



# Creating safe teaching environments with predominantly white cohorts

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# Context

Hi, I'm Hannah. I'm a scholar of Black heritage, working on musical theatre. I am particularly interested in how musical theatre creators and scholars have whitewashed the period 1930-1960 in musical theatre histories.

As part of my hope to disrupt the current status quo, I deliver a module via University of Nottingham's "Research Seminar" format. This format is meant to focus on specific aspects of our personal expertise/current research and (if possible) expand the curriculum. So I deliver a 10-week course called "Research Seminar: Race in Music Theatre"



# Things to know

1. Until I joined in September 2019, there was little to no Critical Race Theory or related engagement in our curriculum.
2. The ethnomusicology module at L1 focuses almost entirely on instruments from East Asia and “traditional musics” of the area.
3. When Level 3 (final year) students take this module, they have never/seldom studied topics to do with race. They have no understanding of what terms like “Orientalism” might mean. Often they are unclear what terms are racial slurs.
4. The cohort is predominantly white British

**The following are a set of slides I have used to minimise the use of harmful language and to introduce ground rules for the topics we cover. Before I developed this model, I used to have to navigate all sorts of atrocious language and overt/insidious racism. I did not see any pejorative language in the assignments for this module in 2019/20.**

# Slides from the first seminar (following an introductory lecture seminar)

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Note: Students are notified of the content warnings for the course before it starts. CWs are on Moodle, in the module handbook, and I reiterate them as relevant in the preceding sessions preceding to protect the BIPOC students.

**Content note:** the following slides include racist slurs and other hate speech. None of these “descriptors” should be said aloud. Please use the numeric system to identify words you don’t understand or to ask questions about.

# Navigating coded and racist language

If you are working on a musical with a race narrative written before 1980, you are likely to encounter racist language and expressions that are now deemed hate speech.

1. Take responsibility for your choice of words. Acknowledge mistakes. Recognise that words about identity carry meanings that may not apply to your own lived experience.
2. If you are not sure of a precise definition of a word or expression, look it up or seek clarification.
3. If you think an expression may be slang, look up the origins of that slang.
4. While individuals (and some movements) have reclaimed language, this does not give us license to use these words unless we identify as part of that community and can explain the radical discourses associated with that reclamation.

# Racist slurs in musical texts

1. Nigger
2. Negro\*
3. Chink
4. Coon
5. Dink
6. Mulatto
7. Half-breed
8. Golliwog
9. Injun
10. Jap
11. Redskin
12. Slanteye
13. Brownie
14. Roundeye
15. Sooty

\*“Negro” is not an acceptable word to use as a general term in the UK. It was reclaimed as non-pejorative for a period in Black radical thought and is sometimes used in the US.

So how do we deal with  
historical sources?





4.

Second Act

The second act opens with the continuation of the intermission, only this time we are in the theatre alley. Three Negroes are lounging against the wall and begin singing "Too Darn Hot". They then go into a soft-shoe shuffle during which the players in costume come through the stage door for a breath of air, join in, Bill among them. The dance is interrupted by the call of the stage manager. The company obediently shuffle off -- all except Bill who goes right on dancing.

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# How and when to use or omit these words

Niggers all work on de Mississippi,  
Niggers all work while de white folks play.  
Pullin' dem boats from de dawn to sunset,  
Gittin' no rest till de Judgment Day!

“Ol’ Man River”, *Show Boat* (1927)

**What do we do with examples like this?**

**Option 1:** Blank out the spelling (N\*\*\*\*\* or N\_\_\_\_\_)

**Option 2:** Leave the word written in the quote but do not duplicate it at any point in your writing in your essay

End of extract



# Potential Discussion Points

- Should we adapt teaching CRT to the white gaze?
- Is this pandering to colonialism or does it protect BIPOC staff and students from harm while establishing the premise that “white voices” cannot define the language, theory, narratives, creativity, etc.?
- Are there other less confrontational methods of managing uninformed/potentially harmful environments while covering this kind of issue?
- How do we (especially Black heritage scholars teaching on slavery, segregation, blackface, etc.) protect ourselves in predominantly white institutions?