

January 2014

The N-Word: Lessons Taught and Lessons Learned

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Repository Citation

Lester, Neal A. (2014) "The N-Word: Lessons Taught and Lessons Learned," *Journal of Praxis in Multicultural Education*: Vol. 8: No. 2, Article 3.

DOI: 10.9741/2161-2978.1057

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The N-Word: Lessons Taught and Lessons Learned

Cover Page Footnote

Thanks to all students who have taken this course since it was created. I appreciate your boldness, your honesty, and your personal risk-taking in creating a new individual community awareness. I learned as much from you as I hope you learned from me and what we did. I am also grateful to my very conscientious and talented research assistants, Jeffrey Holmes and Tonya Eick, for their many contributions to my course preparations and in the preparations of these various manuscript versions.

The N-word: Lessons Taught and Lessons Learned



spring 2001 **rbc magazine** 23

Image 1: Comic by Zoe Rochelle featured in *rbc magazine; The Parenting Journal of Color* (Raising Black and Biracial Children), Spring 2001, Sixth Anniversary Issue, 23

Introduction, or Truth or Dare?

Yes, I am perplexed that anyone would insist that we are now experiencing a post-racial moment in North American history simply because we have a twice-elected President who is biracial—black and white. I expect this claim results from the fact that historical attitudes about the divinity of racial purity, of racial separation, and of racial inferiority did not keep white Americans and others across the racial spectrum from electing Senator Barack Obama as the forty-fourth U.S. President with staggering levels of support, and then re-electing him in 2012 despite significant intra-politician and intra-governmental challenges during his first term. Americans wanted CHANGE; Americans are getting CHANGE (for better or worse, depending on one's politics). And while some behaviors have changed and are even illegal, some attitudes about American race relations have clearly not changed from days past when “the problem of the twentieth century,” according to W.E.B. DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), was “the

problem of the color line.”¹ In fact, during and after the 2008 Presidential election, and between the 2008 and 2012 re-election, we have witnessed some of the most blatantly racist attacks on President Obama and this nation’s First Family of Color: internet joke that the 2009 annual White House Easter Egg hunt would be replaced by a watermelon roll²; a couple of GOP supporters’ creation of boxed “Obama Waffles” *a la* Aunt Jemima and her pancakes³; the ditty “Barack the Magic Negro” performed to the tune of “Puff the Magic Dragon”⁴; former South Carolina Election Commission Chairman Rust DePass’s joke that an escaped gorilla is the ancestor of Michelle Obama⁵; an alleged “Historical Keepsake Photo” of the all forty four U.S. Presidents with Obama as a “spook” with but eyes glowing in a dark corner of the frame⁶; the *New York Post* cartoon about the stimulus package implicitly linking President Obama with a chimpanzee⁷; “Drunken Negro Face” cookies in a Greenwich Village Bakery allegedly “in honor of President Obama”⁸; and “Obama Bucks/ United States Food Stamps with a grinning Obama on a donkey’s body, surrounded by images of a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken, a slab of ribs, a pitcher of red Kool-aid, and a wedge of watermelon.”⁹ Interestingly, nothing specific about then-Senator Obama had been planned into my syllabus for my fall 2008 course on the N-word, but major Obama-related stories sprang up at least twice as we moved through the very first iteration of the course between August and December 2008: a middle school teacher in Florida explained to his young students by writing on the chalkboard that the acronym CHANGE stands for “Come **H**elp **A** **N**igger **G**et **E**lected,”¹⁰ and captured on YouTube, the word “nigger” referring to Obama was shouted out during a Sarah Palin rally and she continued with her speech without interruption.¹¹ At the University of Alabama (Tuscaloosa), an Obama poster on an African American faculty member’s campus office door was defaced: “First, someone ripped down the poster. When she put up another, someone scrawled a racial slur on it along with a

death threat against the first African American to win the White House.”¹² In many ways, it is precisely because we have a President historically defined and self-identified as African American that we continue to lift the hoods from the heads of those who show in their actions that in twenty-first century United States, divisive notions about race matters prevail. In this case, disagreements about Obama’s policies quickly become attacks on his racial person and blatant disrespect for his political stature as in the myriad anti-Obama decals, stickers, and t-shirts: “2012—Don’t Re-Nig” or “Buck Ofama.”

Indeed, it is precisely because of a personal curiosity about the various nuances of language, language and identity issues, and the fact that race still matters that I tried what I suspected was a pretty bold pedagogical and scholarly experiment: I dared to teach for the first time in my twenty-plus college teaching career an entire course on a word, not just any word, but the word “nigger.” I have written and published what I know was a pretty provocative essay some years ago about the presence/ absence of the word “nigger” in children’s texts, arguing against euphemizing or excising the word from print and speech or airbrushing experiences historically associated with this word; offering instead that children’s books may be a place to unteach the racial bitterness associated with this word that children do not learn from dictionaries but rather from hearing adults speak in their familial and familiar environments.¹³ Now, I was anxious to see what I might glean from an intensive, interdisciplinary scrutiny of a word that has a life and history of its own; a word that ultimately cannot and will not allow itself to be erased from cultural memory and experience; a word that cannot and will not be wished away or buried even symbolically in a mock funeral; a word thusly described like no other: “the most explosive of racial epithets”¹⁴; “our cruelest word”¹⁵; “the most toxic in the English language”¹⁶; “the most troubling word in our language”¹⁷; “almost magical in its negative power”¹⁸; “six simple letters

that convey centuries of pain, evil and contempt”¹⁹; “an almost universally known word of contempt”²⁰; “occupies a place in the soul where logic and reason never go”²¹; and “the filthiest, dirtiest, nastiest word in the English language.”²²

When I set out to design and teach this course, “The N-Word: An Anatomy Lesson,” I knew then, and almost four iterations later, that my students and I had to move beyond those common, limited binary perspectives: hip hop youth culture vs. old stodgy fuddy-duds; beyond blacks vs. whites using the word, and beyond blacks word pronunciations and spellings that alleged a stripping away of the word’s historical negative racialized baggage. I also did not want the class to be an historical recollection of every instance when the word has taken center stage in literature, public and private conversations, music, court cases, and all manner of other popular culture. This word is so prominently stitched into the fabric of American history and



culture and in the American psyche that it has traveled extensively beyond U.S. borders as another example of the world’s eyes on the U.S., imitating and adapting that which is deemed American—the good, the bad, and the unpretty. For instance, the parody *Tokyo Breakfast* (2001) presents a presumably Japanese family adopting what it sees as hip hop flava by excessively and lightheartedly using “nigger” during a

routine morning breakfast. This Japanese family clearly conveys no frame of reference for the historical or political sense of this word in American history and culture and intends inconsequential humor as its goal. An interesting companion to this parody is comedian Dave Chapelle's 'The Niggaz,' where a black milkman pokes fun at an all American, white family named Niggaz. With parallel intents and purposes, the two skits demonstrate a critical awareness that this word, no matter the form, is socially and politically problematic. Ultimately, this one-semester teaching experience taught me more than I had expected about language and performance, about language and identity constructions, and about language and race relations. Having taught the course three times now, with significant national attention, I am convinced that as long as black/white American racism exists, the need and desire for such a focused study of language is important and necessary.

Without question, there is substantial attention to the N-word, its use and its history—documentaries; scholarly essays, chapters, and entire books; online electronic petitions to abolish use of the word; comedy skits and episodes ranging from the animated *South Park* to *Chappelle's Show* to the *Seinfeld*-ish sitcom *Curb Your Enthusiasm*; talk show episodes; radio segments; interviews; classic stand-up comedy routines (Paul Mooney, Richard Pryor, and Chris Rock); and hip hop albums, for instance. Public discussions of the N-word have taken place regularly in high school literature courses and in court cases. In the media as many rappers alleged reclamation of the word as cultural reappropriation, actor-comedian Michael Richard meltdowns whirling the N-word at heckling African Americans during his comedy club performance, and Dog the Bounty Hunter's frequent bandying of the N-word caught the public's attention when his private telephone message to his son about dating an African American female leaked to the

media. All of these instances reveal an ocean of materials—critical, popular, and journalistic—that had to be waded through to arrive at a focused study that is coherent and comprehensive.

This essay then is an account of my experiment—a success from my perspective and according to my three sets of different students’ course evaluations—offered as further testimony that understanding words and how we use language to construct realities can open us all to new and exciting ways of experiencing the world. I will continue to teach, lecture, and talk about this course in years to come. Some folks are critical of the course, as is one Hattiesburg, MS *ClarionLedger* blog respondent’s reaction to a short commentary on the course: “If you wonder why a college education is becoming worthless read this article...this subject is such a total waste of resources, time etc. and shows why colleges have become indoctrination centers vs. education facilities (28 September 2011). Others are fascinated and curious; colleagues and students here and afar are already requesting the course syllabus and expressing interest in an online version of this course to accommodate distance learners. What I outline here is not a pedagogical formula but rather a way to sustain a provocative and engaging exploration of a word that has a history and an identity like no other in the English language.

Why such a course?

To the black child... the world [can] seem a prison-house of color-coded language. The black child feels it... when one of his white friends unwittingly uses a counting rhyme with a sharply racialized history.... Misery is when you start to play a game and someone begins to count out ‘Eenie, meenie, minie mo...’
(Langston Hughes, *Black Misery*, 1969).

It shows up in American childhood rhymes and ditties, in minstrel songs, and in commercial advertisements. It is euphemized, buried in mock funerals, and bleeped from video and audio public broadcasts. Responding to one critic's challenge "to create an environment for dialogue about the word's purposes and problems," this course offers an opportunity to dissect the single word described as "easily the most inflammatory, shocking and historic word in the English language." The coursework of readings and assignments considers the word's "continually shifting use" through the complex discourse of American race relations. Ultimately, the course interrogates the fundamental role of words and language to construct identities—individual, communal, and even national. Closely aligned with Jabari Asim's sentiments and purpose in *The N-Word: Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn't, and Why* (2007), this course was created to do the following:

To look closely at [the] folklore tracing the [word's] path as it sustained the entwined ideas of white supremacy and black inferiority, supplemented the nation's ever-growing popular culture, and influenced the scope and direction of its legal system. It explores in depth various categories of literature, science, music, theater, and film, the legislative policies and judicial decisions designed to keep blacks in their place, and the language of racial insult that runs like an electric current through it all. (3)

More specifically, this course addresses these inquiries:

- *How does talking about a controversial word in the public forum of a classroom render it more powerful to wound and insult?*
- *How does euphemizing a controversial word undermine educational efforts to understand and to dissect the word's history and impact?*
- *How does euphemizing a controversial word render it more powerful to wound or insult?*
- *How does this word transcend gender, class, temporality, and even sexual identity?*

- *How do we talk openly about a controversial word without tempting and empowering others to subvert our purest educational efforts and intents?*
- *How do we explore individually and collectively any “word controversy” with maximum honesty, sensitivity, and ethical integrity?*
- *To what extent does any discussion of a controversial word leave us in binary positions—acknowledging various (in)appropriate contexts or issuing a moratorium on the word’s use?*
- *How do controversial words maintain their sting and insult?*
- *How do controversial words lose their sting and insult?*
- *How and why are certain individuals and individual groups empowered to use certain controversial words?*

The course format includes class discussion, written critical analysis/ summaries, and independent research, and the grade for the course is based on the students’ multiple one-page critical analyses/summaries (40%), students’ individual preparation and class participation (30%), and students’ overall attendance (30%). While there is no single text for this course, students access reading assignments via the internet, and I provide copies of other materials. Each week has an overall theme or focus with a diverse range of assignments and texts centered on that particular topic, as seen in the complete course content included in the appendix.

Student Population

As chair of one of the largest English departments in the country (and later as dean of Humanities and Associate Vice President of Humanities and Arts) and like all administrators at my institution, I teach one course a year. In my case, the course I elect to teach is a one-credit/ one hundred-level seminar for first-year students. Such courses are deemed “sexy courses” beyond a specific disciplinary major, a course that introduces new students—typically ages 18

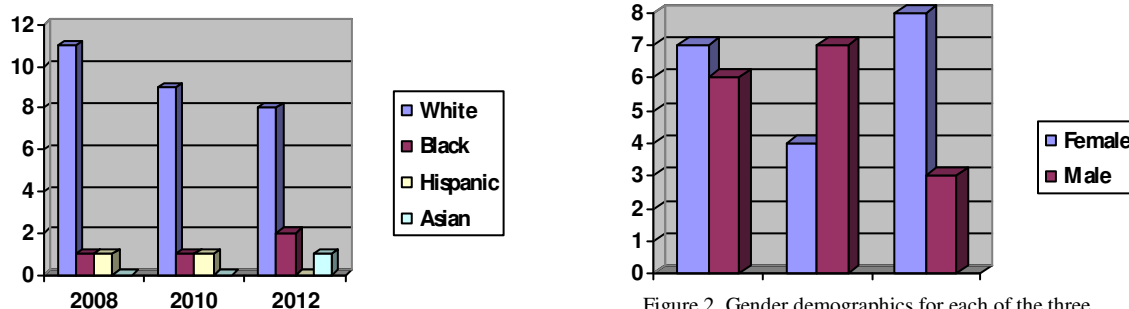


Figure 2. Gender demographics for each of the three sessions.

and 19—to the instructor’s discipline of expertise. My class caps at 12 students: the first iteration with 10 freshmen, 2 sophomores, 6 females, 6 males. Of the 6 students who were English majors, 3 were concentrating on Creative Writing, 2 on literature, and 1 on linguistics; 2 students were Psychology majors; 2 students were Philosophy majors; 1 Film and Media Studies major; and 1 Sociology major. As for the ethnic/ racial makeup of the students, 10 were white, 1 was African American (female), and 1 self-identified as Puerto Rican (male). A Department of English staff member—a Communication student finishing her master’s degree, African American female, about forty-years-old—requested my permission to sit in on the course after seeing my materials and learning of the course content. One white male student dropped the class at midterm admittedly because of health and adjustment issues. In the subsequent iterations, students have come from the English department (as Linguistics and Creative Writing majors) in addition to Psychology, Sociology, Philosophy and Film and Media Studies majors. That my course happened first during the 2008 U.S. Presidential election primary (and again for the 2012 election) added intellectual, social, and political relevance and immediacy as new and renewed discussions of American race relations and voting demographics moved to the center of political and social discourses. Students who typically sign up for these First-Year Seminars are bright and ambitious as evidenced in part by the fact that they take this course on top of a full load of other courses required for their majors, and the course cannot satisfy General Studies requirements. They are careful thinkers, intellectually curious, enthusiastic, and disciplined.” The excitement I witness when we are engaged in discussions of ideas they have never considered fully or at all is most rewarding for me. They come with an unsullied passion and vibrancy that when matched with the right topic like the N-word can make these classes a joy to teach.

As an African American educator, I expect that I have a level of authority and privilege in teaching this particular course that non-African Americans may not have. I certainly have no intellectual advantage over others but others' perceptions of a white person teaching the course might well elicit initial suspicion the way my identity as a male teaching an African American women writers course some years back at another institution met with political and critical suspicion from some students. Once I explained my credentials—I am married to a woman; my mother, grandmother, cousins and aunts are women; I have female students, friends, family members, neighbors, and colleagues; I am father to a daughter; and my doctoral research and early published work is on black women writers, those suspicions faded and we were onto the business of doing the class. To contextualize further my professional, personal, and intellectual embeddedness relative to this racialized topic, images of Mammy, Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and various other racially offensive American artifacts adorn my campus office; these material culture artifacts interface with my teaching of American literature and other cultural studies. Borrowing from comedian and talk show host Whoopi Goldberg, who also collects this kind of memorabilia, I call my office my "colored museum." Office visitors—students and colleagues—are often in awe of and indeed very curious about what they see. I cannot imagine any of my white colleagues having such a collection without some kind of public suspicion, disapproval or even public outcry on many American university campuses.

Naming the Course

Advertising these First-Year Seminars is done primarily by my tenure-home College, in this case, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, as it markets all such first-year seminars at new-student orientations and online:

Generic Course Description: *Small course emphasizing student-faculty discussion/ interaction. Strongly recommended for first-year students.*

Enrollment Requirements/ Pre-requisites: *Must be a freshman OR be a Non-degree undergraduate with 25 or [fewer] total earned hours. [This course carries no General Studies credit.]*

Having taught three such seminars in the past – “Race and Gender Politics of Hair;” “Black and White Interracial Intimacies in Popular Music;” and “Conflicts and Controversies in African American Children’s Literature” – I knew this could be another “sexy course” that would potentially attract a fairly diverse student population. That I named the course using the euphemism ‘N-word’ rather than the word itself was in part my effort to be provocative and also not to offend the potentially sensitive and intellectually faint at heart. I also knew there was potential to subvert the course and my best efforts by having someone take the title into a different mocking context. As well, naming the course “Nigger” might well have led to more limited additions of the course. Here is the blurb used to announce the course:

ENG 191: The N-word: An Anatomy Lesson

It shows up in childhood rhymes and ditties, in minstrel songs and commercial advertisements. It is euphemized, buried in mock funerals, and bleeped from video and audio public broadcasts. Responding to one critic’s challenge “to create an environment for dialogue about the word’s purposes and problems,” this course offers an opportunity to dissect the single word described as “easily the most inflammatory, shocking and historic word in the English language.” Our examination will consider the word’s “continually shifting use” through the discourse of American race relations. Monday, 2:00 - 3:15 p.m.

Because there is so much written on this controversial word, I wanted to capture as many diverse perspectives and treatment formats as possible. Hence, my texts were markedly varied: cartoons, talk show segments, hip hop lyrics, academic journal essays, academic book chapters, newspaper articles, children's books and stories, comedy skits, sitcom episode, stand-up routines, television drama episodes, big screen movies, documentaries, and myriad internet sources—we were fortunate to have a fully mediated classroom for easy access to YouTube and Google searches. Fortunately or unfortunately, my three-volume file of course materials on the N-word continues to expand every time I teach the course can continue to fall within these rough organizational categories:

- *Apologies and Misunderstandings*
- *The Course*
- *Dictionary Definition and the NAACP*
- *Essays*
- *Fiction*
- *History*
- *Memorabilia*
- *Mock Funeral*
- *Music*
- *My Essay: Drafts*
- *N-Word Documentary*
- *NAS (and Album Title)*
- *O.J. Simpson Case*
- *Other Word Controversies*
- *Poetry*
- *Randall Kennedy*
- *Television*
- *Whites and the N-Word*
- *Youth Culture and the N-Word*

Even after teaching three slightly different versions of the course, these categories remain useful organizers of the range of materials on and related to the word.

Ground Rules and Conducting Class

Although I am an African American teacher of this course, I knew that we had to establish as a class and as a community of adults some fundamental ground rules about how we would conduct and smoothly navigate class discussions of this decidedly sensitive topic. One thing I did not want (and to my knowledge was lucky enough not to have) was the dreaded reality that materials from class might well travel maliciously outside class and find their way into uncontextualized discussions and conversations. On the first day of class, we discussed quite candidly the educational purposes of the course, the potentially volatile nature of the subject and the uncensored course content, and the absolute necessity of respecting each other and of creating among and for ourselves a community working toward a common goal. Students trusted me and I them to stay focused and not to subvert the goals and objectives of the course. We agreed that we would say the word “nigger” as we felt comfortable in the context of our critical conversations. Some students used the word, others used the euphemism over three courses of different students. I witnessed no moments of obvious tension among these students and have not found myself stumbling over the word as I had expected since it is not part of my regular personal, private, or public vocabulary. In fact, there are often unsolicited moments of true confession—white students commenting on their white friends’ and family members’ use of the word and the levels of discomfort that use creates for them. White students also comment on how they are compelled when prompted by their family and friends to explain why they are taking such a course on this topic. A Puerto Rican student, in my first course, even shared that his best friend—a white male—always addressed him as “nigger” and that he never, before this class, understood why he felt uncomfortable with that address. Another white male in that class indicated that among his white male friends, referring to each other as “niggers” was a term of endearment. Interestingly, these conversations about using the N-word in familiar settings mostly

took place among white males. I am lucky to have had groups of students mature beyond their years that understand and accept fully their individual and collective responsibility in making this class the best that it can be for all of us. To date, students have responded with great appreciation for the opportunity to take such a class like no other they have taken before.

Course Formats

As I am not typically a lecturer—although my students will admit that I talk a lot—I depend a lot on discussion, with students sharing their critical responses to readings and other assignments. Each day has a topical focus with various assignments selected for that topic. Students also are encouraged to bring to class related materials to share, thus building up my own repository of texts, stories, and activities. Sometimes we divide into small groups and had group report outs. Sometimes students conduct outside research for their written assignments. I share with students rare materials of my personal collection. Students do a good bit of writing and critical analysis over the semester as well.

Students' Responses to Course

At each semester's end, students seem to have gained much from the course and convey confidence that they look at language and words in ways they had not imagined when they entered the course. Here are their anonymous and completely voluntary student evaluation summative comments:

<p><i>What will you take away from this course that is meaningful to you?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>I learned a lot from the class, not just about the subject, but about life in general--whether it be my moral obligation to society or the fact that I can't understand everything and that's not necessarily bad.</i> ● <i>A great understanding of the N-word and a new awareness of language, race, and difference.</i> ● <i>A much deeper understanding of the word, of race relations, and of language in general.</i> ● <i>A better understanding of a very prolific but relevant subject and better writing skills.</i> ● <i>What I will take away is the willingness to think thoroughly of language and its context.</i> ● <i>That much work needs to be done about race, culture and the word "nigger."</i> ● <i>I have learned a lot about the overall subject matter. I have realized that the topic is a very relevant and volatile one.</i>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I learned a lot about how language comes to be what it is. We have some say in defining ourselves but it seems like most times it is the language that defines. I learned that not everything is meant to be understood.</i> • <i>The ability to think more critically about language and the realization that it is much more complex than I first realized.</i> • <i>New knowledge of myself and on popular culture as well as a new understanding of controversial subject matter.</i> • <i>This class is quite thought-provoking. I appreciate the fact that we just delve into the subject matter and are encouraged to share our thoughts and opinions. The class size is ideal because it ensures that everyone has an opportunity to speak. This class has made me want to take more controversial subject matter courses so that I can continue to open my mind to the ideas of others. I encourage anyone who is interested in diction, critical thinking, and race-specific issues to take this class.</i> • <i>This class has affected me in a very big way; my entire thought process about the N-word is clearer and I am glad I took the course.</i> • <i>I have a much better understanding of the word and how society reacts to similar subjects.</i> • <i>The N-word and thus race relations are a complex and shifting area of study. Thus, instead of a clear answer, I have a more complex view.</i> • <i>The knowledge and background of the N-word.</i> • <i>I will take away a far greater understanding of how the N-word's history developed and how it continues to play a practical role in society.</i> • <i>Understanding how the word works within social, political, etc. situations.</i> • <i>I savor the depth this class went into in order to understand the use of the N-word.</i> • <i>I have a much better understanding of the importance of having this conversation (N-word/race).</i> • <i>I now know the history behind this word.</i>
<p>Which course activities and/ or assignments were most helpful to your learning? Which were least?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The videos brought the subject to life much more than anything written, although those items were important too. Discussions also very helpful.</i> • <i>Everything was pretty much excellent. I feel like there is much to be gained analyzing contemporary works so I wish we had spent more time there.</i> • <i>All activities and assignments were helpful, but the one that stood out for me was how [the word] affects children.</i> • <i>A greater understanding of language and story.</i> • <i>Movies, clips, internet, music—actually everything.</i> • <i>I thought that the class discussions were the most useful because different viewpoints were brought up, which I never would have thought of.</i> • <i>Emails about the election were helpful and I thought the course stayed relevant. More time could have been spent on each subject to go more in-depth.</i> • <i>The videos were the most helpful. I gained the least from the children's books.</i> • <i>This class was interesting and unique, which is why I took it. Professor Lester was very knowledgeable in his topic, but I felt as though he failed to inform us on what exactly he wanted in our homework assignments. I felt as though our one-page papers were not necessarily graded fairly, for his view on critical analysis was not what I had learned in my history of being a student.</i> • <i>The most helpful were the 1 page papers and looking at the artifacts brought to class. There was nothing "least helpful."</i> • <i>The videos and papers were highly beneficial. The books weren't as helpful.</i> • <i>I liked the entire thing. All of the class activities stretched my knowledge. I really liked the interdisciplinary approach.</i> • <i>All of them were very thorough and informative. I learned more than I have known in my whole life in these 10 weeks.</i> • <i>I feel like the class discussions were the most helpful. The one-page essays were the least effective for me.</i> • <i>Visual activities were the most helpful.</i> • <i>Articles and videos were helpful; papers were not.</i> • <i>Most [helpful] were South Park video and takes and books; least [helpful] were talking about repetitive subjects.</i>

<p>Which goals were best achieved for you?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Learning the nuances of the N-word and understanding race relations (to some extent)</i> • <i>The course goals achieved were gaining understanding of the subject and understanding how it affects everyday life.</i> • <i>Assignments that were culturally relevant helped.</i> • <i>The papers were useful because I was able to narrow down my ideas to the bare facts and just say what I really believed.</i> • <i>Realizing how this issue is related to today and through generations and the race barriers usually associated with this word.</i> • <i>To help further my understanding of the N-word and related words.</i> • <i>Self-discovery and new understanding.</i> • <i>I am able to condense my thoughts into a well written paper.</i> • <i>I wanted to broaden my understanding of the word and this class did that.</i> • <i>I thought about a word and its use in politics. I thus developed an appreciation of the word.</i> • <i>Better understanding of the word, its history, and how it is used today.</i> • <i>An understanding of the N-word used in both music and humor.</i> • <i>Learning about performance and context.</i>
<p>Please make any other comments about this instructor and/ or this course.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Thank you! It was definitely one of my favorite classes this semester.</i> • <i>He should teach this course again.</i> • <i>If not for the cancelled papers, there was too much work for a 1-credit class. Otherwise, absolutely superb course and the most eye-opening class I took all semester.</i> • <i>Without a doubt the most mentally invigorating class I took this semester.</i> • <i>The instructor is great – magnificent talent and capacity. I look forward to future classes with him.</i> • <i>[The Professor] . . . brought a level of higher discussion which I had up until this class never experienced. I would greatly recommend [this course] to anyone.</i> • <i>Loved this class!</i> • <i>Dr. Lester is an amazing professor and I am very glad I took this course.</i> • <i>The instructor made the course extremely enjoyable and made me excited to come to each class.</i> • <i>I wished we could have spent more time. Thank you! This class was wonderful.</i> • <i>For anyone who is ignorant to this word, I would recommend this class.</i> • <i>I thoroughly enjoyed this course and consider Professor Lester extremely intelligent; I will truly miss this class.</i> • <i>[The content was very] repetitive which made the class a little dull.</i> • <i>I loved the energy he had while speaking on the subject. Also, he had a sense of humor.</i> • <i>He is a great teacher. I enjoyed the class.</i> • <i>Good stuff, however Dr. Lester should provide more descriptive instructions for papers.</i> • <i>Professor Lester was always eager to start discussions in class. He was always prepared and on time. Outside of class he was more than helpful with me personally to discuss my essays and give me feedback on how to improve so that I could get my choice grade in class.</i>
<p>Unsolicited Post-course Comments:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>My experience in the class still influences what I notice around me, especially as it pertains to identity in context of race, gender, sex, sexuality, and even social class. There is such a wealth of information to be had.</i> • <i>Again, thanks for teaching something so insightful and I hope you can use something I did to help students open their consciousness further.</i> • <i>I'm glad to hear you're thinking about teaching the class again; I know I enjoyed it.</i>

Table 1: Survey data compiled from the 2008, 2010, and 2012 end of class surveys.

Admittedly, these are some of the best student comments and responses I have had for any course I've taught—graduate or undergraduate—for over twenty years. I am also pleased that

students acknowledge and appreciate the intellectual rigor of the course, contrary to what the earlier *ClarionLedger* respondent imagines who knew little about the course content beyond the title and subject. For each course, students' attendance is excellent and the level of engagement during discussion often exceeds my expectations for this level of course. The final grade distributions in this first iteration of the course are pretty typical of courses I teach: 6 students received a final grade of "A"; 5 students received a final grade of "B"; and 1 student received a final grade of "C."

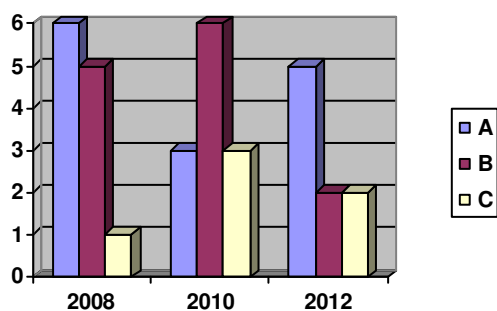


Figure 3. Grade distribution for the three sessions of the course

My student evaluation mean score for this course was among the best I have ever received over the years: 1.15 on a scale where 1 is perfect and 5 is poor. Such a score was far better than the department's mean of 1.28 for course taught by my full professor rank colleagues and better than the 1.42 mean for all those teaching 100-level courses

during this particular semester. While the evaluative scoring system changed for 2010 and 2012, the reported instructor score for both sessions was overall as an 'A.'

Conclusion, or Lessons Learned

As the students' summative evaluation comments indicate, the choice of readings, the pacing of the course assignments, the range of audio and video texts, and the course connections to current media narratives make for a comprehensive and engaging treatment of this topic. Indeed, the range of topics I select can certainly be tailored to different student populations, to instructor preferences, and to any instructor's particular time constraints. In fact, I have also taught this course in 7.5 week sessions and am always challenged to determine what is absolutely

essential. The overall structure and governing principles remain the same even when assignments are added or fall from the syllabus. For instance, I asked students to begin a *Google Alert* for “nigger” for the first three weeks of class the last time I taught the course. During the fourth week, students were asked to analyze patterns of the daily election data. They were amazed at what they found—the frequency of the word’s presence in mainstream social media, the ways in which black actions become criminalized via this word; the myriad “Niggermania” websites as well as the vicious anti-black rants, jokes and stories that permeate and circulate without consequence. Importantly, there is much flexibility in tailoring course content to any instructor’s personal interests and expertise. The following observations were arrived at by me and the class after the first class and have remained consistent with subsequent iterations of the course:

- Language is performative and performances of the N-word, whether oral or written, have similar controversial social and political impact. Changing the spellings, pronunciations, and contexts of this word—nigga, niggah, nigger—doesn’t change the negativity of the original word. If the word needs to be changed, the word is indeed problematic.
- Whites—mostly males—call each other “niggers” (our class had no specific discussions of “wiggahs.”)
- Use of the N-word is more complicated than a generational or black/ white racial divide. Other multiethnic youths use the N-word freely and see no social consequences.
- African Americans are decidedly split on using the N-word, no matter the contexts.
- The N-word is so powerful that it transcends historical moment, gender, class, or sexual orientation unlike these names: dyke, fag, bull-dagger, gay, bitch, cunt, pussy, spic,

cracker, mud people, and wetback. See “The Racial Slur Database”

(<http://gyral.blackshell.com/names.html>).

- Current racial sensitivity exists in documented instances of jobs lost and social critiques of those whites using the word “niggardly,” a word strikingly similar sounding to “nigger.”
- The N-word can never lose its viral sting when its use continues to reflect current perceptions of and historical attitudes toward black/ white race relations.
- A mock funeral to bury the N-word, a petition to ban its use, or excising the N-word from dictionaries will not keep folks from using the N-word or diminish the historical association of this word as racist attack.
- Even the U.S. President can be snatched from his pedestal of accomplishment by calling him the N-word, a name that unites him with every person of African descent.
- The word “nigger” will always be tainted with social negativity, no matter the spelling or nuanced pronunciation or the illusion of those who believe that this word can be appropriated as “a term of endearment” to take away his negative sting; connecting with author Toni Morrison’s sense that “Definitions belong to the definers, not to the defined.”
- Words are neutral. People and their experiences give them power to soothe or to attack. Saying the word “nigger” is not criminal—unless in cases of racial harassment. Ultimately, use of this word is about individual choice and critical awareness.
- Media’s decisions to euphemize the N-word carry with many important implications about the impact of the N-word and legitimacy of the N-word in capturing and documenting a victim/ survivor’s experience.

- What does it mean about the impact of language and its connection to public performance ritual when those who have transgressed can be forgiven or redeemed by appealing to the self-appointed Ambassadors of Race the Reverends Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton?

Admittedly, I don't expect that all educators at either the high school or college level will spend 15 weeks or even 7.5 weeks exploring a single word.²³ Offered here are ideas that can be integrated, borrowed, or otherwise modified to help facilitate comprehensive and lively classroom discussions of what has been deemed by many as perhaps the vilest word in the English language. From such specific discussions can emerge all manner of interesting new thinking about and even better understanding of why and how we all use language to order, name, and to concretize our most complicated human experiences. With such a wide and diverse range of texts—popular and literary, historical and current, audio and video, children's and adult, and multiple genres—any educator can take from this account what he or she needs to contextualize use of the N-word in a particular written or spoken passage, its use in an entire text, or in other situations when the N-word causes eyebrows to raise and bodies to squirm uncomfortably.

Post-course Impact

Once word got out beyond my university that I was teaching a course about the N-word, I have been sought out for many radio and print interviews and conversations. Such media attention included the Southern Poverty Law Center's (SPLC) *Teaching Tolerance*, National Public Radio, *The ClarionLedge* (Blogs), TheRoot.com, TheGrio.com, and *The Chicago Reader*. In fact, when the SPLC's *Teaching Tolerance* interview appeared in 2010, I began getting a number of requests from teachers and administrators from across the country wanting

help with getting their middle, high school, and college students to understand this word more comprehensively and accurately. Such consultations have included:

- *Scottsdale Community College (Scottsdale, AZ), Honors Project (August 2012)*
- *Ferris State University (Graduate Student), Grand Rapids (MI) (November 2012)*
- *University of Edinburgh (March – May 2012)*
- *Milton Academy (May 2012)*
- *Charlotte (NC) Latin School (August 2012)*
- *Dartmouth College (May 2012)*
- *Mesquite Junior High School (Gilbert, AZ) (March 2012)*
- *Alabama State University (Spring 2012)*
- *Humbolt High School (Humboldt, TN) (September 2011)*

As a result of these inquiries and requests, I have now developed a traveling presentation that has successfully reached college students at a local Arizona community college with 500 attendees (students, faculty, staff, and community members) and a historically black college in Alabama with upwards of 200 students, staff, faculty, and community members. In both instances, students are thirsting for critical understanding beyond binaries. They want to discuss. They want to discover. As well, my teaching and writings have led to my being an expert witness in an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission racial discrimination/ harassment case in Utah. I was also invited to write the entry on the N-word for the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Multicultural America*. For all of these opportunities I remain grateful. I suspect that as long as there is racism among American blacks and whites, in coming years, there will be a need for and interest in such a course. I am excited to see that my latest work in this area looks at use of perceptions of the word internationally—Ghana, Sweden, Ireland, Korea, Malawi, and Scotland,

for example. Such an examination reveals much about global perspectives on American history and on American race relations.

APPENDIX

Table showing the complete course content and discussion topics for the initial course presented in 2008.

	Themes, Topics and Materials	Media and Assignments	Discussion Questions
Week 1	<p>“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me:” Words and Identity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> N-word Cartoon from <i>rbc magazine [Raising Biracial Children Magazine]</i> (Spring 2001) by Zoe Rochelle [as seen in the introduction to this paper] American Minstrel Songs as Disney Tunes: “Shew! Fly, Don’t Bother Me”; “Oh! Susanna”; “Jim Crack Corn”; Polly-Wolly-Doodle”; “De History Ob De World”; “Uncle Ned” where second and third verses contain the N-word spelled in various ways (niggah(s) and nigger) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paul Mooney, “Racist Word Association Interview” (featuring Richard Pryor and Chevy Chase from <i>Saturday Night Live</i> (Season 1, Episode 7) December 13, 1975): http://snltranscripts.jt.org/75/75ginterview.phtml July 2008 Segments on the N-word from <i>The View</i> (YouTube) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discuss the validity of the childhood lesson from many parents that “sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” What is the connection between words, language, and identity? How do our experiences shape our language and word choices in thinking, writing, and speaking? Does history grant permission for some to use the N-word when others cannot or should not? Regarding minstrel songs that are also popular Disney children’s songs, how do the songs’ second verses affect our responses and reactions to these tunes? Is there a naïve innocence associated with these popular American tunes? To what extent are “words like bullets” as some artists and scholars contend?

Week 2	<p>The Personal as Political</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ronald L. Jackson, II, "Mommy, There's a Nigger at the Door," <i>Journal of Counseling and Development</i> 77 (Winter 1999): 4-6 This is an autobiographical essay about how white children use the word based on environmental absorption and a black youngster's first traumatic encounter with the word Gloria Naylor, "Mommy, What Does 'Nigger' Mean?" in Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell, eds. <i>Common Ground and Writing about America's Cultures</i> (1994): 379-383 Another autobiographical essay of how Naylor associates the word 	<p>First paper due: a one-page response to Countee Cullen's poem "Incident," in Dudley Randall, ed. <i>The Black Poets</i> (1971): 98-99</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the role of personal narrative in understanding and communicating the political implications and impact of words that ignite controversy? Can the personal and the political ever be disentangled? How is the "personal" defined? How is the "political" defined? In terms of language acquisition, what is the relationship between childhood experience and adult identity? How are children and the notion of childhood important to the social and political messages of the two essays? What are the roles of class and economics in the narratives? How does physical geography connect with identity, language, and race relations? Do these essays convey any unconscious faulty logics? Does anything seem to be left out of the essays since much of what is presented is from each author's memory? What are the authors' purposes in writing these essays? Are they successful in communicating their messages to their audiences? What are those messages? Who are the audiences for the two essays?
Week 3	<p>Children and the N-word. "In the beginning was the word:" Some History and a Definition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phil Middleton and David Pilgrim, "Nigger (the word): A Brief History" (http://californiaaap.org/news/civil-rights/nword) Alison B. Hamilton, "Nigger, Please," <i>Image</i> (October 1994): 16-19, 55-56 This piece traces the history of the word from its first uses as a descriptor to its quick evolution as a word to disparage black bodies Christopher Hitchens, "Minority Report: Black Mischief," <i>The Nation</i> (March 4, 2002) (http://www.thenation.com/doc/20020304/hitchens) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trace the history and evolution of the N-word and its use from distant past to the present? What's has changed, how, and why? How and why do word meanings change? How does history define the N-word? Has it always had the negative sting that it has today? Can the history of the N-word ever be erased or revised?
Week 4	<p>The Word Magnified: The OJ Simpson Case</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kenneth B. Noble, "The Simpson Defense: One Hateful Word," <i>New York Times</i> (March 19, 1995): 1, 4 William Raspberry, "We Give This Slur Its Power," <i>Washington Post</i> (April 11, 1995): n.p. James T. Adams, "No Other Word Fuels Passions Like 'N-word,'" <i>Birmingham News</i> (September 3, 1995): C1, C4 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can a single word, the N-word, take center stage in a court trial? Does a white person's saying the N-word once make the speaker a racist by default?

Week 5	<p>Scholarship and the N-word</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Randall Kennedy, NIGGER: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word,” <i>The Diane Rehm Show</i> (21 February 2002) (transcript provided). Questions from Rehm include ones about: the word’s etymology; Kennedy’s first personal experience with the word; whether Kennedy uses the word in his daily life; whether Kennedy had second thoughts titling the book NIGGER; reluctance of staff at publisher’s house to say the title out loud; various contexts for and meanings of the word; how Kennedy got the idea for the book; American legal cases involving the word; stand-up comedians’ use of the word as a staple in their routines; the prominence of the word in rap songs today; the double standard of whites using the word vs. blacks using it; politicians’ use of the word as allegedly non-racist context; Mark Twain’s use of the word; controversy over the word “niggardly”; and Kennedy’s responses to black commentators’ resistance to the book’s title. 	<p>Second paper due: bring in one page summary of strengths and weaknesses of the 2 books based on reviews: “Randall Kennedy’s Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word” (2002) and Jabari Asim’s “The N-Word; Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn’t, and Why” (2007)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cornel West, “The ‘N’ Word (Part 1),” from <i>Cornel West: Street Knowledge</i> (2004) (audio) • Cornel West, “The ‘N’ Word (Part 2),” from <i>Cornel West: Street Knowledge</i> (2004) (audio) • Cornel West, “The ‘N’-ization of America,” from <i>Cornel West: Street Knowledge</i> (2004) (audio) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is use, treatment of, and attitudes toward the N-word different among academics and scholars than among lay persons? • How is generational difference a factor in these public discussions of using the N-word?
Week 6	<p>Airbrushing Children’s Texts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ntozake Shange’s children’s book <i>Whitewash</i> (1997); <i>The Incident</i> (1992), and Michael Sporn’s animated film version (1994) 	<p>Third paper due: bring to class summaries of accounts from 3 different newspaper accounts of the January 1992 true incident in Bronx, NY upon which this is based. Is the N-word used or not used in media coverage of the event? How and why is censorship important?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do children acquire language? • How are language, values, and attitudes acquisition determined by one’s environment? • Is it the responsibility of parents and the media to censor language from youngsters? • Does censoring language also censor experience?
Week 7	<p>Words, Stories, and Images</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nigger and Caricatures from Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University (http://www.ferris.edu/JIMCROW/caricature/) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rare books’ variations on “Ten Little Niggers” story and cartoon: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Nora Case, <i>Ten Little Nigger Boys and Ten Little Nigger Girls</i> (London: Chatto and Windas, 1962) ○ R & C Kennedy, <i>10 Little Nigger Boys and All about Them</i> (London: Gale and Polden, Ltd., P.B. 058) ○ <i>Ten Little Nigger Boys</i> (London: R.A. Publishing Co., Ltd., n.d.) ○ <i>Ten Little Nigger Boys</i> (London: Juvenile Productions, Ltd, copyright no. 9910) ○ <i>Ten Little Nigger Boys</i> (nursery rhyme on cover of 1890s children’s book) ○ <i>Colour Show Pictures of Ten Little Nigger Boys</i> (London: Juvenile Productions, Ltd, copyright 9502) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do children become inherently connected to adult race politics? • What is the connection between visual images and language? • How do visuals reinforce the narratives?

Week 8	<p>Music and Words</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Frank Horne's poem "Nigger: A Chant for Children," in <i>Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature</i> (1968): 402-403 Lyrics and audio are analyzed by the class 	<p>Fourth paper due: bring to class summary of concerns and commentaries on Nas's 2008 album entitled <i>Nigger</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Last Poets, "Niggers Are Scared of Revolution," "Run Nigger," and "Wake up Niggers," <i>Real Rap</i> (1999) Johnny Rebel, "Nigger Nigger," <i>For Segregationists Only</i> (1971) N.W.A., "Real Niggaz Don't Die," <i>EFILAZAGGIN(Niggaz4Life)</i> (1991) (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jy6Nebd_e0) Geto Boys, "Another Nigger in the Morgue," <i>We Can't be Stopped</i> (1991) DJ Quik, "Can't Fuck Wit a Nigga," <i>Menace II Society Original Motion Picture Soundtrack</i> (1993) Clawfinger, "Nigger," <i>Deaf Dumb Blind</i> (1993) N.W.A., "Niggaz 4 Life," <i>EFILAZAGGIN(Niggaz4Life)</i> (1991) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How are definitions of "nigger" similar and different in these tunes? Who are the audiences for these tunes? What are the messages of these tunes? Would other words in place of "nigger" be as aesthetically, thematically, or politically effective?
Week 9	<p>Words and/in the Media</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Put it on His Tombstone: An Interview with Paul Mooney," <i>Image</i> (October 1994): 56 Students are to bring to class summary accounts of public controversy over uses of "niggardly" as misconstrued word. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Duane "Dog" the Bounty Hunter's recorded phone call Michael Richards's comedy club meltdown Paul Mooney's comedy: "Makes My Teeth White," "Nigger Raisins," and "Nigger History Lesson," from <i>Mr. Paul Mooney: Race</i> (New York: Tommy Boy Music, 1993) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does the private and personal inevitably become the public and political?
Week 10	<p>Television and Drama: On Power and Privilege and Who Can and Can't Use this Word</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Blank Like Me: A Week in the Life of Quentin Tarantino" (a parody), <i>XXL</i>, pages 29-31 Allen Francis, "The 'N' Word: It Just Slips Out," <i>Starting with "I": Personal Essays by Teenagers</i> (1982): 83-86 Leonard Pitts, "Black Youths: It's Time You Put Aside the Bloodied N-Word," <i>Selma Newspaper</i> (August 24, 1995) Nikki Giovanni, "The True Import of Present Dialogue: Black vs. Negro" (1968) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Season 2, Episode 15 (25 February 2002) of <i>Boston Public</i> (video) Jennifer Lopez, "I'm Real (Murder Remix)" <i>J to the L-O!: The Remixes</i> (2002) (bring in lyrics with Jo-Lo's use of the N-word) Earl Ofari Hutchinson, "The War against J-Lo" (http://archive.salon.com/news/feature/2001/07/19/lopez/index.html) Michael Rappaport in Spike Lee's <i>Bamboozled</i> (2000) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent is using the N-word based on racial privilege? When are whites able to use the N-word and not be identified as racist?
Week 11	<p>Television and Comedy: The Dangers of Laughing?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> William Hart, "South Park Uses the N-Word," from <i>Intercultural U: Online Community of Interculturalists</i> (http://cms.interculturalu.com/node/243) Richard Pryor, "Super Nigger," <i>Richard Pryor: The Anthology</i> (1968-1992) (2001) Richard Pryor, "Bicentennial Nigger," <i>Richard Pryor: The Anthology</i> (1968-1992) (2001) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "With Apologies to Jesse Jackson," <i>South Park</i> (Season 11, Episode 1) (March 2007) "CNN Comments on the South Park N-Word Episode" (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AoyYLhgKq4) "The Nigger Family," <i>Chappelle's Show</i> (October 2004) (http://funny.entsensity.net/chappelleshow/chappelleshow.php?media=niggerfamily.wmv) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent do humor and comedy serve as a vehicle to address the use and impact of the N-word?

Week 12	<p>Guest Speaker: Dr. Django Paris, Assistant Professor of English Education, will talk about his doctoral work on California multiethnic youth culture and its use of the N-word.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Geneva Smitherman, "The N-words," <i>Word from the Mother: Language and African Americans</i> (2006): 49-62 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "The N-Word, Divided We Stand" (2004) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In considering the impact of the N-word socially, what is the value of using personal narratives in this documentary? What does the N-word documentary achieve through its use of celebrities—actors, musicians, scholars, sports figures, sports broadcasters, activists, movie directors, and movie producers—to communicate the message(s) of this documentary? Consider the validity of the four distinct definitions of "nigger" outlined in the documentary. Discuss the idea that some rappers feel that wearing the title "nigger" is a badge of honor for surviving as a black person in a blatantly racist America. To what extent is gender central to the public debates on the N-word and its use? Discuss the Geneva Smitherman essay, "The N-words," in terms of word meanings—reclamation, history, dictionary definitions, and the significance of naming and being named.
Week 13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Geneva Smitherman, "The N-words," <i>Word from the Mother: Language and African Americans</i> (2006): 49-62 		
Week 14	<p>By Comparison, Other "Word Controversies" and Treatments</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bring in accounts/ instances of other "word controversies"; discuss their significance within various specific and general contexts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What other words create social and political controversy? Are the controversies of the same magnitude as that surrounding "nigger"? Are these other word controversies about race, class, sexuality, gender, or something else?
Week 15	<p>Can the N-word be buried and laid to rest?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jesse Jackson's reference to African Americans and Presidential candidate Barack Obama (July 2008) via the N-word 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fifth paper due: students bring in one-page summative and creative response to accounts of the 2008 mock funeral by the NAACP to bury the word from usage. To what extent has this public exercise and performance been useful or futile? AZ 'N' Word Resolution (http://www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/649317918?titl=1179978914) (Go to site and bring copy of resolution to class) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How difficult is it to ban a word's use? How is word use monitored? What penalties or consequences would truly affect uses of the N-word? Is there hypocrisy associated with censoring the N-word from public use?

Fall 2010 Assignments and Class Discussions

(Discussion Questions remained the same as the 2008 course, but were adjusted to match the term weeks.)

Themes, Topics and Materials	Media and Assignments
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Week 1	<p>Why Such a Course? Relevance and Timeliness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Random Facebook posting, “So tell me, if Obama fixes the oil leak problem, . . .” (14 June 2010) • “Dr. Laura Schlessinger Uses the N-word on Her Radio Show” <i>The Washington Post</i> (13 August 2010) http://voices.washingtonpost.com/livecoverage/2010/08/dr_laura_schlessinger_apologiz.html • “Teaching Tolerance: Professor Neal Lester at ASU will have a ‘sustained intellectual discussion’ with his students about the n-word this fall. What should he include on his syllabus?” https://www.facebook.com/TeachingTolerance.org/posts/134786173213571 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BLOG: Jerry Mitchell, “Coming to a College Course this Fall: ‘The N-word.’” <i>Clarion Ledger</i> (Jackson, MS) http://blogs.clarionledger.com/jmitchell/2010/06/22/arizona-professor-offering-course-on-the-n-word/ • “[White] Teacher Calls [Black] Student ‘Nigga’” (Jefferson, KY, 2006) YouTube URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XURRzofbMc0
Week 2	<p>“Sticks and stones may hurt my bones, but words will never harm me”: Words and Identity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N-word Youth Survey Results, by Jerry Mitchell, <i>Clarion Ledger</i> • Minstrel Songs as Disney Tunes: “Shew! Fly, Don’t Bother Me”; “Oh! Susanna”; “Jim Crack Corn”; “Polly-Wolly-Doodle”; “De History Ob De World”; “Uncle Ned” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing the One-page Analysis (Needn’t be a Traumatic Experience) • Paul Mooney, “Racist Word Association Interview (featuring Richard Pryor and Chevy Chase),” <i>Saturday Night Live</i> (Season 1, Episode 7) (13 December 1975): http://snltranscripts.jt.org/75/75ginterview.phtml Show clip: http://www.hulu.com/watch/1477/saturday-night-live-word-association
Week 3	<p>The Word as Personal as Political as Personal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ronald L. Jackson, II, “Mommy, There’s a Nigger at the Door,” from <i>Journal of Counseling and Development</i> 77 (Winter 1999): 4-6 • Gloria Naylor, “Mommy, What Does ‘Nigger’ Mean?” in Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell, eds. <i>Common Ground and Writing about America’s Cultures</i> (1994): 379-383 http://www.fphil.uniba.sk/fileadmin/user_upload/editors/kaa/Ivan_Lacko/Naylor_Mommy_What_Does_Nigger_Mean.pdf 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First paper due: One-page critical response to Countee Cullen’s poem “Incident,” in Dudley Randall, ed. <i>The Black Poets</i> (1971): 98-99 http://www.classjump.com/mrcilker/documents/Unit%204%20-%20Countee%20Cullen%20-%20Incident.pdf • Alternative source: http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171327
Week 4	<p>“In the beginning was the word”: Some History</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phil Middleton and David Pilgrim, “Nigger (the word): A Brief History” http://www.ca-naacp.org/news-media-civil-rights-library-a-brief-history-of-the-word-nigger.php Alternative source: http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/nigger-word-brief-history • Christopher Hitchens, “Minority Report: Black Mischief,” <i>The Nation</i> (4 March 2002) http://www.thenation.com/article/black-mischief • “N-Word: Who is N-Word? Where is N-Word? Where is N-Word? Definition” http://www.knowledgerush.com/kr/encyclopedia/N-word/ 	<p>Alison B. Hamilton, “Nigger, Please,” <i>Image</i> (October 1994): 16-19, 55-56</p>
Week 5	<p>The Word and the Scholarship</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NPR interview with Randall Kennedy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Second paper due: Bring in one page summary of strengths and weaknesses of the 2 books based on reviews: “Randall Kennedy’s Nigger” (2002) and Jabari Asim’s “The N-word” (2007) • Cornel West, “The ‘N’ Word (Part 1),” from <i>Cornel West: Street Knowledge</i> (2004) (audio) • Cornel West, “The ‘N’ Word (Part 2),” from <i>Cornel West: Street Knowledge</i> (2004) (audio) • Cornel West, “The ‘N’-ization of America,” from <i>Cornel West: Street Knowledge</i> (2004) (audio)
Week 6	<p>The Word and the Images</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Variations on “Ten Little Niggers” story and cartoon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nigger and Caricatures from Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University http://www.ferris.edu/JIMCROW/caricature/

Week 7	<p>The Word and the Airbrushing in Children's Texts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ntozake Shange, <i>Whitewash: The Incident, the Film and the Children's Book</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Third paper due: Bring to class summaries of accounts from 3 different newspapers of the January 1992 true incident in Bronx, NY upon which this is based. Is the "n-word" used or not used in media coverage of the event? How and why is censorship important?
Week 8	<p>The Word and the Music</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Last Poets, "Niggers Are Scared of Revolution," <i>Real Rap</i> (1999) http://www.urbanlyrics.com/lastpoets.html Johnny Rebel, "Nigger Nigger," <i>For Segregationists Only</i> (1971) http://www.lyricsmania.com/johnny_rebel_lyrics.html or http://www.lyricsmania.com/nigger_nigger_lyrics_johnny_rebel.html Geto Boys, "Another Nigger in the Morgue," <i>We Can't be Stopped</i> (1991) http://www.lyricsmania.com/real_niggaz_dont_die_lyrics_nwa.html or http://www.lyricsmania.com/another_nigger_in_the_morgue_lyrics_geto_boys.html DJ Quick, "Can't Fuck with a Nigga," <i>Menace II Society Original Motion Picture Soundtrack</i> (1993) http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/menaceiisociety/cantfuckwitnigga.htm Clawfinger, "I Nigger," <i>Deaf Dumb Blind</i> (1993) http://lyrics.wikia.com/Clawfinger:Nigger 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PAPER 4 DUE: Bring to class summary of concerns and commentaries on Nas's 2008 album entitled Nigger N.W.A., "Real Niggaz Don't Die" and "Niggaz 4 Life" from <i>EFILAZAGGIN(Niggaz4Life)</i> (1991) See video on your own: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jy6Nebd_e0
Week 9	<p>The Word, the Power, and the Privilege: Television and Media</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allen Francis, "The 'N' Word: It Just Slips Out," <i>Starting with "I": Personal Essays by Teenagers</i> (1982): 83-86 http://www.youthcomm.org/Books/Starting%20With%20I/SWI-SampleStory.htm Leonard Pitts, "Black Youths: It's Time You Put Aside the Bloodied N-Word," <i>Selma Newspaper</i> (24 August 95) (provided via PDF) Jennifer Lopez, "I'm Real" Earl Ofari Hutchinson, "The War Against J-Lo": http://archive.salon.com/news/feature/2001/07/19/lopez/index.html 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Season 2, Episode 15 (25 February 2002) of <i>Boston Public</i> (video)
Week 10	<p>The Word and the Laughter</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> William Hart, "South Park Uses the N-Word," from <i>Intercultural U: Online Community of Interculturalists</i> http://cms.interculturalu.com/node/243 Other "word controversies"; discuss their significance within various specific and general contexts. Jesse Jackson's reference to African Americans and Presidential candidate Barack Obama (July 2008) via the N-word AZ 'N' Word Resolution http://www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/649317918?tl=1179978914 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Season 11, Episode 1: "With Apologies to Jesse Jackson," <i>South Park</i> (Season 11, Episode 1, March 2007) http://www.southparkstudios.com/episodes/102800/ "CNN Comments on the South Park N-Word Episode": http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AoyYLhgKq4 "The Nigger Family," <i>Chappelle's Show</i> (October 2004) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PtqqMchhUkw Richard Pryor, "Super Nigger" and "Bicentennial Nigger," <i>Richard Pryor: The Anthology, 1968-1992</i> (2001) (audio)
Week 11	<p>Can the N-word be buried and laid to rest?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fifth paper due: Bring in one-page response to accounts of the 2008 mock funeral by the NAACP to bury wipe the word from usage. To what extent has this public exercise and performance been useful or futile?

Fall 2012 Assignments and Class Discussions

(Discussion Questions remained the same as the 2008 course, but were adjusted to match the term weeks.)

	Themes, Topics and Materials	Media and Assignments
Week 1	<p>Why Such a Course? Relevance and Timeliness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Random Facebook posting, “So tell me, if Obama fixes the oil leak problem, . . .” (14 June 2010) “Dr. Laura Schlessinger Uses the N-word on Her Radio Show” (<i>The Washington Post</i> 13 August 2010) http://voices.washingtonpost.com/livecoverage/2010/08/dr_laura_schlessinger_apologiz.html “Teaching Tolerance: Professor Neal Lester at ASU will have a ‘sustained intellectual discussion’ with his students about the n-word this fall. What should he include on his syllabus?” https://www.facebook.com/TeachingTolerance.org/posts/134786173213571 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> BLOG: Jerry Mitchell, “Coming to a College Course this Fall: ‘The N-word.’” <i>Clarion Ledger</i> (Jackson, MS) http://blogs.clarionledger.com/jmitchell/2010/06/22/arizona-professor-offering-course-on-the-n-word/ “[White] Teacher Calls [Black] Student ‘Nigga’” (Jefferson, KY, 2006) YouTube URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XURRzofbMc0 Writing the One-page Analysis (Needn't be a Traumatic Experience) “Bruins Fans Calling Joel Ward the N-word” (April 2012) http://chirpstory.com/li/6781 Initiate Google Alert: “Nigger” (to be analyzed in an assignment in the subsequent weeks)
Week 2	<p>“Sticks and stones may hurt my bones, but words will never harm me”: Words and Identity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> N-word Youth Survey Results, by Jerry Mitchell, <i>Clarion Ledger</i> Minstrel Songs as Disney Tunes: “Shew! Fly, Don’t Bother Me”; Oh! Susanna”; “Jim Crack Corn”; Polly-Wolly-Doodle”; “De History Ob De World”; “Uncle Ned” Ronald L. Jackson, II, “Mommy, There’s a Nigger at the Door,” from <i>Journal of Counseling and Development</i>, 77 (Winter 1999): 4-6 Gloria Naylor, “Mommy, What Does ‘Nigger’ Mean?” in Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell, eds. <i>Common Ground and Writing about America’s Cultures</i> (1994): 379-383 http://www.fphil.uniba.sk/fileadmin/user_upload/editors/kaa/Ivan_Lacko/Naylor_Mommy_What_Does_Nigger_Mean.pdf 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paul Mooney, “Racist Word Association Interview (featuring Richard Pryor and Chevy Chase),” <i>Saturday Night Live</i> (Season 1, Episode 7) (13 December 1975): http://snltranscripts.jt.org/75/75ginterview.phtml_Showclip: http://www.hulu.com/watch/1477/saturday-night-live-word-association First paper due: One-page critical response to Countee Cullen’s poem “Incident,” in Dudley Randall, ed. <i>The Black Poets</i> (1971): 98-99 http://www.classjump.com/mrcilker/documents/Unit%204%20-%20Countee%20Cullen%20-%20Incident.pdf Alternative source: http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171327
Week 3	<p>“In the beginning was the word”: Some History</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phil Middleton and David Pilgrim, “Nigger (the word): A Brief History” http://www.ca-naacp.org/news-media-civil-rights-library-a-brief-history-of-the-word-nigger.php Alternative source: http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/nigger-word-brief-history Christopher Hitchens, “Minority Report: Black Mischief,” <i>The Nation</i> (4 March 2002) http://www.thenation.com/article/black-mischief “N-Word: Who is N-Word? Where is N-Word? Where is N-Word? Definition” http://www.knowledgerush.com/kr/encyclopedia/N-word/ 	<p>Alison B. Hamilton, “Nigger, Please,” <i>Image</i> (October 1994): 16-19, 55-56</p>
Week 4	<p>The Word and the Images</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Variations on “Ten Little Niggers” story and cartoon Minstrel Songs as Disney Tunes: “Shew! Fly, Don’t Bother Me”; Oh! Susanna”; “Jim Crack Corn”; Polly-Wolly-Doodle”; “De History Ob De World”; “Uncle Ned” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Second paper due: What can be learned from the results of the Google Alerts? What patterns do you see? Nigger and Caricatures from Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University http://www.ferris.edu/JIMCROW/caricature/ “Last one in is a nigger” (poster) Variations on “Ten Little Niggers” story; Preeti Sagar’s <i>Nursery Rhymes</i> (2007)

Week 5	<p>The Word and the Laughter</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> William Hart, "South Park Uses the N-Word," from <i>Intercultural U: Online Community of Interculturalists</i> http://cms.interculturalu.com/node/243 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Season 11, Episode 1: "With Apologies to Jesse Jackson," South Park (Season 11, Episode 1, March 2007) http://www.southparkstudios.com/episodes/102800/ "CNN Comments on the South Park N-Word Episode": http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AoyYLhgKq4 "The Nigger Family," Chappelle's Show (October 2004) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PtqqMchhUkw Richard Pryor, "Super Nigger" and "Bicentennial Nigger," Richard Pryor: The Anthology, 1968-1992) (2001) (audio)
Week 6	<p>The Word and the Music</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Last Poets, "Niggers Are Scared of Revolution," <i>Real Rap</i> (1999) http://www.urbanlyrics.com/l/lastpoets.html Johnny Rebel, "Nigger Nigger," <i>For Segregationists Only</i> (1971) http://www.lyricsmania.com/johnny_rebel_lyrics.html or http://www.lyricsmania.com/nigger_nigger_lyrics_johnny_rebel.html Geto Boys, "Another Nigger in the Morgue," <i>We Can't be Stopped</i> (1991) http://www.lyricsmania.com/real_niggaz_dont_die_lyrics_nwa.html or http://www.lyricsmania.com/another_nigger_in_the_morgue_lyrics_geto_boys.html 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Third paper due: Bring to class summary of concerns and commentaries on Nas's 2008 album entitled <i>Nigger</i> N.W.A., "Real Niggaz Don't Die" and "Niggaz 4 Life" from <i>EFILAZAGGIN(Niggaz4Life)</i> (1991) See video on your own: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jy6Nebd_e0 DJ Quick, "Can't Fuck with a Nigga," <i>Menace II Society Original Motion Picture Soundtrack</i> (1993) http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/menaceiisociety/cantfuckwitani_gga.htm Clawfinger, "I Nigger," <i>Deaf Dumb Blind</i> (1993) http://lyrics.wikia.com/Clawfinger:Nigger
Week 7	<p>Is there a double standard? Can the N-word be buried and laid to rest? Is this a generational 'thing'?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jay Smooth, "Ill Doctrine: The Last Word on that Word" http://www.animalnewyork.com/2012/ill-doctrine-the-last-word-on-that-word/ AZ 'N' Word Resolution http://www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/649317918?tl=1179978914 Other "word controversies"; discuss their significance within various specific and general contexts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Tim Wise on the N-word" http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MnmDiQsDA Sean Medlin, "'Nigga' and Its Six-Letter Twin" (transcript provided) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-ymeQSR2ek Fourth paper due: Bring in one-page response to accounts of the 2008 mock funeral by the NAACP to bury wipe the word from usage. To what extent has this public exercise and performance been useful or futile?

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NOTES

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- ¹⁸ William Raspberry, “We Give this Slur its Power,” *Tuscaloosa News (Alabama)* 11 Apr. 1995: n.p.
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- ²¹ Kenneth B. Noble, “One Hateful Word,” *New York Times* 19 Mar. 1995: 1E.
- ²² Attorney Christopher Darden quoted in David Margolick, “For Black Prosecutor, There is No Allure in the Simpson Case,” *New York Times* 22 Jan 1995: 13.

²³ Since there has been much classroom, community, and media attention to use of the N-word in American literature by white authors William Faulkner, Mark Twain, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, for instance, I deliberately stayed away from this still ongoing unresolved debate in this course. In terms of how and when to teach this word as a subject, I have happened upon a couple of accounts of high school and college educators talking about their experiences. One report details an African American high school English teacher's discussion of the N-word with her racially mixed class on the occasion of her students' seeing and being interested in the provocative *Boston Public* television episode based on Randall Kennedy's book *Nigger*. The reporter comments on Adamson's need to deal with this sensitive subject:

Adamson hadn't been sure she wanted to lead a discussion on what she calls 'a horrible word that needs to die.' It was one thing to read the word as she taught the 1930s literature of William Faulkner or Zora Neale Hurston. It was something else again to bring it up in the context of today, with seniors who were only 4 years old in 1988 when gangsta rappers N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude) lobbed the word into popular culture with their best-selling CD *Straight Outta Compton*. . . . By talking about the previously untalkable, [students] learn more about themselves and their friends. So why are adults always trying to shut them up? (Laura Sessions Stepp, "Starts with N, Ends with You and Me; Blair Students Deconstruct American English's Thorniest Slur—and Slang," *The Washington Post* [25 March 2002]: C01.)

Although there are no details of precisely what transpired in his classroom, African American teacher Bill Maxwell, in a review of Randall Kennedy's *Nigger*, believes that had the Kennedy book been available when he taught *Huckleberry Finn* in an American literature course at Northern Illinois University, the experience would have been more satisfying for both him and his students:

I put Mark Twain's classic novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* on the reading list of my American literature course. The six African American students in the course protested,

saying they would not read the novel because of Twain's heavy use of the word 'nigger' and because of the black protagonist named *Nigger Jim*. . . . This was an instructive saga for me, a second-year college teacher, a black man reared in the South, who, despite having been called *nigger* hundreds of times both by whites and blacks, now believed the university campus was a place of free thinking. I had naively believed I could put the word *nigger* in context and help my students assess its various shades of meaning as Twain had intended. Because of my ignorance, I gave a lot of young people an unnecessary bad experience. (Bill Maxwell, "Confronting Our Cruellest Word," *St. Petersburg Times* [Florida], Jan. 27, 2002, D5).

University of Vermont's (Burlington) Professor Emily Bernard's piece, "Teaching the N-Word: A Black Professor, an All-White Class, and the Thing Nobody will Say, (*The American Scholar.Org* [Autumn 2005]: 1-8. <http://www.theamericanschoalr.org/yeaching-the-n-word/>), discusses the inseparable personal responses to talking about this word as it intersects with the political implications. Hers is a reflection on how her white students felt about using the word in her presence formally in the classroom in discussing a critical essay on the word and informally in conversations about the word and Randall Kennedy's book outside of class.

Finally, Alcorn State University Professor Cynthia S. Scurria's 2008 unpublished paper, "The 'N-Word' in the College English Classroom: Are the Rules in Black and White?" is another such piece about the N-word as a centerpiece of classroom discussion at an historically black college in the Deep South (Mississippi). Scurria reveals her personal ambivalence about being white and teaching and saying the N-word even in the context of a literature classroom discussion. She considers hers a bold political move in her ongoing efforts to teach her mostly African American students—reportedly grateful for the experience overall—to be more critically literate about language use, American history, and linguistic performance.