



## 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