

A Word on the N-word

By Randall Kennedy

2010

Curators of Edward Joseph Collins's "Daughter of the South" confront a difficult issue. On several occasions, one of the characters in the opera, the plantation slave Melba, refers to a fellow slave as a "nigger." Deciding how to respond is a challenging enterprise.

The infamous n-word is a key term in the American lexicon of racial degradation, contempt, and hatred. It is probably the most notorious racial slur in English. It understandably invokes strong emotions, and opinions vary on how best to handle the word.

Some observers maintain that "nigger" is so toxic that it should never be aired, even as an historical artifact. Proponents of this view object, for example, to assigning to students unexpurgated versions of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* since "nigger" appears in the novel hundreds of times.

Others contend that "nigger" -- like slave cabins, or auction blocks, or photographs of lynchings, or any other artifact of racism -- is part of American culture and warrants preservation. Proponents of this view note that scouring the n-word from American culture would require burying or mutilating many important texts, including works by such figures as James Weldon Johnson, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Richard Pryor, and Chris Rock.

Further complicating the issue is that the n-word, like all words, can mean different things in different settings. While "nigger" has primarily been used as an insult, it has also been used, ironically, as a term of endearment. Many resent such a usage and deem it to be unwise, indeed reprehensible. That the n-word is sometimes used in this way, however, is beyond dispute.

Those responsible for this recording of "Daughter of the South" are well aware of the controversies that swirl around the airing of "nigger." They wish to signal their recognition of the debate -- hence this essay -- and to minimize any pain caused by their decision to publish Collins's original libretto. At the same time, they are committed to making available to those who seek it an uncensored version of Collins's only opera, in this its first public offering.

While some may disagree with the decision they have reached, all should recognize the seriousness with which they have grappled with the dilemma they faced.

Randall Kennedy is the *Michael R. Klein Professor of Law* at Harvard University and the author of *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*.