

## **Statement on Non-Verbalization of Racial Slurs and the N-word: Cultivating Antiracist and Anticolonial Classroom Communities**

Over the past few months, students have written to the department chair, program directors, and more publicly about several incidents in which a white or non-Black English department instructor has verbalized the N-word as part of reading from or quoting a course text. BIPOC students in particular have shared their experience hearing the N-word read aloud in class and the alienation, harm, and lasting pain this has caused. As a department committed to antiracism and anticolonialism, we strive to cultivate supportive and productive classroom environments, and the verbalization of the N-word by white and non-Black faculty and students is harmful and pedagogically damaging.

This is not a question of censorship or academic freedom. While our work requires at times that we engage with texts that use this language, either for historical, aesthetic, or political reasons, it also requires that we do so in a manner that does not harm our students. Thus, how we engage with such texts raises a question of power and what is given life and voice to, by whom, and when. It also raises a question of the kinds of emotional, intellectual, and welcoming spaces we create in our courses, and whether these spaces enable all of our students to learn. In the context of race and power, the verbalizing of the N-word and other racialized terms becomes experienced as slurs that not only harms students, especially students who disproportionately bear the weight and violence of the N-word's and other racist language's history; it also significantly interrupts learning. BIPOC students repeatedly report that the verbalizing of racial slurs by white faculty and students harms them and their ability to learn in our classes. As importantly, the verbalizing of racial slurs keeps requiring of our students the exhausting need to speak up about and to explain to a predominantly white institution racist language's harm, violence, and continued trauma. We cannot keep forcing our students to have to do this.

There is a significant and consequential difference between reading slurs in a text and having the slurs verbalized aloud. In a text, they can be read and processed in one's own voice. When verbalized, the slur is given life and voice, is energized, heard, embodied, and experienced in a public way that creates palpable harm. Especially if the slur is verbalized by a white instructor, its relation to power and violence is re-asserted, no matter how it might be framed. Also, and crucially, when verbalized rather than individually read, the slur is experienced in a public way. We have heard from BIPOC students about the feeling of alienation, exposure, and vulnerability this creates for them in predominantly white classrooms.

A commitment to racial equity, to antiracist and anticolonial pedagogy, and to making our community one in which all students feel safe, welcome, supported, and can thrive starts by being attentive to the experiences of BIPOC students. It also requires attending to issues of power, racism, and whiteness embodied in the language we use and sanction. Attending to these issues should allow us to recognize the differences between our racial constitution through language and the ways that signifying practices can have liberating effects for BIPOC faculty and students, as Professor [Vershawn Ashanti Young in "Banning the N-word on Campus Ain't the Answer: It Censors Black Professors Like Me" explains](#). We call for an understanding of the complexity of Black language use by Black students and faculty, as Young and other

scholars of Black language have articulated. We support Indigenous, Black, and students and faculty of color and will follow their lead in terms of what language they would like to use to speak of themselves, their experiences, and communities.

Additionally and along with Professor Koritha Mitchell [in “The N-Word in the Classroom: Just Say NO.”](#) we acknowledge that giving embodied voice and life to the N-word and other racial slurs by white faculty and students directly undermines efforts to create a safe and broadly supportive learning environment. While we’re not advocating for a blanket prohibiting of the N-word as Mitchell suggests, we do oppose white and non-Black faculty and students’ use of the N-word, and agree that finding alternatives to verbalizing racial slurs (for example, saying “N” or “Ns” or simply pausing for students to read silently before reading on) does not diminish our and our students’ ability to engage in literary and cultural analysis of texts that include this language. Nor does it prevent us from addressing the historical contexts of racial and settler colonial violence, acknowledging their past and persistence. By finding alternatives, we affirm the necessity of cultivating supportive and productive classroom environments that are aligned with our antiracist and anticolonialist commitments.

#### Suggested Actions:

- Create space for and support Indigenous, Black, and other students and faculty of color and follow their lead in terms of what language they would like to use to speak of themselves, their experiences, and communities
- For white and non-Black faculty and students, find alternatives to using the N-Word and other slurs
- Include language in your syllabi that establishes norms for using alternatives to these slurs while also recognizing the complexity of language use and systems of power.
- Listen to and be receptive to feedback of BIPOC students that pertains to their experiences in classroom communities
- Read BIPOC scholars and artists who engage and write about language and power, including how we are racially constituted through language and other social forces, and when signifying practices have liberating effects for BIPOC faculty and students

This statement has been written and endorsed by the English department Chair, Associate Chair, and Executive Committee:

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