"The white folks had sure brought their white to work with them that morning." — Chester Himes

**On Shouting White Racial Slurs in Public**

I am a white, middle-class male professor at a big, public university, and every year I get up in front of 150 to 200 undergraduates in a class on the history of race in America and I ask them to shout white racial slurs at me.

The results are usually disappointing.
totally taboo. Even so, most of these kids are not new to conversations about race; the majority of them are students of color, including loads of junior college transfers, student parents, vets, and a smattering of white kids, mostly freshmen. Of course some are just scared of speaking in front of so many people, no matter what the topic.

So I cajole a few of them into "cracker" and "redneck." We can usually get to "hillbilly" or "trailer trash" or "white trash," possibly even "peckerwood," before folks recognize the "Cletus the Slack-Jawed Yokel" pattern of class discrimination here. And being that we are at a top ranked West Coast university, not only do we all share basic middle-class aspirations, but we can feel pretty safe in the fact that there are no "rednecks" here to insult.

The '60s era black nationalist terms come out next, usually from one of the all too few black male students in the room, sometime from a student athlete. "Honky!" This gets a chuckle from the class. After all, it is a funny word to say out loud. "Whitey" and its weak hip hop variant "wigger" are voiced to more giggles. The black power aggression of "look out whitey" and "white devils" is only a memory of a failed black militancy.

Hispanic students find their way to "gringo," just as a student perhaps from Atlanta or Houston offers "Yankee." Students from further away give their own regional variant insult for white imperialists and tourists — such as "haole." From this we learn that race is defined by place, and that where you are white matters.

It is either a sign of their ongoing potency or proof of the decline in the category of ethnicity, but the old racial slurs for Italians, Irish, Greek, Jewish, Catholic, German, Polish, etc., never get spoken aloud. Is this silence because these groups are or are not white? Maybe these kids have never heard someone use the word "dago" or "wop" or "mick" before, apart from that Jewish movie guy in The Godfather?

The point of this sanctioned spewing of hate speech is that none of these words can hurt me. Because I am an individual. I can choose to not be offended. White racial slurs are not common in our colorblind age because they don't work on people who posses white privilege. When they do work, like "redneck" or "cracker," it's a matter of class politics.

But rich white men enjoy the invisible power of being just people. Normal. Basic
Humanity. Everyone else gets some version of discrimination.

The nonwhite racial slurs hurt because they both smear with dirt and deny human diversity. They reduce all members of a race to the same hated and debased categorization. Your skin, your blood and body are all that matters, the words say, and I hate you for it.

This is about when I run out of time and have to end class. As I am unplugging, a few of those white kids creep up to ask: So what should we do? If we want to be more than just not racist, if we want to be actually anti-racist, then how should we act? How do we deal with the burden of a privilege we did not earn?

Now I gotta get to another class half-way across campus, so I don't have time to tell them that so-called "liberal guilt" is not the answer and that empathy and solidarity are. I don't have time to explain that learning to share anger at injustice is the start of a common conversation, and that they can learn how to recognize where privilege resides in their own lives by reading about and listening to the experiences of others who do not have it. I gotta run, so I just say to them: "It's a long argument, and an endless series of principled choices, but the short version is simply: Don't be a douchebag."

A Useless, Sexist Tool

This may sound like shallow, even flip advice. But it's a hard-won and well-tested insight using the multicultural classroom as laboratory. It came to me a few years back, at the end of the standard exercise in class.

"What about douchebag?" I asked the students, experimentally.

"Have any of you ever called some one black or brown or Asian a douchebag?... How 'bout women or gay folks?" The students had no recognizable response to the initial suggestion. But with each refining question—"Ever call a poor person a douchebag?"—their widening eyes became knowing nods, nods became spoken agreement, and the scattered "yes" gathered into a room of collectively blown minds. Including mine. Yes, it turns out, only rich, white heterosexist men are douchebags.

We had just contradicted the point of the racial slurs discussion, but that was lost in the
rush of discovery. Here, hiding in plain view, was a viable white racial slur. Because while "cracker" and "honky" don't hurt me, I would totally be offended if someone called me a douchebag. And I would need some sort of definition against which to launch my personal defense.

So why had none of us recognized this before? Why did this slur actually work? What does the human douchebag really look like? Why do we call him that and what do we hate about the douchebag?

The douchebag is someone—overwhelmingly white, rich, heterosexual males—who insists upon, nay, demands his white male privilege in every possible set and setting. The douchebag is equally douchey (that's the adjectival version of the term) in public and in private. He is a douchebag waiting in line for coffee as well as in the bedroom.

There are plausible objections to "douchebag". It feels like an overused insult. And its origins lie in the male insult culture that identifies women's bodies as the object of contempt. But even as such, it's an accidental monument to male blindness. An actual douchebag isn't feminine; it's a quite literally useless, sexist tool. It's alienated from women.

And with that particular understanding, I believe the term "douchebag" is the white racial slur we have all be waiting for.

We have only to realize this, for it has been there all along. In fact, it is white privilege itself that has blinded us to the true nature of the douchebag's identity. In the same way that white heterosexist males are thought of as an unmarked category, regular people, the douchebag has—at least until now—been similarly unmarked. It's insult that refers to ordinary men. Who happen to be white. Whiteness' inability to see whiteness has so far blinded us all to implications of the douchebag. But no longer.

The precise race, class, and gender position of the douchebag marks this identity as a specific subset of the asshole, another identity on the rise in the twenty-first century. The asshole—as brilliantly defined by Ta-Nehisi Coates—is someone who insists that all social encounters occur on their terms, as in, "Hey that person over there with the Google Glass is an asshole!" (Glasshole! Get it?)
While anyone can be an asshole, though, the douchebag is always a white guy—and so much more than that. The douchebag is the demanding 1 percent, and the far more numerous class of white, heterosexist men who ape and aspire to be them. Wall Street guys are douchebags to be sure, but so is anyone looking to cash in on his own white male privilege.

This narrowness of categorization—perhaps unique in the history of America's rich history of racial and sexual slurs—is what makes the word *douchebag* such a potentially useful political tool.

There is a history of the douchebag as a white racial slur, stretching from when the word was first flung across a D&D game in 1982's *ET* to the recent, and all too premature, assessment by Gawker and Jezebel that the term has "jumped the shark." Before the douchebag there was the suburban "collar popping" preppy and the urban yuppie. Now there is the frat boy, the mansplainer, the pick-up artist, the dude, the bro, and most of the men in Las Vegas. But really, they are all just douchebags.

**Douchebag Politics**

So it turns out that the term douchebag is a great deal more, and a great deal more precise, than what Dan Harmon considers merely "a more potent way to call someone a jerk."

Adam Levine, like Ryan Lochte before him, is so commonly labeled as a douchebag in social media that in a recent GQ celebrity profile he offered up his own multi-part definition of the douchebag, coupled by a point by point rebuttal as to why he should not be counted amongst the category he so defined.

Of course, playing douchebag / not a douchebag is one of social media's most favorite games, so let's try it with our new definition based on white privilege:

Gordon "greed is good" Gecko is lord high douchebag, and Charlie Sheen is his firstborn and crowned prince douchebag.

There are billionaire CEO douchebags like Larry Ellison and Donald Trump, and wage slave douchebags who work as lifeguards, bartenders and in sporting good stores but
aspire to be billionaires. Tech, finance, and consulting douchebags predominate, but there are also high concentrations of douchebags in real estate, mid-level management, fitness, video games, and television entertainment.

Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan are both douchebags, which is part of why they lost. Joe Biden and Bill de Blasio are not douchebags, which is part of why they won.

*Wall Street* and *Wolf of Wall Street* are the best movies about the douchebag. Steven Colbert and his entitled, uninformed, self-promoting, and colorblind persona is its most thorough parody. Fox News offers us the spectacle of an entire television network composed of douchebags pushing a douchebag's world view.

Pro sports is a dense field of douchebaggery. Lance Armstrong, Roger Goodell, the Washington Redskins, and Cristiano Ronaldo are douchebags, but Leo Messi and FC Barcelona are not.

Sam Spade is not a douchebag but John Wayne certainly was. Captain Kirk is a douchebag, but Spock, Picard, and Riker are not (though Riker sometimes wants to be). Peter Parker is not a douchebag, neither is Clark Kent. But Bruce Wayne and Tony Stark sure are. Cyclops is a douchebag whereas Magneto is not. Hal Jordan is a douchebag, but Captain America (perhaps surprisingly) is not.

And if we needed further proof that the douchebag is a social construction, and a set of personal choices, rather than some form of white male essentialism, I give you the paradox of Michael J. Fox: Alex P. Keaton is a douchebag, but Marty McFly is not.

**Beware the Killer Douchebag**

But this is not all fun and games. Douchebags can be deadly, especially to women. And learning to recognize them and avoid them can be a word of advice to save a life.

At their most extreme, the douchebag can be someone like Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho*; a psychotic killer who uses the mask of white male wealth and privilege to seduce victims and elude detection. But this type does not just exist in fiction.

On college campuses, white (i.e. segregated) frats are pestilential breeding grounds for
alcohol poisoning, drug abuse, sexual assault, and white male privilege, and if they
cannot be dismantled or removed from university campuses, then they should be
strenuously avoided by all but campus police and "Take Back the Night" marches.

There have been dangerous douchebags throughout history. Thomas Jefferson, when he
slipped into the slave quarters at night for his dose of brown sugar, became our nation's
douchebag founding father. The Southern plantation aristocracy were probably the most
powerful douchebags in American history, and the Civil War was fought to suppress them
and win human rights for the enslaved. Over the next century and a half these defeated
douchebags transformed themselves into the Redneck / Douchebag coalition that runs
the Republican party today.

"Some Emotional Need": The Medical History of the Douchebag

But there is a history beyond this history, a medical history that provides the unlikely
background to this character type.

In surveying the medical literature, one finds that the douchebag—a vulcanized rubber
appliance like a hot-water bottle attached to a rubber tube or hose—had a wide range of
useful applications for doctors and nurses. In a field hospital, a douchebag can be used to
wash out wounds, and in 1943, the American Journal of Nursing gave the best ever
reason to use a douchebag: to wash out one's eyes in the event of a gas attack.

"Douchebag" simultaneously appears in the linguistics literature in 1946 as military slang
for a misfit, someone "maladjusted to military life." Maybe this failed soldier just needed
to wash out his eyes?

In 1956, Dr. Oscar Bourgeault wrote on the "Feminine Hygiene Question" in the
American Journal of Nursing, telling nurses to advise their patients that if they think
they need to douche, the answer "usually is don't." Dr Bourgeault’s advice grew out of a
felt need for medical professionals to challenge the widespread advertisements in the era
of the Feminie Mystique threatening women with what one add called the loss of "the
precious air of romance" with their husbands "for lack of the intimate daintiness
dependent on effective douching." The advertiser's solution was—believe it or not
—douching with Lysol disinfectant to "destroy germs and odors, to give a fresh, clean and
"Douchebag": The White Racial Slur We've All Been Waiting For

wholesome feeling" and "restore every woman's confidence in her power to please."

Dr. Bourgeault couldn't agree with this nonsense. Douching was part of the medical profession for years, he explains, but it only developed a mass usage beginning in 1900 when a Boston physician claimed that vaginal douching was a good form of birth control. As Margaret Sanger and Emma Goldman learned the hard way, discussing birth control in public was a crime in this era, and this particular doctor was hounded out of the profession for violating public decency. Nevertheless, the rumor of an accessible and discrete form of birth control, especially for middle class women, set off a popular wave of usage as word spread "via the grape vine, back fence and sewing circle."

Not only is douching ineffective as a method of birth control, but, Dr. Bourgault concluded, "douches are unnecessary for women—maiden, wife or mother." He added that women who feel "unclean" without their daily douche are trying to serve some "emotional need."

If disgust and ignorance about the functioning of your own reproductive organs counts as an "emotional need" then the anti-feminist logic of the device should be apparent to us. So too does it reveal how the origins of the term "douchebag" as an insult stems from not just contemptuousness towards women's anatomy and sexual health, but misunderstanding.

Of course, in today's medical advice world the "usually" in the "usually don't" claim has been unequivocally removed. Writing in 2004, Dr. Mary Ann Iannachione states it clearly: "douching is unnecessary and carries inherent risks... leaving women at greater risk of upper and lower vaginal tract infections." Herein we find the link between the medical appliance, the outdated practice of feminine hygiene, and the white men we recognize today as "douchebags." They are both, it bears repeating, useless sexist tools.

**Conclusion: "Don't Be a Douchebag"**

What should you do if you know or even care about someone who is douchebag? Well, apart from some kind of systemic forced re-education, I suggest you follow the rules established for Schmidt, the resident comic douchebag on the TV show *New Girl*. Every time Schmidt demands his First World privilege, his roommates cry foul and order him to…
stuff cash in the "douche jar," thereby collecting a punitive tax on the rich and douchey that can be used to subsidizes the house beer fund. Perhaps there is a lesson for social policy in this gag?

Of course there is! Our policy attack on social douchebaggery can begin with with taxes on yachts, Segways, private planes and vacation homes. Are you a single dude with more than one car? Pay up. Do you ride to work on the Google bus? You should pay taxes to San Francisco for the roads and bus stops your privatized mass transportation relies upon. Best of all, we can stop calling the threat to raise taxes on the rich "class warfare" and just start calling it the "douchebag tax." That's a ballot measure we can all get behind!

Of course, some of you are thinking, do we really need a white racial slur? Is not the vision of equality that we should aspire towards a world without the N-word or douchebag? Maybe. Maybe it is. But as everyone who is not colorblind can plainly see, this is not yet that day.

For the time being, this is the vernacular critique of whiteness that we've always needed, and its been right before our eyes all along. The term douchebag, again used as we already use it, has the power to name white ruling class power and white sexist privilege as noxious, selfish, toxic, foolish, and above all, dangerous.

Since the coming of colorblindness as the official ideology of neoliberal racism, we have needed a precise term with which to recognize and ridicule white privilege when we see it. So we here it is. Use it, and give the douchebags the thing they are always imagining anyways: reverse discrimination.

Michael Mark Cohen works as a professor of American Studies and African American Studies at UC Berkeley. He lives in the East Bay with his family, his garden, and his bee hives. You can find a webcast of his Intro to American Studies lectures on YouTube and his collection of Socialist cartoons at cartooningcapitalism.com.

[Illustration by Tara Jacoby]
"Douchebag": The White Racial Slur We've All Been Waiting For