

Statement on Non-Verbalization of Racial Slurs:  
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 an 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 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. The verbalizing of the N-word and other racial slurs 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 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. 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 directly undermines efforts to create a safe and broadly supportive learning environment, and for these reasons we oppose this practice. As Mitchell argues, 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:

- Find alternatives to using the N-Word and other slurs

- Include language in your syllabi that establishes norms for using alternatives to these slurs
- Listen to and be receptive to feedback of BIPOC students that pertains to their experiences in classroom communities

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

*Anis Bawarshi*

*Habiba Ibrahim*

*Robert Abrams*

*Gillian Harkins*

*Charles LaPorte*

*Kate Norako*

*Maya Sonenberg*

*Jesse Oak Taylor*