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Nomination Hearing (1993)

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## Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993): News Article 17

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## Buffaloed at Penn

A freshman, the latest victim of the ideological fever known as political correctness, goes on trial at the University of Pennsylvania today. It's not irrelevant to note that the head of this institution, Sheldon Hackney, is President Clinton's nominee to head the National Endowment for the Humanities—and a man, university spokesmen insist, committed to free speech. That's reassuring to know, especially in light of the goings on at Penn.

There the disciplinary furies of the speech police have descended on freshman Eden Jacobowitz for shouting out of the window. Mr. Jacobowitz, it seems, was studying in his dorm room after midnight, when women members of a black sorority camped outside his window began stamping their feet and screaming and generally whooping it up.irate, Mr. Jacobowitz yelled that they were water-buffalo and that if they wanted to party there was a zoo nearby.

Thus began one of the more Kafkaesque chapters in the ongoing campus follies. The campus police rushed up and asked other dorm residents—some of whom in fact *had* been shouting racial slurs—if they had yelled out of the window. All of them denied it. Only Eden Jacobowitz stepped forward to say he had been yelling out of the window. The police asked the dorm residents if they knew the race of the noisemakers, and were told no—except for Eden Jacobowitz, who said yes. But that, he told the police, had nothing to do with his anger.

Mr. Jacobowitz, who thought one should not lie to the police, would pay a price for his forthrightness. He had yet to learn what they don't teach at freshman orientation; namely he had now entered a world where a charge of racism or sexism is as good as a conviction.

The racial harassment case mounted against him reads like something from the theater of the absurd. The campus judicial inquiry officer, Robin Read, determined that the student had intended a racial slur by the reference to water buffalo, which she said suggested "large

black animals that live in Africa." The student's reference to "zoo," Ms. Read charged, was also racial— notwithstanding the fact that it is a term commonly applied on campuses to noisy fraternity houses, as in the movie "Animal House." In the course of her continuing inquiry, Ms. Read asked Mr. Jacobowitz if he had been having "racist thoughts" the night of the crime. He had no such thoughts, he assured her.

Despite this official's determined belief that "water buffalo" is a racial slur, a variety of experts who could be expected to know a racial slur when they heard one, disagreed. Dr. Elijah Anderson, a leading black ethnographer and sociologist at Penn, has offered to testify in Mr. Jacobowitz's behalf, that water buffalo is not a racial slur, direct or indirect. Professor John Roberts, director of Afro-American Studies at Penn, and several other of the university's authorities on Afro-American culture and black-white relations emphatically agree.

Penn Professor Dan Ben-Amos, an expert in black folklore provided the key to the question of the water buffalo reference. When he determined that the student had attended Yeshiva and knew Hebrew, he suggested that the student had quickly translated an extremely common Hebrew word, "behameh," which literally means "water oxen" but is used in everyday language to mean fool or thoughtless person. It has no racial connotations whatsoever.

In the course of her interrogations, Ms. Read offered the freshman a deal. There would be no further charges if he would agree to hold a racial sensitivity seminar in his form and also agree to have a harassment charge noted on his transcript. Mr. Jacobowitz refused the offer, which is why he is now on trial, facing the possibility of expulsion from Penn if found guilty. What happens to him at today's tribunal should be of interest to anyone concerned with the state of reason and sanity on the campuses today.