I'll take the Pepsi Challenge with Amsterdam shit any ol' day of the fuckin' week.

VINCENT: That's a bold statement.

LANCE: This ain't Amsterdam, Vince. This is a seller's market. Coke is fuckin' dead as disco. Heroin's comin' back in a big fuckin' way. It's this whole seventies retro. Bell bottoms, heroin, they're as hot as hell. (Tarantino, 1999: 40–41, **bolding added**)

When Lance says “Am I a nigger? Are you in Inglewood?” he is undoubtedly reflecting the racism endemic among whites in the United States of America that black areas such as Inglewood (where Jules lives) are impoverished when compared with white areas. What Lance is besmirching with these words is the city of Inglewood by associating it with the dealing of inferior quality illicit drugs. Neither explicitly nor implicitly does he slur African-Americans other than those who deal junk in Inglewood. Lance's motivation is to insist that he deals in high quality heroin which one wouldn't get (according to him) in a black area of Los Angeles such as Inglewood, nor even in Amsterdam.<sup>16</sup> Lance's house is located in Echo Park, which has large Latino and Asian populations but few blacks; however, most of the audience doesn't know this and might miss the point of the reference to Inglewood without the forthright “Am I a nigger?” that precedes it and the ensuing “White people who know the difference between good shit and bad shit, this is the house they come to”. Certainly Lance's use of *nigger* adds lexical dysphemism to the offensive remark about other drug dealers, but it is not gratuitously extraneous to the dramatic action. Sure, Lance is being derogatory about black drug dealers, but that is true whether or not he refers to them as niggers. For him to have said *Am I black?* would be no less of a racial slur; and *Am I African-American?* would be ludicrously inappropriate in every way.

The next time *nigger* occurs it is in story two, and it is uttered by Marsellus Wallace after he has learned that Butch won the fight by killing his opponent. Marsellus puts a contract on Butch.

MARSELLUS (*Off screen*): I'm prepared to scour the earth for this motherfucker. If Butch goes to Indo-China, I want a **nigger** hidin' in a bowl of rice, ready to pop a cap in his ass. (Tarantino, 1999: 91, **bolding added**)

Marsellus is not being offensive about one of his hit-men. His subsequent use of *nigger* also refers to his employees. There is a powerful image here that brings together bowls of rice in Indo-China and the comedic image of a black man hiding himself in a bowl of white rice waiting to shoot Butch. There is probably an echo of the expression *nigger in a woodpile* hailing from pre-Civil War days. “I want a nigger hidin' in a bowl of rice” is an evocative line in which, as I've said, an African-American uses *nigger* in a spirit of camaraderie rather than malevolence towards his hireling; but Marsellus is also invoking the ‘bad nigger’ stereotype of a menacing, weapon toting, vicious criminal (Asim, 2007: 85, 146).

The same is true of this next quote from Marsellus uttered after Butch has rescued him from being raped by the hillbillies Maynard and Zed in their Mason–Dixie Pawnshop<sup>17</sup>.

MARSELLUS: What now? Well let me tell you what now. I'm gonna call a couple pipehittin' **niggers**, who'll go to work on the homes here with a pair of pliers and a blow torch. (*To Zed*) Hear me talkin' hillbilly boy?! I ain't through with you by a damn sight. I'm gonna git Medieval on your ass. (Tarantino, 1999: 131, **bolding added**)

In this context pipe-hitters are thugs, and the “pipe-hittin' niggers” are Marsellus' heavies; once again Marsellus invokes the ‘bad nigger’ stereotype. He is certainly not being offensive to or about them, because he will rely on them to avenge his fury, pain, and shame. On the other hand, the term *hillbilly* is intentionally derogatory for white trash; it has similar negative connotations to *nigger* when the latter is used as a disparaging slur, except of course that it denotes a white person. Butch has already used it to address Maynard, and now Marsellus uses it to address Zed.

In the film, but not the printed text, about ten minutes before Butch and Marsellus gain the upper hand, Maynard uses *nigger* to Butch who has pinned Marsellus to the floor of the pawnshop and is pointing Marsellus' own .45 handgun in his face. This occurs after Butch has deliberately run Marsellus over and the latter has been shooting at him. Butch has sought shelter in the pawnshop and was followed in by Marsellus. A vicious fight ensues in which Butch floors Marsellus. Needless to say, Maynard is enraged by this violent invasion of his premises.

MAYNARD (brandishing a pump action shotgun pointed at Butch who stands above Marsellus): Hold it right there goddammit.

BUTCH: This ain't none of your business, mister.

MAYNARD: I'm making it my business. Toss the weapon.

BUTCH: You don't understand, man.

<sup>16</sup> On the Pepsi Challenge see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pepsi\\_Challenge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pepsi_Challenge).

<sup>17</sup> There are Dixie Pawn shops in many US towns, including Los Angeles.



MAYNARD: Toss the weapon. (*After a brief delay Butch throws the gun to his left.*) Take your foot off the **nigger** [1:33:2]. Put your hands behind your head. Approach the counter, right now. (*Maynard slugs Butch with the butt of his shotgun.*)

This is a definite racial slur in respect of Marsellus from the white hillbilly to the white boxer. Is it dramatically justified? In the prior scene where Marsellus was run over by Butch, he was assisted to his feet by a bevy of sympathetic mostly white female bystanders one of whom says “If you want someone to go to court, I’ll be glad to help”. This is a white woman willing to testify against a white man on behalf of an African-American – admittedly before Marsellus starts shooting at Butch and, in the process, wounding a female onlooker. Nevertheless, the contrast with the incensed pawnshop manager is stark. Maynard’s shop was invaded by two men fighting, so we cannot expect him to be courteous to either of them. He refers to the groggy Marsellus as “nigger” and he slugs Butch with his gun. Under these circumstances the racial slur is not out of place from a dramatic point of view; whatever term was used to refer to Marsellus was going to be insulting and there are not a lot of choices: *that motherfucker* or a sarcastic *your buddy/friend* perhaps; a realistic *that cunt* would not have passed the censor; *that brother* would be inappropriate from Maynard; and *that homie/guy* would be too weak dramatically. I conclude that this occurrence of *nigger*, 93 minutes into the film, is a dramatically justifiable racial slur.

Jules and Vincent have shot the three white junkies from story one, the last of whom had burst out of the bathroom firing at them but missed. Jules is convinced that “God came down from heaven and stopped these motherfuckin’ bullets”; Vincent is not persuaded; stool pigeon Marvin (black) is mesmerized by the horror of it all.

VINCENT (*to Jules*): Do you wanna continue this theological discussion in the car, or at the jailhouse with the cops?

JULES: We should be fuckin’ dead now my friend! What happened here was a miracle, and I want you to fuckin’ acknowledge it!

VINCENT: Alright, it was a miracle. Can we go now? (*Opens the door and leaves.*)

JULES (*to the dazed Marvin*): Let’s go **nigger**. [1:49:55] Come on. Shit. (*They hussle out the door.*)

Jules addressing Marvin as ‘nigger’ is in the spirit of camaraderie, though this may be bolstered by the fact that Marvin is lower in the pecking order than Jules and also at that moment stupefied by what has transpired (see Croom’s P3 and P7).

Jules is driving Vincent and Marvin back to Marsellus after the murder of the junkies; on the way Vincent accidentally shoots Marvin whose brains spatter all over the inside of their car and its occupants. To clean up the mess they drive to Jules’ friend Jimmie’s house in the mostly white Toluca Lake in the San Fernando Valley. The next uses of *nigger* come from Jimmie, who is white (and in the film, played by Tarantino himself).

VINCENT: Jules, you ask me nice like that, no problem. He’s your friend, you handle him.

INT. JIMMIE’S KITCHEN – MORNING. Vincent, Jules, and Jimmie are standing in Jimmie’s kitchen, each with a mug of coffee.

JULES (*drinking coffee*): Goddamn Jimmie, this is some serious gourmet shit. Me an’ Vincent woulda been satisfied with freeze-dried Tasters Choice. You spring this gourmet fuckin’ shit on us. What flavor is this?

JIMMIE (*wearing a bathrobe*): Knock it off, Julie.

JULES: What?

JIMMIE: I’m not a cob of corn, so you can stop butterin’ me up. I don’t need you to tell me how good my coffee is. I’m the one who buys it, I know how fuckin’ good it is. When Bonnie goes shoppin’, she buys shit. I buy the gourmet expensive stuff ‘cause when I drink it, I wanna taste it. But what’s on my mind at this moment isn’t the coffee in my kitchen, it’s the dead **nigger** in my garage.

JULES: Jimmie –

JIMMIE: – I’m talkin’. Now let me ask you a question, Jules. When you drove in here, did you notice a sign out front that said, ‘Dead **nigger** storage?’

Jules starts to ‘Jimmie’ him –

JIMMIE: ... answer the question. Did you see a sign out in front of my house that said, ‘Dead **nigger** storage?’

JULES (*playing along*): Naw man, I didn’t.

JIMMIE: You know why you didn’t see that sign?

JULES: Why?

JIMMIE: ‘Cause storin’ dead **niggers** ain’t my fuckin’ business!

Jules starts to ‘Jimmie’ him.

JIMMIE: ... I ain't through! Now don't you understand that if Bonnie comes home and finds a dead body in her house, I'm gonna get divorced. No marriage counselor, no trial separation – fuckin' divorced. And I don't wanna get fuckin' divorced. The last time me an' Bonnie talked about this shit was gonna be the last time me an' Bonnie talked about this shit. Now I wanna help ya out Julie, I really do. But I ain't gonna lose my wife doin' it.

JULES: Jimmie –

JIMMIE: – don't fuckin' Jimmie me, man, I can't be Jimmied. There's nothin' you can say that's gonna make me forget I love my wife. Now she's workin' the graveyard shift at the hospital. She'll be comin' home in less than an hour and a half. Make your phone calls, talk to your people, then get the fuck out of my house.

JULES: That's all we want. We don't wanna fuck up your shit. We just need to call our people to bring us in. (Tarantino, 1999: 146–149, bolding added)

It is never said in the printed script that Bonnie is black (Kennedy, 2003: 103, Asim, 2007: 189). But about a minute following the quote above while Jules is explaining their problem to Marsellus, Bonnie (played by black actress Venessia Valentino) is shown in an imagined sequence:

JULES (to Marsellus): You got to appreciate what an explosive element this Bonnie situation is. ([1:54:47–1:55:6] *Imaginary scene where Bonnie does what Jules is hypothecating.*) If she comes home from a hard day's work and finds a bunch of gangsters doin' a bunch a gangsta shit in her kitchen, ain't no tellin' what she liable to do.<sup>18</sup>

What is significant in the quote from pp.146–149 is that Jimmie wants Jules, Vincent, the dead Marvin, all the gory clothes and blood-soaked car off his property before his wife gets back from working the “graveyard shift at the hospital”. It maybe that Jimmie has helped Jules out on some earlier occasion because he says “The last time me an' Bonnie talked about this shit was gonna be the last time me an' Bonnie talked about this shit”. It's with this on his mind that Jimmie is, understandably, upset at having a bloody car with the dead Marvin in it in his garage. He tells Jules he is apprehensive about “the dead nigger in my garage”. As a white addressing a black this can be construed as insensitive, but the situation hardly merits sensitivity (in fact there is no sensitivity revealed anywhere in ‘Pulp Fiction’). Is Jimmie casting a slur on the dead man? I don't think so. He is angry about the situation. This leads to a couple more occurrences of *nigger* in one of the most quoted parts of the film:

did you notice a sign out front that said, ‘Dead nigger storage?’ (Jules starts to ‘jimmie’ him –) Answer the question. Did you see a sign out in front of my house that said, ‘Dead nigger storage?’ ... You know why you didn't see that sign? ... ‘Cause storin' dead niggers ain't my fuckin' business!

Although I do accept that Jimmie's use of *nigger* is potentially offensive to some in the film's audience, there is no sign that the addressee Jules is offended. He and Jimmie are throughout using diminutives of their names, “Jimmie” and “Julie”, which witnesses a close friendship between them. Indeed, one cannot take a gory murdered corpse to someone's house and ask for assistance unless there are close ties with that person. Apparently Jimmie has the status with Jules of a white Negro and that gives him leave to speak like a black; possibly, Bonnie's being black is a factor here. Jules has inflicted a huge imposition on Jimmie, put Jimmie in jeopardy with the law, and for all Jimmie knows, in danger from the dead man's friends and family. Jules has to wear Jimmie's anger and fear which are surely contributing to his use of *nigger* in this scene. Jimmie's use of *nigger* heightens the tension, which renders it appropriate in the context of the film at this point.

As we have seen, the scene continues with Jules calling Marsellus to seek help with their predicament. Following on the evocation of Bonnie during Jules' account of what she might do if she finds the gangsters in her kitchen, Marsellus responds:

MARSELLUS: I've grasped that, Jules. All I'm doin' is contemplating the ‘ifs’.

JULES: I don't wanna hear about no motherfuckin' ‘ifs’. What I wanna hear from your ass is: ‘you ain't got no problems, Jules. I'm on the motherfucker. Go back in there, chill them **niggers** out and wait for the cavalry, which should be comin' directly.’

MARSELLUS: You ain't got no problems, Jules. I'm on the motherfucker. Go back in there, chill them **niggers** out and wait for The Wolf, who should be comin' directly.

JULES: You sendin' The Wolf?

MARSELLUS: Feel better?

JULES: Shit **Negro**, that's all you had to say. (Tarantino, 1999: 150–151, bolding added)

Here, in the text that Marsellus repeats back to him, Jules uses “niggers” to refer to Jimmie and Vincent, both of whom are white. Arguably he is including himself with them. Among the text cut from the film between the Bonnie sequence and quote above is Jules saying to Marsellus:

<sup>18</sup> Why “gangsters” rather than *gangstas* or “gangsta” rather than *gangster* is a mystery; as with *nigger/nigga* the difference in spelling is not matched by a difference in pronunciation.

'Cause if push met shove, you know I'll take care of business. But push ain't never gonna meet shove. Because you're gonna solve this shit fer us. You're gonna take our asses outta the cold and bring it inside where it's warm. 'Cause if I've got to get into it with my friend about his wife over your boy Vincent, I'm gonna have bad feelings. (Tarantino, 1999: 150–151)

As is clear from this cut text and from elsewhere in this scene, Jules blames Vincent for their predicament but nonetheless they are comrades in arms and all in a dangerous situation because of the way Bonnie might react.

The final line of the text quoted here (from p.151) includes the only occurrence of *Negro* in the script. It's a mark of in-group respect for the boss Marsellus who is arranging and financing the rescue; presumably addressing him as *nigger* would be too familiar in this circumstance. In 'Pulp Fiction' *nigger* is used of equals or inferiors and those disparaged, which reflects the norm in real life.<sup>19</sup>

The last occurrence of *nigger* in 'Pulp Fiction' is later in this scene.

INT. GARAGE – MORNING. Both Jules and Vincent are inside the car cleaning it up. Vincent is in the front seat washing windows, while Jules is in the backseat, picking up little pieces of skull and gobs of brain. Both are twice as bloody as they were before.

JULES: I will never forgive your ass for this shit. This is some fucked-up repugnant shit!

VINCENT: Did you ever hear the philosophy that once a man admits he's wrong, he's immediately forgiven for all wrong-doings?

JULES: Man, get outta my face with that shit! The motherfucker who said that never had to pick up itty-bitty pieces of skull with his fingers on account of your dumb ass.

VINCENT: I got a threshold, Jules. I got a threshold for the abuse I'll take. And you're crossin' it. I'm a race car and you got me in the red. Redline 7000, that's where you are. Just know, it's fuckin' dangerous to be drivin' a race car when it's in the red. It could blow.

JULES: You're gettin' ready to blow? I'm a mushroom-cloud-layin' motherfucker! Every time my fingers touch brain I'm 'Superfly TNT,' I'm the *Guns of Navarone*. I'm what Jimmie Walker usta talk about.<sup>20</sup> In fact, what the fuck am I doin' in the back? You're the motherfucker should be on brain detail. We're tradin'. I'm washin' windows and you're pickin' up this **nigger's** skull.

(Tarantino, 1999: 158f, bolding added)

When Jules refers to Marvin as "this nigger" he is very angry and feels put upon. He is, as throughout most of film, speaking colloquially and swearing a lot. Is he casting a slur on the unfortunate Marvin? I am certain he is not. Think of alternative ways in which he could have expressed the point. True, he could have used innocuous terms like *brother*, *homie*, *dude*, etc. with some loss of dramatic force while maintaining stylistic consistency. It would have been stylistically absurd to substitute for *nigger* any of *African-American*, *American*, or *Negro*. It would have been inappropriate, because dysphemistic, to use *black man* or *black*. So, for maximum dramatic effect, given the language we have come to expect from Jules, "you're pickin' up this nigger's skull" is the optimum expression here; it entails empathy with the unfortunate victim and former associate.

## 5. Conclusions

The lexical form of a language expression such as *nigger* does not itself constitute a slur, it is its perlocutionary effect – in the light of the co-text together with the situation of its utterance and reception – that decides whether or not it discredits, slights, smears, stains, besmirches or sullies who it is applied to. The people Kennedy (2003) refers to as "eradicationists" insist that every occurrence of *nigger* is a slur and, therefore, no one should use the word. This confounds the form of the word for the frequent perlocutionary intention to slur its referent;<sup>21</sup> it is the offensive perlocutionary effect, i.e. not the word itself but its behavioural concomitant, that needs to be eradicated.

There is a problem that offense may be caused unintentionally by use of the word *nigger* and we need to accept that an unintended offense can be almost as hurtful as intended offense. There is no solution to this dilemma and the best way to handle it must be for a general rule that whereas intentional offense should be castigated as obnoxious, unintended offense should be forgiven, and it also needs to be recognized that there may be reasonable grounds for it to persist (e.g. in the writing of an academic paper). The use of *nigger* (and any other potential slur) should only be condemned when the speaker/writer is recognized to have the perlocutionary intention to slur. Although a slur eventuates as a perlocutionary effect, and dysphemistic effects are properly castigated, what is more abhorrent is the intention to achieve such an effect. The speaker/writer's intention can only be surmised from the context of utterance – the co-text and the situation of utterance including what is

<sup>19</sup> Recall the fifteen occurrences of "Negro" used as a term of respect (though not of address) in Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial, August 28, 1963.

<sup>20</sup> Perhaps a reference to Jimmy Walker in the 1970s sitcom 'Good Times' in which his character JJ. Evans used the catch-phrase *Dyn-o-mite!*.

<sup>21</sup> This is also referred to as confusing 'use' with 'mention', see e.g. Capone (2016).

known about the speaker/writer and the perlocutionary effect of this and similar uses of the potential slur. Judging the perlocutionary effect of *nigger* as a slur (as derogatory) is also a matter of surmise, although it is normally identifiable by the target as the sense of insult. So, both perlocutionary intention and, to a lesser degree, perlocutionary effect are open to controversy resulting from differing interpretations of the same set of data.

Some African-Americans would have it that only blacks can use the word *nigger*, because when a white utters *nigger* it is ipso facto a slur: this proscription is pure racism – even if it is understandable given the history of the behaviour of people of European descent towards those of African descent. Taking one step away from the racist proscription, it is certainly true that very many African-Americans (e.g. Spike Lee, Jabari Asim, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Alvin Hall (opp.cit.)) are extremely uncomfortable with whites saying *nigger* under any circumstances. This coincides with the politically correct position that has led to the persecution of figures like Keith Dambrot (white basketball coach, sacked from Central Michigan University in 1993) and Ken Hardy (dismissed from Jefferson Community College, Louisville, Kentucky in 1998) – see Kennedy (2003): 113–117.

Some whites do have permission to address black friends as *nigger* (not that this saved Keith Dambrot's job at CMU in 1993). For example, until October 2013 Louis Delmas (black) and Tony Scheffler (white) were team mates in the Detroit Lions football team who reportedly regularly referred to one another as respectively *white boy* or *cracker*<sup>22</sup> and *nigger*:

'Me and [Scheffler] have a relationship many people do not have – both black and white,' Delmas said. 'I look at him like my brother. I love him to death. He greets me, He greets me "What up, nigger?" But I understand it. So I say, "What's up, cracker?" But we would never take it outside the building.

Scheffler agreed.

'I treat Louis like a little brother,' he said. 'He knows my wife and kids. He calls me "white boy" and "cracker". We go back and forth with it and we are both comfortable with each other. I can't say the same with other relationships in the locker room or how other guys would feel about it. So it is a tough dynamic when you are using those types of words. Everybody does not react the same.'

[...]

'My teammates understand me,' Delmas said. 'They call me nigger all the time. We have a bond that can't be broken. [But you can't use that word outside this building.]' (Wilson, 2013)

What is made very clear is that the context in which *nigger* is socially acceptable, particularly from whites, is highly restricted. In a number of articles, John McWhorter has suggested that if whites identify as "niggers" it is because they are (whether consciously or not) adopting certain aspects of black cultural norms (see McWhorter (2010, 2013, 2014)). His view is that it's time to start getting used to whites saying the N word in certain contexts. If, as seems to be the case, *fuck* has lost its sting by becoming so commonplace in the media, maybe *nigger* would do so too, fulfilling a suggestion made by Lenny Bruce back in the early 1960s ('Are there any niggers here tonight?' [www.youtube.com/?v=gfNhiRGQ-js](http://www.youtube.com/?v=gfNhiRGQ-js)). As Bruce reportedly said in some other rendition of that sketch: "Well, I was just trying to make a point, and that is that it's the suppression of the word that gives it the power, the violence, the viciousness" ([http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Lenny\\_Bruce](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Lenny_Bruce)). He wasn't quite right, because we must also take into account the intended perlocutionary effect.

In this essay I have shown that most uses of the word *nigger* in Quentin Tarantino's 'Pulp Fiction' are not slurs. They are uttered without malevolence to or about in-groupers, some of whom are white. As blacks, Jules, Marsellus, and English Dave have the greatest sanction to use *nigger* without offense, thereby subverting a perception that they are themselves obvious targets for the most offensive, insulting, contemptuous uses of *nigger* from both whites and blacks. Jules' white friend Jimmie seems to be an in-group member with Jules and this gives him leave to use *nigger* when speaking to Jules, though he never addresses Jules as *nigger*. The sanction that applies to Jimmie does not apply to drug dealer Lance (at Tarantino, 1999: 40) and certainly not to hillbilly Maynard referring to Marsellus (93 minutes into the film, c. Tarantino, 1999: 122). Yet these socially unacceptable uses are, I have claimed, dramatically appropriate.

When Marsellus tells Butch "you're my nigger" [0:22:45] he invokes the sense of *nigger* as an inferior and servant, thus exploiting the slur with powerful dramatic irony. When Lance says to Vincent "Am I a nigger? Are you in Inglewood? No" there is a plausible instance of slurring: there is no doubt that Lance is being derogatory about the (black) drug dealers of Inglewood in order to talk up the quality of his own smack; this is the perlocutionary effect he intends to achieve and the abusive connotations of *nigger* add force to it. Slur it may be, yet, within the context of the film it is not gratuitous and unnecessary. Finally, I have argued that hillbilly Maynard's slur to Butch against Marsellus "Take your foot off the nigger" [1:33:2] is also dramatically justifiable given its context. So the use of *nigger* as a term of deprecation in 'Pulp Fiction' is, in my view, excusable on the three occasions in which this slur occurs.

The affective quality of a linguistic expression should never be judged without taking account of its intended perlocutionary effect in the context in which it is uttered. I have argued that none of the instances of *nigger* that occur in 'Pulp Fiction' is gratuitous. In a highly colloquial dramatic script that might, like *Huckleberry Finn* before it, be criticized for using rough, coarse, inelegant language "suited to the slums", the employment of terms like *nigger*, *fuck*, *motherfucker*, *shit*, *bitch* is

<sup>22</sup> *Cracker* is thought to derive primarily from the white slave master cracking the whip and, secondarily, because most edible crackers are whitish in colour.

stylistically appropriate. Furthermore, the majority of instances of *nigger* in Tarantino's film are clearly used not as slurs but as markers of camaraderie to in-groupers. Hopefully, however much you may hate and disapprove use of the N word, especially when spoken or written by a white person, you can recognize that it is not always a slur on people of African descent.

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