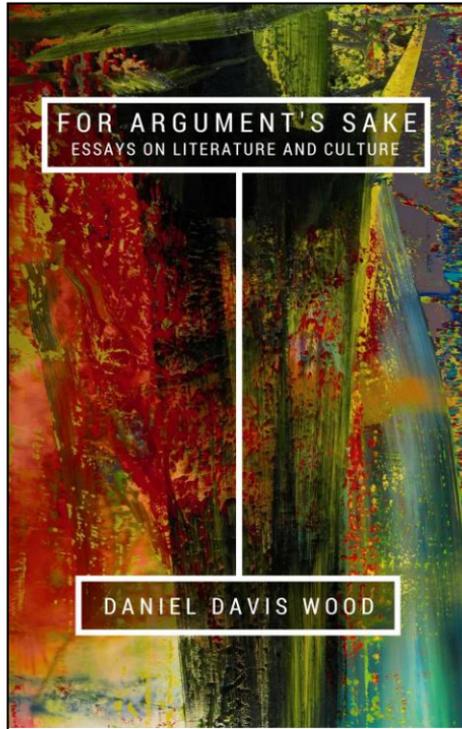


The following document is an extract from *For Argument's Sake: Essays on Literature and Culture* by Daniel Davis Wood, pages 41-46.

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DISTINCT DEHUMANISATIONS

This note originally appeared online at *Infinite Patience* (23 January 2011).

JANE SULLIVAN IS AN AUSTRALIAN NOVELIST WITH A WEEKLY newspaper column, 'Turning Pages,' which remains a fixture of the weekend literary supplements in both *The Sydney Morning Herald* and Melbourne's *The Age*. What usually makes the column stand out from the more news-oriented literary coverage that surrounds it is the spirit of contemplation from which it is written. Sullivan rarely takes new releases as her subject and rarely exhorts her readers to make a beeline for whichever book has most recently won her over. Instead, she uses 'Turning Pages' as a space in which to think out loud about literary issues of a less transient nature, to meditate on the difficulties and the triumphs of literary creativity in a voice of resolute calm.

In January 2011, however, Sullivan used 'Turning Pages' to publish one of the more incredible things I have ever encountered in a literary supplement — incredible in the sense that it is literally beyond credibility. Equal parts infantile and insidious, I find myself unable to believe that anyone who even aspires to being a novelist could have ever written it in the hope or the expectation that it would be taken seriously. Earlier that month, Alan Gribben, "a well-meaning professor of English at an Alabama university" (Sullivan, 'Censoring'), announced his intention to publish a version of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* throughout which the word 'nigger' would be replaced with the word 'slave' (see Bosman). Following the announcement, Sullivan complained, "[t]he media and blogosphere... erupted with comments, almost all negative. How dare anyone, even [such] an eminent Twain scholar... monkey about with Huck Finn?" ('Censoring').

Lest anyone now reading those words infer that Sullivan supports Gribben's misguided project, she goes on to insist that she "can't help but agree with [his] critics: I hate the very idea of tampering with a classic, and I believe that Twain chose his language with enormous care... to show the way, in all its stark truth, that ordinary uneducated [Southerners] spoke and thought about the slave popu-

lation.” Even so, she concludes, “having read Gribben’s introduction to his new edition, I find I have a sneaking sympathy for his views. ... I never thought I’d write this. But maybe... in certain classrooms, for a limited period, a censored Huck is better than no Huck at all” (“Censoring”).

To put Sullivan’s remarks in plain language: ‘I’m not saying we should censor *Huckleberry Finn*; I’m just saying that maybe it deserves to be censored.’ Far worse than her doublespeak, though, is the sheer naïveté of her proposals and the arrogance of the assumptions on which they are founded. Exactly who would decide which classrooms study the original text and which ones study the censored edition, and exactly what sort of limits would be placed on the period of readers’ studies in censorship? And, more importantly, how in the world has it come to be understood that literature, of all things, is somehow invested with a moral obligation to avoid upsetting the humanist sensibilities of contemporary liberal society or even to bow down and flatter them? How has it been decided that a work of literature which shirks this obligation should remain unread if it remains uncensored?

In what reads to me like an attempt to forestall the objection that she does not give due consideration to the criticisms made of Gribben’s project, Sullivan offers some of them a little airtime. “We [have] heard,” she writes, “that trying to erase the N-word from American culture [i]s ‘profoundly, profoundly wrong.’ We were told that the book was ‘about a boy growing up a racist in a racist society who learns to reject that racism, and it makes no sense if the book isn’t racist’” (“Censoring”). The first of those two criticisms is, for me, the most powerful, largely because of the political circumstances with which news of Gribben’s project coincided. On January 3, 2011, the first sitting day of the 112th Congress, members of the House of Representatives took turns reading aloud the United States Constitution. But even though the reading included the Thirteenth Amendment which constitutionally enshrined the nationwide abolition of slavery, it did not include the full text of Article 1, Section 2, which formally recognised the practice of slaveholding and thus constitutionally enshrined slavery in the first place (see Steinhauer).

In effect, then, Congress airbrushed the legislative institutionalisation of slavery out of the broader picture of the history of America, construing it as some sort of vestigial practice inherited from the colonial era rather than a practice that was knowingly and purposefully written into the supreme law of the land. That sort of brazen and officially sanctioned historical revisionism would be distressing at the best of times, but it is even more so for having emerged hand-in-hand with Alan Gribben's censorship of *Huckleberry Finn* — and vice-versa for the censorship itself. Slavery was the formal and legislative manifestation of the dehumanization of African Americans. The 'niggering' of African Americans is the social and cultural manifestation of that same dehumanisation. The designation of a person as a 'slave' and the designation of a person as a 'nigger' are, respectively, the political and the personal outgrowths of the same practice of dehumanisation. It would be profoundly wrong for Gribben to erase 'nigger' from a literary cornerstone of American culture even if for no other reason than that the contemporaneous Congress showed no hesitation in whitewashing the political equivalent of 'niggering' from the document that legitimates the entire American Government. But, of course, there is one other important reason why the replacement of 'nigger' with 'slave' is terribly misguided, as Francine Prose has indicated:

[W]hat puzzles me most about the debate [regarding Gribben's revisions] is why the word 'nigger' should be more freighted, more troubling, the cause of more (to paraphrase [Gribben's] introduction) 'resentment' than the word 'slave.' Racial epithets are inarguably disgusting, but not nearly so disgusting as an institution that treats human beings as property to be beaten, bought and sold. 'Nigger' and 'slave' are not synonyms by any stretch of the imagination. ('Less Offensive')

Absolutely not. Although both are vile and both originate from the same practice of dehumanisation, the designation of a person as a 'slave' carries political and even militaristic implications and consequences that the designation of a person as a 'nigger' never has. Yet

the preponderance of the view that ‘nigger’ is the more troubling word indicates to me that the unconscionable significance of ‘slave’ has been diluted to an extent that the word is now widely seen as innocuous in a way that slavery itself is not; and the replacement of ‘nigger’ with ‘slave’ threatens a further dilution of the significance of the very word that should be the more disturbing of the two. What is particularly troubling is that Jane Sullivan clearly has some sense of this. “[W]e were reminded,” she writes as she recites the criticisms of Gribben, “[that] Twain was particular about his language: a champion of the vernacular in all its forms, he hated being edited, let alone censored” (‘Censoring’). Part of Twain’s being particular about language involved occasionally using the word ‘slave’ as a word quite distinct from ‘nigger,’ so that to replace ‘nigger’ with ‘slave’ is to muddy the meaning of both words at the same time.

There is more at stake in the debate sparked by Gribben’s project than what Sullivan admits when she looks on it as a disagreement over whether anyone should be “tampering with [the] classic[s]” and “monkey[ing] about with Huck Finn” (‘Censoring’). What is at stake is the meaning of words that bear the weight of cultural memory. The narrower the definition of those words, the clearer their meaning and the stronger the memories they bear; and, inversely, those memories dissolve as the words that bear them are exchanged for others whose meaning is similar but not exactly the same. The racism against African Americans which is conveyed via the word ‘nigger’ is undeniably horrible; but much more horrible — indeed, horrific — is the full-scale political dehumanisation of African Americans that can be best conveyed only through the use of the word ‘slave.’ Conflating the two words might make certain passages of *Huckleberry Finn* more palatable for contemporary readers who are put off by Mark Twain’s use of mid-nineteenth century Southern dialect, but it belittles and thus trivialises the quotidian oppression of the millions of Africans and African Americans who woke each day and collapsed into sleep each night and lived every hour of their lives under the torment of total, inescapable enslavement. More than his “hat[red of] being edited” and of “proofreaders and typesetters chang[ing] his punctuation” (Sullivan, ‘Censoring’),

the trivialisation of slavery occasioned by revising *Huckleberry Finn* would send Mark Twain spinning in his grave — to say nothing of doing likewise to the slaves whose unfathomable agony is equatable, for Gribben's supporters, to receiving an earful of racist slang.

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