



## HEAD NOTE TO THE “N-WORD” ESSAYS

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*Kathleen Pfeiffer*

When Emily Bernard’s eloquent essay, “Teaching the N-Word,” was first published in the August 2005 issue of *The American Scholar*, the essay’s sub-heading read, “A black professor, an all-white class, and the thing nobody will say.” Emily and I have been close friends for many years, having met because of our shared scholarly interest in Carl Van Vechten, the white Harlem Renaissance author whose novel *Nigger Heaven* has been the subject Emily’s and my scholarship in the past. Emily and I have often discussed this topic, “the thing nobody will say” in our classrooms, the so-called “n-word.” Emily’s experience as a black professor of African American literature in classes that often consist of all white students is one that poses very different challenges than mine, as a white professor of African-American literature in classes that often include a multi-racial student body. This past semester, my “African-American Literature” class included an unusually thoughtful and articulate group of students, and led to class discussions that were particularly sensitive and insightful, especially around difficult topics, such as hate speech and racial epithets. As such, I offered the students a paper assignment that invited them to read and respond to Emily Bernard’s essay, inviting them to reflect on their own experience with the “n-word” both in the classroom, and out in the world. The topic was optional, and not all students chose it; those who did, however,

wrote some of the most nuanced and interesting essays I've read in a long time. Four of them are reprinted here.



## LEARNING “THE N-WORD”

*Adam Cherry*

Before this course, and before reading “Teaching The N-Word” by Emily Bernard, I was of the mindset that words are words. Their meanings are arbitrarily selected, and so language should be fluid. Therefore, a word like “nigger” can be erased or assigned a new, more positive meaning. However, my simplistic view has been complicated by the use of this word in our course texts and Bernard’s essay which struggles to work out its role in language.

In her article, Bernard often contradicts herself when trying to determine what role she wants the “n-word” to play in her life. She ultimately can’t come to one conclusion, perhaps because of her personal investment in the topic. The best way to summarize what Bernard learns is that “nigger” means a lot of different things to different people. Embedded in American culture, the word’s impact cannot be studied as one unified American experience.

Bernard tells her students that she doesn’t hold a special place of pain for the “n-word,” only to turn around and admit she is lying. Her motivation for doing so seems to be that an honest admission could squelch classroom debate. In reality, Bernard sees some truth in her students’ fears that saying the word out loud could annihilate her. The “n-word” has deep seeds of influence in her life. It reminds her of the past struggles of her race and creates anxiety in her own life. It is why Bernard has to dress professionally to feel like a professional. It is why she is hesitant to have students call her Emily, and why

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Before this course, and before reading “Teaching The N-Word” by Emily Bernard, I was of the mindset that words are words. Their meanings are arbitrarily selected, and so language should be fluid. Therefore, a word like “nigger” can be erased or assigned a new, more positive meaning. However, my simplistic view has been complicated by the use of this word in our course texts and Bernard’s essay which struggles to work out its role in language.

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Bernard tells her students that she doesn’t hold a special place of pain for the “n-word,” only to turn around and admit she is lying. Her motivation for doing so seems to be that an honest admission could squelch classroom debate. In reality, Bernard sees some truth in her students’ fears that saying the word out loud could annihilate her. The “n-word” has deep seeds of influence in her life. It reminds her of the past struggles of her race and creates anxiety in her own life. It is why Bernard has to dress professionally to feel like a professional. It is why she is hesitant to have students call her Emily, and why

she hears “queer” and “fag” shouted from traffic and has to wonder if “nigger” will be next.

Above all, Bernard wants respect for a word that once defined, and confined, an entire people. She was pleased by a student’s indignation in refusing to say the “n-word” for that reason. While Bernard almost challenges her class to say it, part of her wants them to be afraid. She seems to want the “n-word” to be examined as part of the African-American experience, but not used outside of this purpose. Perhaps she secretly wants the negative connotations to remain in order to motivate her further to improve her own quality of life. Or maybe she puts her copy of “Nigger” on her bookshelf, where it is half-hidden but still available, so she is reminded to respect those who suffered to make her opportunities possible. Without their lives being re-told, “nigger” would not be spoken in a literary sense.

For the “n-word” to be respected today, though, it had to have been used to cause mental and physical harm in the past. From the readings this semester, there are four major reasons why the word was directed at slaves and blacks. The literary works attempt to portray the way whites would unleash anger by referring to a black person as a “nigger.” They show the way the word was used to label the blacks as worthless, as well as to reinforce the notion of blacks as subservient. Finally, and in stark contrast to the other uses of the word, “nigger” is used almost as a term of endearment by Uncle Julius in Charles Chestnut’s *Conjure Tales* (1899).

Whites in the novels often use the “n-word” to express anger about a situation. Frederick Douglass says that the “watch-words” of proponents of slavery were “Damn the Abolitionists!” and “Damn the Niggers!” (134) This anger wasn’t an example of hating slaves solely to hate slaves, though. Slaveholders were dependent on slave labor, so their anger was fed by the fragility of their livelihoods.

The anger Mrs. B. and Mary direct at Frado in “Our Nig” by Harriet E. Wilson (1859, rediscovered in 1982) is also based on their own insecurities. Mrs. B. tells Jack that he seems “most

pleased with the little nigger” (27), referring to Frado this way out of jealousy. Mrs. B. can’t understand why her own children would rather spend time with Frado, a servant, than with their mother. Mary, like her mother, addresses Frado as “nigger” only when she is angry about being one-upped. This is apparent when Mary is embarrassed by falling in the stream. The whole scene arose because Mary was upset to be “walking with a nigger” to school (31). Afraid this might hurt her popularity, Mary tried, but failed, to teach Frado a lesson. These are examples of authors using the “n-word” to characterize the person saying it more than to characterize the recipient.

Two closely related uses of the “n-word” to disparage racial identity appear in work by Frederick Douglass and Harriet Wilson. Douglass writes that a common saying was “that it was worth a half-cent to kill a ‘nigger,’ and a half cent to bury one” (69). This is the best example of the “n-word” being used to deem an entire race as worthless. This epithet works to remind slaves what their lives are worth to their owners, which is nothing so long as there are many slaves. To the slaveholder, a “nigger” is a slave, and the two must not be separated. That is why Douglass cannot be taught to read, because, as Mr. Auld said, “It would forever unfit him to be a slave” (*Life of Frederick Douglass* 78). Auld doesn’t feel he has to acknowledge the person underneath the slave because the slave is considered uneducated. Some slaves are so broken-down that they do not think they deserve identities apart from that of slaves. Similarly, Wilson shows that Frado doesn’t expect to sleep in a real room, because, as Mrs. B. says, “It’s good enough for a nigger” (26). If you are never given equal opportunities, it would be easy to think you don’t deserve them.

Incredibly, to me, “Their Eyes Were Watching God” (Zora Neale Hurston, 1937) shows that even those oppressed by the term “nigger” used it to denigrate members of their own race. Both Nanny and Phoeby call certain black men “trashy niggers.” After Tea Cake gets into the fight at the card game, he tells Janie how he “grabbed dat nigger” (127). Nanny, Phoeby and Tea Cake use the term to express how they think

some members are bringing down the race. Here Hurston points out how in-fighting only leads to more feelings of worthlessness within the black community.

These feelings of worthlessness create the stage for slaveholders and whites to make African-Americans completely subservient. In this sample of literature, the “n-word” is used by whites to reinforce the role of blacks as people who obey orders. Really, they are not seen as people by their white brethren in these novels, but as “doers of tasks.” Mrs. B. sums up their thought process when she says she doesn’t “mind the nigger” in Frado but would “like a dozen better” (26). Again, she is separating the so-called “nigger” part of Frado that does chores from the human part that has feelings. The two, of course, can never really be separated.

The most obvious example of the “n-word” as a denigrating term comes from Chestnut’s “The Passing of Grandison” (*The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*, 1899). Grandison’s owner thought he had his slave right where he wanted him, pleased as can be to complete any task, or obey any order. Grandison has his owner convinced that he wants to hit an abolitionist, to which the colonel replies, “It would serve ‘em right to be hit by a nigger!” (194). The colonel uses the “n-word” here because he finds the situation so ironic. Abolitionists believe his “nigger” self, the worker part of a man, wants to be freed, when really he wants to punch them in the jaw! The real irony was yet to come, as the “nigger” fooled everyone.

The final way the “n-word” is used in African American literature is the hardest to analyze. Both whites and blacks occasionally use the word as a term of endearment, with entirely different meanings in mind. In her novel *Passing* (1929), Nella Larsen depicts her character Jack lovingly calling Clare “Nig” because he swears her skin is getting darker. I can only guess what point Larsen was trying to make here. Jack had displayed his lack of appreciation for the black race, so I would think he would avoid bringing them up in conversation. He must not feel threatened because he thinks he is surrounded by white folks.

On the other end of the spectrum is Uncle Julius, who frequently uses “nigger” as a noun (“de niggers”) and as an adjective (“nigger chilluns”). He sounds as if he is talking about a people that are foreign to him, since he doesn’t refer to them as “My People” or “We.” But He is just putting on a show for his white employers, more specifically Annie, who couldn’t get enough of his stories of what seemed like a foreign people. Julius tells the stories because he is proud of his people, and he has no problem calling them “niggers,” since they have traditionally gone by that name. *Conjure Tales* (1899) did come out at a time when black culture was coming into “vogue,” which also allowed the term to be used as an endearment.

While the “n-word” has come to represent all these things through African American Literature, you will still never hear it coming out of my mouth. I don’t claim to know what that word means to every African-American, so I’ve decided to err on the side of caution. I am not saying this to be politically correct. Rather, I want to show respect to others who may have had very different experiences from my own. While the history of the “n-word” is something we can teach, the term is still too painful for too many people for it to become a part of everyday vernacular.



## MALICIOUSNESS: LEARNING THE “N-WORD”

*Chelsey Cook*

One of the most controversial and difficult words to utter in the English language is *nigger*. Most will speak the word with a whisper, most won’t look at anybody when this word escapes their lips. Emily Bernard, in her essay “Teaching the N-Word” makes this observation about a student of hers, Eric, while he

sits in her office. What is it that truly makes this word so terrible (aside from the obvious—its origin from when whites enslaved blacks and other races) that it is feared to be spoken? It is a despicable and terribly degrading word—but even in intellectual conversation, *nigger* is not used, not spoken of, not acknowledged with such blindness that this sightlessness gives it power. The weight of *nigger* reminds all who speak it of the hellish past from which it derives, how it is used and the absolute fear that if anyone hears her use it, that person would be called racist. The emotional responses to *nigger* are buried deep in the psyche of American culture on all sides of race, gender and age.

My best friend when I was a child, was a boy named Jerry. We went to school together. He was good at math and science; I was good at reading and comprehension. I was a grade lower than he, but we were in a split class, where the advanced students wouldn't be held back by the rest of the class, but were not in an upper grade. I was in a class with Jerry; we were paired together often to help each other by our teacher. I was seven when one of the other students saw us together on the playground. He said, "Look at the nigger." Jerry shut down. It was as though Jerry had deflated and there wasn't anything left of my best friend. I didn't know that the term meant, but I knew that I didn't like it. Next the boy said, "And here's a nigger lover." This is my first incident with *nigger*. Never before had I ever heard of the term. My education about *nigger* began, whether I liked it or not.

Even after my mother explained it, we were still best friends. At that moment I had learned something new—that for some reason skin color mattered. One thing I do remember is my mother said color mattered to some, but to others it didn't and we are in the second category. I asked if it meant I had to stop being friends with Jerry and she said absolutely not. In my seven-year-old world, what Mother said was law.

Children learn from an early age about differences between themselves and others. Never before or after the incident with Jerry have I ever considered uttering *nigger* as an in-

sult to anyone. Bernard has a passage which directly relates to my experience. “. . . the n-word is the ‘trump card, the nuclear bomb of racial epithets’ . . . ‘nuclear bombs annihilate. What do you imagine will be destroyed if you guys use the word in here?’ . . . Me. It is my annihilation they imagine” (Bernard 6). This is what had happened when I was seven. I watched the obliteration of a friend and didn’t know it. Didn’t understand it. Never before, nor after have I ever used *nigger* as an insult and I never will.

There is a fear in saying *nigger*. A huge fear. To say it, it seems, is to be racist, or at least that is what society has come to believe. Even in intellectual conversation, such as in Bernard’s class (or even Professor Pfeiffer’s class) it is hardly, if ever, mentioned. What is imagined when someone even just says *racist*, is that the person being accused of being racist has pronounced some racial epithet—usually *nigger*. The word *racist* makes people so very uncomfortable that they practically squirm in their seats. Using the word *nigger*, most barely are able to make it audible to those around them and then, no one meets each others’ eyes. Being called *racist* takes away a person’s credibility, taking all respect and turning him/her into an object of pity and disgust.

Bernard declares that “. . . something is lost when you don’t articulate it, especially if the context almost demands its articulation” (Bernard 5). The question is “what is lost?” but the answer to that will be different for each person. Personally, I believe what is lost is the acknowledgement of the past: of how blacks were enslaved and white supremacy reigned with such an iron fist that the country watered its crops with blood. What is lost is the respect for those who have withstood such torturous treatment yet have been able to stand proudly as survivors. What is lost is an acknowledgement of the cruelty of white culture. What is lost is the weight that settles uncomfortably on the shoulders of all who say it or hear it. What is lost is the dead silence after someone mentions the word—the tension of who will say what next.

In my hometown, Battle Creek, I see people all around

me who scarcely live above the poverty line. Some are not even *that* lucky. I have been called a “stupid white bitch” by black girls and a “white whore” by black men. My response: none. In my neighborhood, if I had responded in any manner (even to simply refute their claim) I would be called racist and attacked by three or four people. These are not very good odds for a skinny little girl on her own.

What is most interesting is that this past summer there was a gang war in the neighborhood between the Bloods (those who wear red), the Jays (blue) and the Nights (black). Most of the Bloods were black, the Jays were mixed black and white, the Nights—mostly black. One night a Blood walked with me for a short distance while I was walking my dogs. I understood why—it is standard that those uninvolved be provided an escort through “hot” territory. It was one of the few times I had heard anyone use manners and politely call me “ma’am” in my home neighborhood. The Bloods were the most polite black men I had ever come across.

Bernard had an incident where someone yelled out a car window “Queers! Fag!” (Bernard 6) and she is stunned as the car pulled away. Like Bernard, I too was stunned when these incidents happened. What had I done to deserve to be called a *bitch*, *whore* or *nigger lover*? People are not capable of looking someone in the eye and calling another this—just like most are not able to say *nigger* to someone without dropping their eyes. Bernard also notices how *nigger* hadn’t been shouted at her—yet. It is as though she waits to be slapped in the face with it. She tries to lie about not caring, but she does, and admits it on page two of “Teaching the N-Word.” She lies because she wants her class to say the word, to understand what it means to say it and to accept the responsibility of knowing how a single word can destroy any person it is directed at. No matter the context, the emotions and hatred behind the word boil over. No one wants to offend the person she/he is talking to, so is it possible to discuss *nigger* and not offend someone? People are offended by even reading the word.

Culture demands that only certain ethnic groups are al-

lowed to articulate *nigger*. Whites are not on the list. Blacks, especially the men, use *nig*, *nigga*, *nigger*, and many of the other forms in everyday usage. Brothers, friends, family, all are referred to in one of these styles. Especially in the lower-class, almost-under-poverty-level neighborhoods. I heard this constantly as I grew up, but never joined in. First, because I never wanted to. Second, whenever someone who was *white* responded, the black men reacted quickly and fiercely. It is acceptable within the confines of race to call another such a deplorable name. It is not when two different races are together. It is not acceptable to even mention *nigger* in the presence of other races.

Even without talking about the word *nigger*, children learn about it. They learn about the meaning, the hurt and the consequences of when and how *nigger* is used. Even though my mother explained it to me when I was a child, everyone learns of it differently. The boy who had called me a *nigger lover* and my best friend *nigger* almost certainly wasn't taught to say that, or told to. He more than likely heard a parent use the term in conversation. Yet he used the term, because his parents had. In most kids' minds if a parent does or says something then the child can too. With parents using *nigger*, it makes me wonder what beliefs they hold and what kind of beliefs will be passed down to the child. Children learn almost all of their stances (such as politics, religion, etc.) from parents. If he hadn't said *nigger* to me, I wouldn't have learned about it until later on—perhaps in literature and history classes, a far more appropriate situation to learn about *nigger*.

The oppressiveness of *nigger* bears down on society, especially when the topic comes so close that it skirts on the edges of *nigger*, including ideas such as racism, slavery and even novels that have the title of *Our Nig*, *Nigger Heaven* or *Nigger*. To completely ignore the issue of what *nigger* means and the emotions it evokes doesn't help the problem; it only hinders any progress that could be made. *Nigger* isn't something to dust off once in a while when someone decides that it would be a good idea to talk about. Race isn't something that people can pre-

tend doesn't exist. Racism still prevails, even in silence. Choosing not to say *nigger*, or any other words, doesn't make the problem go away, nor does it mean those who don't say it are not racist. Just because someone says the word *nigger*, however, doesn't mean he/she is racist.

Bernard's last few paragraphs point to unacknowledged issues that *nigger* brings to light. Colleen Cullen's poem "Incident" is posted for her students to comment about.

Once riding in old Baltimore,  
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,  
I saw a Baltimorean  
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,  
And he was no whit bigger,  
And so I smiled, but he poked out  
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore  
From May until December;  
Of all the things that happened there  
That's all that I remember.

Only one person responds and that is weeks later, after much prodding. Eric claims he will write about it. Bernard tucks her novel, *Nigger*, on a shelf where it is hard to see. These actions suggest that no one actually wants to deal with *nigger* head-on. This is exactly what we all do, myself included—we ignore the problems that do not have a fluffy, nice and neat solution wrapped up with a frilly bow like a Christmas present. Unfortunately, we give more power to *nigger* when we do not speak it, when we don't acknowledge it in any venue. And as the power grows, who will stop it? Who will allow themselves to be called a racist, to bear all the maliciousness of all races to attempt to take away the power that *nigger* holds over all of us? Who will change how a child learns the term *nigger*?



## RECLAIMING THE TERM: THE “N-WORD”

*Liz DePaoli*

Emily Bernard’s essay, “Teaching the N-Word,” struggles to articulate the complex and profound implications of the word ‘nigger’ not only in African American literature, but also in everyday life. Her essay appears openly confessional and personal at times, relating how the word ‘nigger’ has affected her own life, while other times her writing is consciously restrained as she resists becoming too familiar with both the reader and her students. This tension within her essay reflects how powerfully the word “nigger” promotes a distinct kind of fear. For Bernard, the fear of hearing the word “nigger,” whether from the mouth of a respected colleague or a stranger on the street, is real and oppressive, while her students fear the act of voicing such a notorious racial epithet and its consequences. This fear paralyzes her students during class discussions, unwilling to say “nigger” out loud, yet Bernard strives to assert her own control over the word’s power and the personal connotation it holds within her own self and history.

Throughout the essay, Bernard emphasizes how the classroom’s racial dynamic dictates, and ultimately restrains, the discussion on the n-word in African American literature. As a black professor teaching an all-white, and mostly male, group of students, Bernard realizes how her own presence influences class discussions as she asks them collectively, “Would you be able to say it [‘nigger’] if I weren’t here?” (4). While some deny this would make any difference, one student boldly asserts that her absence would in fact make it easier to say the word. Further on, one of her students quotes author and journalist Farai Chideya, stating, “she says that the n-word is the ‘trump card,

the nuclear bomb of racial epithets” (6). Bernard then asks her students what would be destroyed by using the word, with the unanimous, yet unspoken reply, “Me. It is my annihilation they imagine” (6). This implicit response not only reveals how Bernard’s race is omnipresent, controlling and shaping the way students discuss the word “nigger,” but also emphasizes the idea of the word itself being a powerful and destructive weapon of bigotry. It is assumed to be the equivalent of the nuclear bomb in terms of racial epithets, which undeniably elevates the term beyond its implied meaning; it is revered as this all-powerful presence.

Bernard critiques this assumption indirectly, through her discussion of the word “queer” compared to the word “nigger” toward the beginning of her essay. As one of her students Eric claims he “embraces” the term “queer,” Bernard readily questions whether the word “nigger” can be so easily reclaimed and transformed. Eric soon becomes uncomfortable addressing the issue; he clearly sees the word “nigger” as far more complicated, and perhaps powerful, than the word “queer.” Later in her essay, Bernard once again encounters the word “queer,” as a group of male students yell out the derogatory term toward a group of students on the sidewalk while stuck in traffic. Bernard becomes paralyzed upon hearing those words being crudely shouted and repeats silently to herself, “Queer. Fag. Annihilating, surely” (6). In this instance, Bernard clearly sees the words “queer” and “fag” as equally powerful as “nigger,” being both capable of the violent and destructive act of “annihilation.” Yet she is stunned to see that no one else has reacted to the derogatory shouts: “All around me, students and parents marched to their destinations, as if they hadn’t heard” (6). For Bernard, elevating the word “nigger” above other equally prejudiced and dangerous terms is a mistake. Not only does this peculiar hierarchy indirectly devalue other derogatory names such as “fag,” but also gives the word “nigger” a kind of absolute power within the English language. This power stems not only from her students’ fear about voicing the epithet, but also from Bernard’s own fear.

This power of the word “nigger” manifests itself bodily as Bernard’s students appear to be “strangled” as they struggle to say the word out loud. The same sort of physical violence affects the students just hearing the word, as one student observes, “I saw us all collectively cringing” (4). Others, like Eric earlier in the essay, grow more and more uncomfortable using the term, while many avoid the word “nigger” altogether, opting to use its abbreviation. The effect the word has on Bernard’s students is real, whether it is a violent allusion to strangulation or paralysis. One student in particular, Lauren, explicitly voices her fear of the word as she states,

“I am afraid of how I will be affected by saying it” (6). Here, Lauren seems to suggest she will be changed in some way, tainted even, by saying the word out loud. Lauren’s reasoning transforms the word “nigger” into something much more sinister and tangible than just a racist term; she admits that the word would have *control over her*. Her own fear lends power to the word “nigger,” which another student, Nate, quickly identifies as the problem. He asks, “Don’t you grant a word power by not saying it? Aren’t we, in some way, amplifying its ugliness by avoiding it?” (6). Bernard seems to endorse this, as she struggles to encourage her students to say the word “nigger” rather than ‘the n-word’ when talking about texts that explicitly use the word freely. She claims, “something is lost when you don’t articulate it, especially if the context demands it articulation” (5). Bernard strives to promote a discussion on the word “nigger” in academic terms, rather than in terms of its social implications. She clearly wants her students to set aside their fears and familiarity with the term and instead approach the word’s meaning as defined by the literature. Bernard herself struggles to separate her own personal relationship with the term and her fears while discussing the word in its literary context. She becomes haunted by the idea of the word “nigger” always on the verge of exploding from the mouths of all the white people in her life.

Nella Larsen, in her novel *Passing* (1929), also articulates the fear of the word “nigger” discharging from the mouth of a

white person and having a paralyzing effect on African Americans. As Clare's husband teasingly calls Clare "nig" and then asserts, "I know your no nigger. I draw the line at that. No Niggers in my family," Irene becomes more and more enraged, yet paralyzed, unable to lash out against Mr. Bellew (40). She holds back her emotions while remarking it was "unbelievable and astonishing that four people could sit so unruffled, so ostensibly friendly, while they were in reality seething with anger, mortification, shame"(42). While Irene undoubtedly restrains herself for Clare's sake, the "shame" and "mortification" she expresses also seems to hold back her desire to stand up against Bellew. After the incident, Irene feels humiliated, insulted, and outraged at Clare, which once again emphasizes the powerfully negative effect hearing the word "nigger" has on Irene as she feels a mixture of shame and anger. For Clare's character, being called "nig" through her husband's seemingly playful teasing, the effect of the word becomes even more complicated. Clare boldly embraces the name in front of Irene and Gertrude as she asks them, "Did you hear what Jack called me?" (39). Clara does nothing to discourage her husband, Jack, from using the name as a term of endearment, but rather passively accepts the label. Clare's passivity stems directly from her act of 'passing' as a white woman. Clare's life with Jack is that of a white woman, so that the term "nig" loses its power and the negative hold it claims over Irene. Later on in the novel, however, as Clare transitions back into the black community, she admits to Irene she cannot bear to hear Jack call her such an offensive name. Clearly Larsen portrays the power of the word "nigger" in terms of race; that is, the term becomes deeply offensive for blacks while whites use the term almost playfully and certainly unabashedly.

In Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) the peculiar abbreviation of "nigger" seems omnipresent throughout the novel. Wilson's heroine, Frado, is alternatively referred to Nig, or Frado, depending on context in the narrative and the character speaking to her. This interchangeable identity, asserted even by the narrator of the story, implies a distinct kind of loss

of identity for Frado as an individual. Wilson, by blending Frado's character with the generalized racial term "nig," shows through Frado the suffering of free blacks in America. Also, by including in her title the blaring racial epithet "nig," Wilson emphasizes her novel as intrinsically tied to racial terms. Frado's story is wholly dependent upon her race, and therefore, the racist views of others, so that the color of her skin plays a major role throughout the narrative. The novel's bold title forces the reader to recognize this fact, but that does not necessarily mean Wilson is celebrating the term "nig," but rather asserting its importance in her story. The phrase *Our Nig* symbolizes Frado's domesticated life of slavery, since the possessive 'our' insinuates ownership, as well as family unity. Further, the derogatory epithet "nig" of *Our Nig* emphasizes Frado's identity in terms of race. The novel as a whole reflects Wilson's carefully and deliberately chosen title.

I remember discussing the significance of Wilson's title in Professor Pfeiffer's class, and in particular one student who claimed "nig" was a term of endearment, and somehow positively used towards blacks in antebellum America. The student was white and was quickly rebuked by a black student, who articulated the fact that "nig," being an abbreviation of "nigger" was still very derogatory towards blacks. I appreciated her passion and the kind of authentic authority she offered for the class. Looking back on the incident, I am reminded of Bernard's own student Eric who says, after struggling with their discussion on the word "nigger," "I really wish there was a black student in our class" (2). In our own classroom discussions, having a white professor teaching African American literature to a mixed classroom of white and black students, I feel students may talk more freely about texts using the word "nigger" in part because we have a mixed class; the white students, as Bernard would say, take their cues from the black students in discussing and using these racial epithets.

Ultimately, the word "nigger" in works of African American literature, such as *Passing* and *Our Nig*, demands to be recognized because it plays such an intrinsic part in the narrative

and the author's intention. Bernard realizes that the text's significance is lost by ignoring the word, and I agree the word "nigger" has a special place within African American literature because the word is used on the author's own terms. Unlike Bernard's student Lauren, writers like Wilson and Larsen do not allow the word to control them, but rather they reclaim the term by using it in their own texts and in their own voice, manipulating the epithet so that it works for their literary goals, rather than against them.



## A STUDENT OF THE N-WORD

*Brian Rick*

I used to frequent Canadian bars religiously every weekend from the week of my nineteenth birthday up until the week before my twenty-first birthday. Now, at thirty-one years of age, I look back at the time spent in those bars and nightclubs and one experience sticks out more than any other. It had nothing to do with meeting and dancing with an extremely attractive woman. It had nothing to do with having a really good time drinking with some of my closest buddies. In fact, the night consisted of shooting countless games of pool, while I felt bored out of my mind, and nursed the same Molson Canadian brew.

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It's Sunday morning. I'm twenty years old and don't have to work Monday so I make the decision to go to the bar tonight. I call my friend Jason who also wants to go to the bar. I continue calling my friends, one by one, to see if they are in the mood for drinking and dancing. Everyone seems to have to work on Monday except for my friends Keenan and Steve.

They want to go to Canada too. At 9 p.m., we all pile in the car and head for Windsor. We walk to our favorite bar and stand at the back of the ridiculously long line. We start complaining between ourselves about the line and two gentlemen in front of us alert us to the fact that it's "black night" at the Windsor Music Café, just around the corner. As the men tell us this, they look at Keenan and Steve for a minute before turning back around. Our group confers for a moment and we decide to leave the line and head to the Windsor Music Café.

The line there is short so we only wait about fifteen minutes before heading inside. I break immediately for the bar but before I make it about three paces, I am stopped by a burly white man wearing a black t-shirt with the word security in big, white, block letters. He asks me to lift my shirt and proceeds to check me for weapons before running the metal detector wand over my front side and then my back. After my "pat down," I continue to the bar and glance back to see that Jason, Keenan, and Steve are going through the same security procedures that I did. I order four beers and pass them around when everyone finally congregates at the bar. Keenan and Steve immediately leave to hit the dance floor while Jason and I stay by the bar. I notice that we are the only two white folks in the place that weren't bar staff or security.

As I take my third slug of beer, five black guys walk up to Jason and I and ask "The fuck you white boys doin' in here?" I respond with the word, "Chillin'." They chuckle, announce to us that we are "stupid mufuckin' white boys" and before walking off, they insinuate that we should leave. I look for Keenan and Steve and spot them on the dance floor having a great time so to avoid a confrontation, Jason and I head for the back of the club to shoot pool and to stay out of everyone's way.

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It's been a long time since I thought about that night at the bar but while reading Emily Bernard's essay, I couldn't think of anything else. While the "N-word" possesses a much more violent and oppressive past than "stupid mufuckin' white boys"

ever could, after that night at the bar, it took me a while to not feel awkward in large groups of black people when before, it wasn't that big of a deal. In this regard, I can understand why Bernard has trouble crossing busy roads without remembering her incident. I can also understand why she thinks that everyone has the "N-word" deep in their throat even if they haven't used that word . . . yet. She pointed out to her class that "just because a person refuses to say 'nigger,' that doesn't mean that person is not a racist." People are capable of using that slur at any time even if they haven't done it in the past.

Personally, I don't expect my friends to ever lapse and throw my race in my face because unlike Bernard, my friends don't show me poetry about their racist grandmother who freely used the word "honky." They also don't tell me about their cousin who decided to vote for the "cracker" in the election because of the white politician's pro-workingman stance. I think the difference between my experience and Emily Bernard's is that the history of the "N-word" is more extensive and has more tangible hatred, oppression, and violence associated with it than "honky", "cracker," or "stupid mufuckin' white boy" ever could.

Bernard's experience at 16 years of age stuck with her for her entire life whereas my experience stuck with me for maybe a year, if that. Her fear that someone would assault her with the "N-word" influenced many aspects of her adult life. While out drinking with her friend and colleague, she wasn't able to get a bit tipsy without thinking that the white patrons of the restaurant might call her the "N-word" or at least associate her with the word in their minds. While teaching, she wasn't able to allow herself to dress casually in the classroom because she wasn't white and couldn't indulge herself in the white privilege of dressing down. However, I concur with her student, Eric, who said that regardless of race, professors should dress professionally. She also wants her students to disassociate her from the "N-word" by constantly mentioning how highly educated she is and how she earned her degrees from Yale. Even by doing all of these things, she is still fearful that someone will

call her the “N-word” or at least subconsciously think she is one anyway.

Frankly, I think that is the thesis of Bernard’s “Teaching the N-word” essay. After my experience at that bar, I felt, like I mentioned earlier, awkward in the company of black people when I was the only, or one of the few, white people in the room. However, I never felt that I had to dress in a certain way to keep black people from thinking I was a “stupid mufuckin’ white boy.” I never felt that I couldn’t catch a buzz out in public without the fear of being referred to as a “stupid mufuckin’ white boy.” I never felt the need to alter my personality, conduct, or style of dress in order to avoid this accusation. I also have never felt the need to advertise my educational achievements in the company of black folks. This could be simply because Emily Bernard and I are different people, think differently, or react to things differently. It also could mean that the slurs we experienced are different, have different connotations, and have different histories.

The “N-word” is powerful. There is no doubt about it. When I hear “stupid mufuckin’ white boy,” I don’t think of the history of my people being beaten and hung from trees. I don’t think of white families being systematically torn apart to in order to instill the belief that the white race is less than human and should be subservient to another race. I am also not reminded of an entire nation’s acceptance of enslaving white men to conduct hard, thankless, and strenuous labor that provided benefits that the white man was never able to partake in. When I was called a “stupid mufuckin’ white boy,” none of that history repeated itself in my mind my entire life, like it obviously did when Bernard was called the “N-word.” When Jason and I were called “mufuckin’ white boys” at the nightclub, all I thought about was the incredibly rude and unbelievably ignorant people who had approached us at the bar. I was angry at them, became self-conscious, and started to wonder how many people there at the bar were also upset that Jason and I had crashed “black night.” However, it didn’t take me to a place where I had to envision the systematic cruelty

that my ancestors were historically subjected to and the repercussions that still exist to this day.

I believe that African American literature uses the “N-word” because of its history. African American literature not using the “N-word” would be like a WWII film refusing to mention how Jews were rounded up and exterminated in mass numbers. It would be a disservice to anyone watching the film because it wouldn’t allow the viewer to see the utter inhumanity and brutality that the Nazis inflicted upon an entire race of people. The raw and disgusting elements of the concentration camps need to be mentioned so we can all remember the viciousness of the Holocaust and consciously do everything we can to prevent something like that from ever reoccurring.

It’s the same with slavery. If the “N-word” is taken out of African American literature, then slavery might as well be taken out of the history books. If you eliminate the word, then you eliminate the fact that slavery ever existed and that the ramifications of slavery still exist to this day. The “N-word” is a vile and hateful word just as slavery was a vile and hateful institution. If Fredrick Douglass refused to refer to the overseer as “the slave breaker” and refused to note that Mr. Covey used the “N-word,” it more sounds like he just had a mean boss as opposed to someone who beat and tortured him because he was a black man. If Claire’s husband Jack, in “Passing,” didn’t refer to her as “Nig” and didn’t use the “N-word” at all, the motivation of Claire to leave her stable lifestyle and hang out with other blacks would not be so clear. When Dick Owens tries to free Grandison, it’s not because he genuinely thinks that slavery is wrong and wants to help eliminate the institution; he’s doing it because he wants to win the love of a girl. He is using Grandison as an inhuman pawn for his own personal gain. This sounds to me like the definition of slavery. The “N-word” in African American literature serves to remind us what an evil and reprehensible institution slavery was and since the “N-word” is still used now, it proves that slavery’s effects last even to this day.

Personally, I could do without ever hearing someone use

the word again. I don't need to hear it being used as a salutation by my black friends and I could do without hearing it used by ignorant racists who think my short hair and goatee is indicative of Neo-Nazi sympathy. Of course I don't speak for all Americans. I don't even speak for all *white* Americans. I can only speak for myself and express my own preferences. However, I think it would be detrimental to African American literature to remove the "N-word" from the pages of such books as "Our Nig" and "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass," and even literature that is not necessarily African American such as "Huckleberry Finn" and "Tom Sawyer."

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While searching my pockets for a buck's worth of quarters so Jason and I could shoot another game of pool, Steve and Keenan walked up to us. I look at my watch and realize that it's almost closing time. They ask us why we never went out to the dance floor and why they never saw us mingling with anyone. I recount the happenings at the bar and they smile.

"What do you think the guys in line at the other bar were saying when they told us that it's 'black night' at the Windsor Music Café? They were basically saying that we should leave and go be among our own," Steve said. "They didn't want us to crash their 'white night'."

I hadn't thought about it like that.

"Also, don't you think it's somewhat ironic that we have never been patted down or frisked at predominately white bars?" Keenan asked. "What you guys experienced was the norm for us."

I hadn't thought about that either. Emily Bernard's essay combined with Countee Cullen's "Incident" allowed me to recollect my experience, thus helping me to better understand why the "N-word" is so volatile even in 2009.

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