

One of the central issues in African American literature is the use of language. Debate and conflict, as well as celebration, surrounds language use in African American literary art. Should the writer use the language and traditions of the enslaver? Should the writer create new traditions, using what is commonly known as colloquial language and occasionally thought of as a separate dialect? When do those lines blur? Arguably, the most contentious issue surrounding language use in the African American context is focused on a single word: the 'N word.' This is an issue so fraught that I am, in fact, using its substitute — connected as this substitute is to curses, to that which must not be uttered aloud (e.g. the 'F word'), it resonates.

Recently, the NAACP came down against the use of the N-word. In July 2007, a mock funeral and burial were held in Detroit for the N word, personifying it: "birthed to the unlikely couple Language and Hate, Nigger entered society to carry out his odium of black-skinned people." ("Obituary for the N-word," July 9, 2007).<sup>i</sup>

In no African American literature class is it possible to avoid the conversation about the N-word because the writers use it, either to show what the white characters say about the black characters (more common in the 19<sup>th</sup> century); or, to show how the black characters have either fallen into its use (one the one hand) or have co-opted its use as a method of self-empowerment (on the other). Indeed, I think it important to not avoid this conversation because part of my job is to model respectful interactions for and with my students.

This project has its origins in a pre-class discussion about a year ago with a student who feared that she was going to be invited to perform a reading in that day's class (I have students in all classes perform readings of the texts; sometimes it is pre-scheduled, sometimes it is not). She expressed her discomfort with saying "nigger" out loud—and asked whether she could substitute "negro" or "n-word" or just skip it altogether. We opened her concerns up for conversation when the class began.

The Rapaport Ethics Across the Curriculum Grant facilitated the development of this discussion from a small moment in class to a larger moment, or set of moments, outside of class. It also allowed for students not enrolled in the class to participate.

In the Winter term 2010, in my African American Literature 1900 to the Present course, our N-Word discussion took place in the Sorum Minerva House: present were 12 guests (2 faculty & 10 students) and my 12 students. Because I think it important for students to participate in the making of the conversation, the plan was generated by my students in class.

Please note: for privacy's sake, student names below have been made anonymous.

We began our evening with food and chat, introducing ourselves to one another as we went. We then move to a more formal introduction of the evening and of ourselves, going around and letting everyone know why we were there. We then moved to a word web/word association exercise.

Student A wrote the phrase "The N-Word" on the board (her decision to do so; I had said: "let's start by putting up the word itself on the board.). She then asked the audience to say the first thing that came to their mind. Here are the words that were generated:

Slavery

Lynching

Derogatory

Friends—particular atmospheres/contexts

Poverty--class

Racism

The south (one student from the south said that when the word is used there, she cringes; when it is used here in the north, it doesn't feel as bad.)

Rap—Weezy, Tupac

After about 5 minutes, and when we came to a lull, I noted to the group that no one was saying the actual word, itself. For various, quite good reasons, the word behind the euphemism was not actually being uttered. We had a brief comment or two about the references to the words on the board that reflected history; this led us logically to Student B's presentation on the history of the word, itself.

We then moved back into the Great Room, where Student C read Mona Lisa Saloy's "The 'N' Word" (in which the word is used 92 times); Student D read Evie Schockley's "The n-word," which does not use the word at all, but instead refers to it by its effects and by using a blank where the word is supposed to be. Dean Hathaway was seated behind Student C as he read; he did not see her there, and didn't see the startled and shocked look on her face as he read through the poem and said the word 92 times. He wrote in his short paper afterward that although he believes the word should be used in friendly situations (but only as the nigga form, not nigger), he felt odd about reading this poem in public because it uses the word so many times in quick succession.

Following the poetry readings (which were designed to put the word into play in the room in a non-confrontational way), we moved to small group discussion. My class led the discussion, 3 students worked as discussion guides/leaders; about 3 guests joined each group. I circulated throughout the Great Room, where most of the groups congregated, and into the classroom down the hall, where one of the groups went.

Each group decided where they wanted to go with the conversation. Some of my students summed up the arguments of Randall Kennedy, author of *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, and Jabari Asim, author of *The N Word: who can say it, who shouldn't, and why*. Others had brought their laptops, and played music clips of songs that used the word, and the same song with the word expurgated. Still others used the word web generated at the start of the evening, or they referred back to the copies of the poems that were read.

Fascinating topics arose:

Small groups: Black Men, overall, said that (in their own experience) the word was used by Black men to Black men, but rarely, if ever, by Black men to Black women. Black women said they couldn't remember many Black women that they know using it toward other Black women unless there was an overt joke between friends already in play (i.e. The use of the word, even when meant in a 'friendly' way, seemed to fall upon strongly gendered lines.) There were definite opinions about whether the word should be used or not: some said it could be used by black people amongst friends; others believed it shouldn't be used at all because it perpetuates the problem of the word — i.e. no amount of claiming empowerment changes the reality of the word and its negative connotations. The history of the word, for these students, takes over any intent of the user.

Other small groups concentrated on the use of the word in pop culture, and their choices of listening to the original songs, in which the word is used; or, listening to the censored/edited songs, in which the word is either bleeped out, or another word is inserted (voice-over/dubbed-in style). Still others in the small groups concentrated on the effect of the word on children, and what they learn—or do not learn—about the nuances of using the word. I.e. do they really get that it's a friendly atmosphere? What if they do not get it, and use it inappropriately?

After about half an hour, we moved all back into the Great Room to take the conversation from the small groups to the larger group. Group discussion leaders reported back to the large group what their small group had concentrated on as topics. In the larger group, other pieces of the conversation were presented, or spun out naturally from the small group reports: Some students contended that if black people use it, white people will never quite get that it is not okay for them to use it. Some black students said they had non-white friends who used it with everyone, including with them, and didn't think much of it. (e.g. Latina friend calling a black friend "nigga" might be okay, but white friends should be more cautious and should wait until invited).

Overall, anyone who thought using it in an "appropriate atmosphere" said using nigga was better than nigger. One white man (Student E) said that although he has a black friend (Student C) who has told Student E he could use it when talking/joking with Student C, Student E refuses to use it. He said he just cannot make himself use it.

Student A (a black woman) said that although she herself never uses it, and does not like it when it is used, she does not want to tell others that they can or cannot do. She really wants everyone—of whatever color—to stop using it, but that cessation should come from an individual's own volition and from self-reflection. Student A brought up comedy about the n-word—she focused on what is behind the comedy-- the anger. One black man said using the word is like smoking: smoking used to be thought of as a "cool thing" just as using the word (especially in the form of 'nigga') is thought of as "cool." But, as his metaphor shows, he thinks the use of the n-word is dangerous and is only perpetuated when used, no matter what the context or what the form.

Students who do think it is okay to use the word amongst friends did not give much of a response to this, except to say that they just didn't care about the use, as long as the context was friendly. In the larger group discussion, this 'camp'—those who think it can be used within a friendly context—were the least vocal in the larger group discussion.

Overall, the Sorum House discussion was a dialogue, not a debate; there was a tacit agreement that this interaction was about mutuality, about conversation—not argument. As I walked through the rooms and listened in on their conversations, I was struck by their respectful disagreement. I was also struck by the variable directions their conversations went: from gendered issues; to uses of the word by strangers vs. the use of the word by friends; to uses of the word in music (should they buy the song with the word in it, or the "PG-version"; to the impact of using the word around children; from anger to comedy.

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<sup>i</sup> [www.naacp.org/news/press/2007-07-09-2/index.htm](http://www.naacp.org/news/press/2007-07-09-2/index.htm)