

# Teaching the N-Word

*A black professor, an all-white class, and the thing nobody will say*

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EMILY BERNARD

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

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

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

—Countee Cullen, "Incident" (1925)

**October 2004**

ERIC IS CRAZY ABOUT queer theory. I think it is safe to say that Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and Lee Edelman have changed his life. Every week, he comes to my office to report on the connections he is making between the works of these writers and the books he is reading for the class he is taking with me, African-American autobiography.

I like Eric. So tonight, even though it is well after six and I am eager to go home, I keep our conversation going. I ask him what he thinks about the word "queer," whether or not he believes, independent of the theorists he admires, that epithets can ever really be reclaimed and reinvented.

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“‘Queer’ has important connotations for me,” he says. “It’s daring, political. I embrace it.” He folds his arms across his chest, and then unfolds them.

I am suspicious.

“What about ‘nigger’?” I ask. “If we’re talking about the importance of transforming hateful language, what about that word?” From my bookshelf I pull down Randall Kennedy’s book *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, and turn it so its cover faces Eric. “Nigger,” in stark white type against a black background, is staring at him, staring at anyone who happens to be walking past the open door behind him.

Over the next 30 minutes or so, Eric and I talk about “nigger.” He is uncomfortable; every time he says “nigger,” he drops his voice and does not meet my eyes. I know that he does not want to say the word; he is following my lead. He does not want to say it because he is white; he does not want to say it because I am black. I feel my power as his professor, the mentor he has so ardently adopted. I feel the power of Randall Kennedy’s book in my hands, its title crude and unambiguous. *Say it*, we both instruct this white student. And he does.

It is late. No one moves through the hallway. I think about my colleagues, some of whom still sit at their own desks. At any minute, they might pass my office on their way out of the building. What would they make of this scene? Most of my colleagues are white. What would I think if I walked by an office and saw one of them holding up *Nigger* to a white student’s face? A black student’s face?

“I think I am going to add ‘Who Can Say Nigger?’ to our reading for next week,” I say to Eric. “It’s an article by Kennedy that covers some of the ideas in this book.” I tap *Nigger* with my finger, and then put it down on my desk.

“I really wish there was a black student in our class,” Eric says as he gathers his books to leave.

AS USUAL I HAVE assigned way too much reading. Even though we begin class discussion with references to three essays required for today, our conversation drifts quickly to “Who Can Say Nigger?” and plants itself there. We talk about the word, who can say it, who won’t say it, who wants to say it, and why. There are 11 students in the class. All of them are white.

Our discussion is lively and intense; everyone seems impatient to speak. We talk about language, history, and identity. Most students say “the n-word” instead of “nigger.” Only one or two students actually use the word in their comments. When they do, they use the phrase “the word ‘nigger,’” as if to cushion it. Sometimes they make quotations marks with their fingers. I notice Lauren looking around. Finally, she raises her hand.

“I have a question; it’s somewhat personal. I don’t want to put you on the spot.”

“Go ahead, Lauren,” I say with relief.

“Okay, so how does it feel for you to hear us say that word?”



I have an answer ready.

“I don’t enjoy hearing it. But I don’t think that I feel more offended by it than you do. What I mean is, I don’t think I have a special place of pain inside of me that the word touches because I am black.” *We are both human beings*, I am trying to say. She nods her head, seemingly satisfied. Even inspired, I hope.

I am lying, of course.

I am grateful to Lauren for acknowledging my humanity in our discussion. But I do not want me—my feelings, my experiences, my humanity—to become the center of classroom discussion. Here at the University of Vermont, I routinely teach classrooms full of white



students. I want to educate them, transform them. I want to teach them things about race they will never forget. To achieve this, I believe I must give of myself. I want to give to them—but I want to keep much of myself to myself. How much? I have a new answer to this question every week.

I ALWAYS GIVE MY STUDENTS a lecture at the beginning of every African-American studies course I teach. I tell them, in essence, not to confuse my body with the body of the text. I tell them that while it would be disingenuous for me to suggest that my own racial identity has nothing to do with my love for African-American literature, my race is only one of the many reasons why I stand before them. “I stand here,” I say, “because I have a Ph.D., just like all your other professors.” I make sure always to tell them that my Ph.D., like my B.A., comes from Yale.

“In order to get this Ph.D.,” I continue, “I studied with some of this country’s foremost authorities on African-American literature, and a significant number of these people are white.

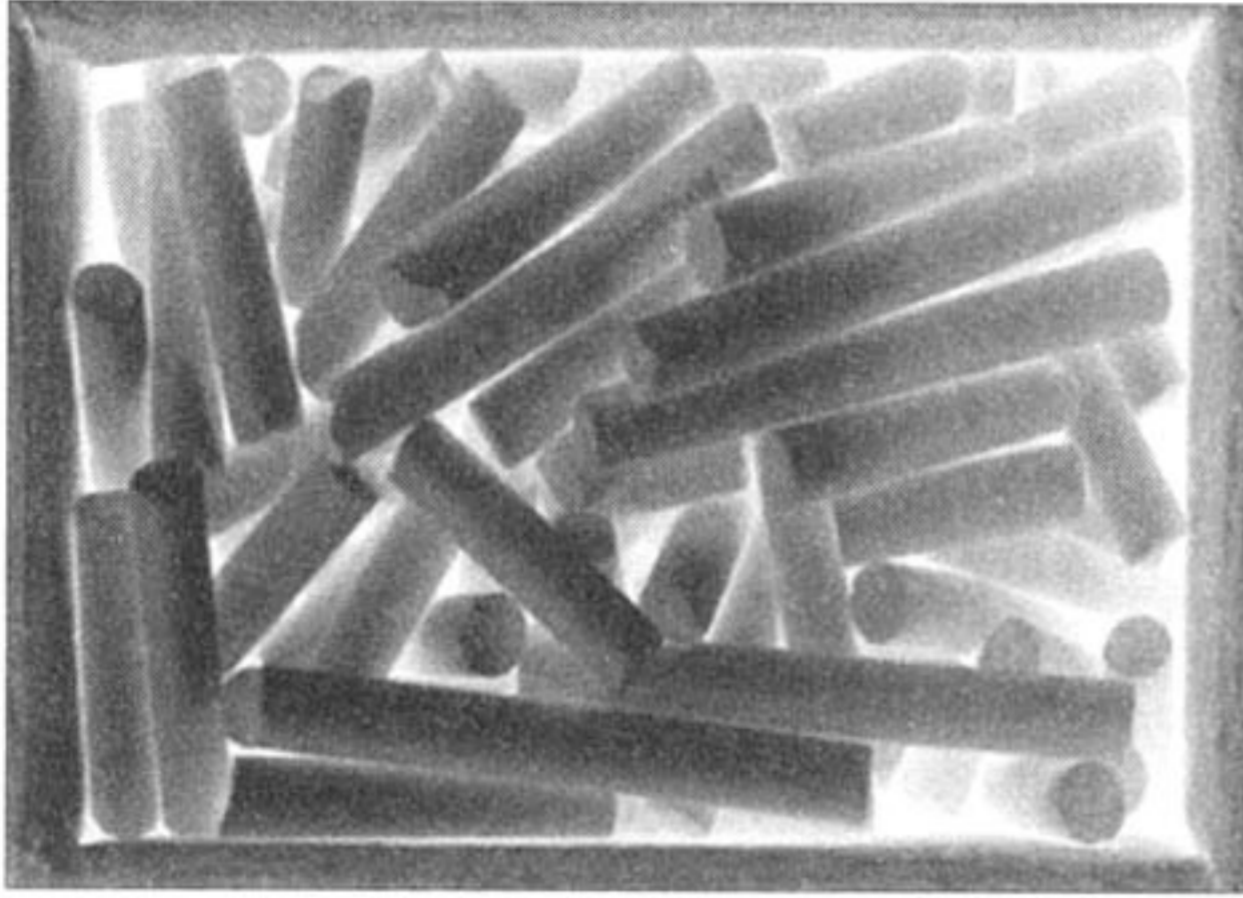
“I say this to suggest that if you fail to fully appreciate this material, it is a matter of your intellectual laziness, not your race. If you cannot grasp the significance of Frederick Douglass’s plight, for instance, you are not trying hard enough, and I will not accept that.”

I have another part of this lecture. It goes: “Conversely, this material is not the exclusive property of students of color. This is literature. While these books will speak to us emotionally according to our different experiences, none of us is especially equipped to appreciate the intellectual and aesthetic complexities that characterize African-American literature. This is American literature, American experience, after all.”

Sometimes I give this part of my lecture, but not always. Sometimes I give it and then regret it later.



AS SOON AS LAUREN asks me how I feel, it is as if the walls of the room soften and collapse slightly, nudging us a little bit closer together. Suddenly, 11 pairs of eyes are beaming sweet messages at me. I want to laugh. I do. “Look at you all, leaning in,” I say. “How close we have all become.”



I sit at the end of a long narrow table. Lauren usually sits at the other end. The rest of the students flank us on either side. When I make my joke, a few students, all straight men, I notice, abruptly pull themselves back. They shift their eyes away from me, look instead at their notebooks, the table. I have made them ashamed to show that they care about me, I realize. They are following the cues I have been

giving them since the beginning of the semester, cues that they should take this class seriously, that I will be offended if they do not. “African-American studies has had to struggle to exist at all,” I have said. “You owe it your respect.” *Don’t be too familiar*, is what I am really saying. *Don’t be too familiar with me*.

Immediately, I regret having made a joke of their sincere attempt to offer me their care. They want to know me; they see this moment as an opportunity. But I can’t stop. I make more jokes, mostly about them, and what they are saying and not saying. I can’t seem to help myself.

ERIC, WHO IS SITTING near me, does not recoil at my jokes; he does not respond to my not-so-subtle efforts to push him and everyone else back. He continues to lean in, his torso flat against the edge of the table. He looks at me. He raises his hand.

“Emily,” he says, “would you tell them what you told me the other day in your office? You were talking about how you dress and what it means to you.”

“Yes,” I begin slowly. “I was telling Eric about how important it is to me that I come to class dressed up.”

“And remember what you said about Todd? You said that Todd exercises his white privilege by dressing so casually for class.”

Todd is one of my closest friends in the English department. His office is next door to mine. I don’t remember talking about Todd’s clothing habits with Eric, but I must have. I struggle to come up with a comfortably vague response to stop Eric’s prodding. My face grows hot. Everyone is waiting.

“Well, I don’t know if I put it exactly like that, but I do believe that Todd’s style of dress reflects his ability to move in the world here—everywhere, really—less self-consciously than I do.” As I sit here, I grow increasingly more alarmed at what I am revealing: my personal philosophies; my attitudes about



my friend's style of dress; my insecurities; my feelings. I quietly will Eric to stop, even as I am impressed by his determination. I meet his eyes again.

"And you. You were saying that the way you dress, it means something, too," Eric says. *On with this tug of war*, I think.

I relent, let go of the rope. "Listen, I will say this. I am aware that you guys, all of my students at UVM, have very few black professors. I am aware, in fact, that I may be the first black teacher many of you have ever had. And the way I dress for class reflects my awareness of that possibility." I look sharply at Eric. *That's it. No more.*

## September 2004

ON THE FIRST DAY of class, Nate asks me what I want to be called.

"Oh, I don't know," I say, fussing with equipment in the room. I know. But I feel embarrassed, as if I have been found out. "What do you think?" I ask them.

They shuffle around, equally embarrassed. We all know that I have to decide, and that whatever I decide will shape our classroom dynamic in very important ways.

"What does Gennari ask you to call him?" I have inherited several of these students from my husband, John Gennari, another professor of African-American studies. He is white.

"Oh, we call him John," Nate says with confidence. I am immediately envious of the easy warmth he seems to feel for John. I suspect it has to do with the name thing.

"Well, just call me Emily, then. This is an honors class, after all. And I do know several of you already. And then wouldn't it be strange to call the husband John and the wife Professor?" Okay, I have convinced myself.

Nate says, "Well, John and I play basketball in a pickup game on Wednesdays. So, you know, it would be weird for me to be checking him and calling him 'Professor Gennari.'"

We all laugh, and move on to other topics. But my mind locks onto an image of my husband and Nate on the basketball court, two white men, covered in sweat, body to body, heads down, focused on the ball.

## October 2004

"IT'S NOT THAT I can't say it, it's that I don't want to. I will not say it," Sarah says. She wears her copper red hair in a short, smart style that makes her look older than her years. When she smiles I remember how young she is. She is not smiling now. She looks indignant. She is indignant because I am insinuating that there is a problem with the fact that no one in the class will say "nigger." Her indignation pleases me.

Good.

“I’d just like to remind you all that just because a person refuses to say ‘nigger,’ that doesn’t mean that person is not a racist,” I say. They seem to consider this.

“And another thing,” Sarah continues. “About dressing for class? I dislike it when my professors come to class in shorts, for instance. This is a profession. They should dress professionally.”

Later, I tell my husband, John, about our class discussion. When I get to Sarah’s comment about professors in shorts, he says, “Good for her.”

I HOLD UP *Nigger* and show its cover to the class. I hand it to the person on my left, gesture for him to pass the book around the room.

“Isn’t it strange that when we refer to this book, we keep calling it ‘the n-word’?”

Lauren comments on the affect of one student who actually said it. “Colin looked like he was being strangled.” Of the effect on the other students, she says, “I saw us all collectively cringing.”

“Would you be able to say it if I weren’t here?” I blurt.

A few students shake their heads. Tyler’s hand shoots up. He always sits directly to my right.

“That’s just bullshit,” he says to the class, and I force myself not to raise an eyebrow at *bullshit*. “If Emily weren’t here, you all would be able to say that word.”

I note that he, himself, has not said it, but do not make this observation out loud.

“No.” Sarah is firm. “I just don’t want to be the kind of person who says that word, period.”

“Even in this context?” I ask.

“Regardless of context,” Sarah says.

“Even when it’s the title of a book?”

I tell the students that I often work with a book called *Nigger Heaven*, written in 1926 by a white man, Carl Van Vechten.

“Look, I don’t want to give you the impression that I am somehow longing for you guys to say ‘nigger,’” I tell them, “but I do think that something is lost when you don’t articulate it, especially if the context almost demands its articulation.”

“What do you mean? What exactly is lost?” Sarah insists.

“I don’t know,” I say. I do know. But right here, in this moment, the last thing I want is to win an argument that winds up with Sarah saying “nigger” out loud.

THROUGHOUT OUR DISCUSSION, Nate is the only student who will say “nigger” out loud. He sports a shearling coat and a Caesar haircut. He quotes Jay-Z. He makes a case for “nigga.” He is that kind of white kid; he is down. “He is so down, he’s almost up,” Todd will say in December, when I show



him the title page of Nate's final paper for this class. The page contains one word, "Nigger," in black type against a white background. It is an autobiographical essay. It is a very good paper.

### October 1994

NATE REMINDS ME OF a student in the very first class I taught all on my own, a senior seminar called "Race and Representation." I was still in graduate school. It was 1994 and *Pulp Fiction* had just come out. I spent an entire three-hour class session arguing with my students over the way race was represented in the movie. One student, in particular, passionately resisted my attempts to analyze the way Tarantino used "nigger" in the movie.

"What is his investment in this word? What is he, as the white director, getting out of saying 'nigger' over and over again?" I asked.

After some protracted verbal arm wrestling, the student gave in.

"Okay, okay! I want to be the white guy who can say 'nigger' to black guys and get away with it. I want to be the cool white guy who can say 'nigger.'"

"Thank you! Thank you for admitting it!" I said, and everyone laughed.

He was tall. He wore tie-dye T-shirts and had messy, curly brown hair. I don't remember his name.

AFTER *PULP FICTION* CAME OUT, I wrote my older brother an earnest, academic e-mail. I wanted to "initiate a dialogue" with him about the "cultural and political implications of the various usages of 'nigger' in popular culture."

His one-sentence reply went something like this: "Nigga, niggo, niggu, negreaux, negrette, niggrum."

"DO YOU GUYS EVER read *The Source* magazine?" In 1994, my students knew about *The Source*; some of them had read James Bernard's column, "Doin' the Knowledge."

"He's my brother," I said, not bothering to mask my pride with anything like cool indifference. "He's coming to visit class in a couple of weeks, when we discuss hip-hop culture."

The eyes of the tie-dyed student glistened.

"Quentin Tarantino is a cool-ass white boy!" James said on the day he came to visit my class. "He is one cool white boy."

My students clapped and laughed.

"That's what I said," my tie-dyed student sighed.

James looked at me slyly. I narrowed my eyes at him. *Thanks a lot.*

### September 2004

ON THE WAY TO SCHOOL in the morning, I park my car in the Allen House lot. Todd was the one who told me about the lot. He said, "Everyone thinks the



lot at the library is closer, but the lot behind Allen House is so much better. Plus, there are always spaces, in part because everyone rushes for the library.”

It is true that the library lot is nearly always full in the morning. It’s also true that the Allen House lot is relatively empty, and much closer to my office. But if it were even just slightly possible for me to find a space in the library lot, I would probably try to park there, for one reason. To get to my office from Allen House, I have to cross a busy street. To get to my office from the library, I do not.

Several months ago, I was crossing the same busy street to get to my office after a class. It was late April, near the end of the semester, and it seemed as if everyone was outside. Parents were visiting, and students were yelling to each other, introducing family members from across the street. People smiled at me—wide, grinning smiles. I smiled back. We were all giddy with the promise of spring, which always comes so late in Vermont, if it comes at all.

Traffic was heavy, I noticed as I walked along the sidewalk, calculating the moment when I would attempt to cross. A car was stopped near me; I heard rough voices. Out of the corner of my eye, I looked into the car: all white. I looked away, but I could feel them surveying the small crowd that was carrying me along. As traffic picked up again, one of the male voices yelled out, “Queers! Fags!” There was laughter. Then the car roared off.

I was stunned. I stopped walking and let the words wash over me. *Queer. Fag.* Annihilating, surely. I remembered my role as a teacher, a mentor, in loco parentis, even though there were real parents everywhere. I looked around to check for the wounds caused by those hateful words. I peered down the street: too late for a license plate. All around me, students and parents marched to their destinations, as if they hadn’t heard. *Didn’t you hear that?* I wanted to shout.

All the while I was thinking, *Not nigger. Not yet.*

## October 2004

NATE jumps in.

“Don’t you grant a word power by not saying it? Aren’t we, in some way, amplifying its ugliness by avoiding it?” He asks.

“I am afraid of how I will be affected by saying it,” Lauren says. “I just don’t want that word in my mouth.”

Tyler remembers a phrase attributed to Farai Chideya in Randall Kennedy’s essay. He finds it and reads it to us. “She says that the n-word is the ‘trump card, the nuclear bomb of racial epithets.’”

“Do you agree with that?” I ask.

Eleven heads nod vigorously.

“Nuclear bombs annihilate. What do you imagine will be destroyed if you guys use the word in here?”



Shyly, they look at me, all of them, and I understand. Me. It is my annihilation they imagine.

### November 2004

*SOME OF MY BEST FRIENDS*, my anthology of essays about interracial friendship, came out in August, and the publicity department has arranged for various interviews and other promotional events. When I did an on-air interview with a New York radio show, one of the hosts, Janice, a black woman, told me that the reason she could not marry a white man was because she believed if things ever got heated between them, the white man would call her a nigger.

I nodded my head. I had heard this argument before. But strangely I had all but forgotten it. The fact that I had forgotten to fear “nigger” coming from the mouth of my white husband was more interesting to me than her fear, alive and ever-present.

“ARE YOU BI-RACIAL?”

“No.”

“Are you married to a white man?”

“Yes.”

These were among the first words exchanged between Janice, the radio host, and me. I could tell—by the way she looked at me, and didn’t look at me; by the way she kept her body turned away from me; by her tone—that she had made up her mind about me before I entered the room. I could tell that she didn’t like what she had decided about me, and that she had decided I was the wrong kind of black person. Maybe it was what I had written in *Some of My Best Friends*. Maybe it was the fact that I had decided to edit a collection about interracial friendships at all. When we met, she said, “I don’t trust white people,” as decisively and exactly as if she were handing me her business card. I knew she was telling me that I was foolish to trust them, to marry one. I was relieved to look inside myself and see that I was okay, I was still standing. A few years ago, her silent judgment—this silent judgment from any black person—would have crushed me.

When she said she could “tell” I was married to a white man, I asked her how. She said, “Because you are so friendly,” and did a little dance with her shoulders. I laughed.

But Janice couldn’t help it; she liked me in spite of herself. As the interview progressed, she let the corners of her mouth turn up in a smile. She admitted that she had a few white friends, even if they sometimes drove her crazy. At a commercial break, she said, “Maybe I ought to try a white man.” She was teasing me, of course. She hadn’t changed her mind about white people, or dating a white man, but she had changed her mind about me. It mattered to me. I took what she was offering. But when the interview was over, I left it behind.



MY HUSBAND THOUGHT MY STORY about the interview was hilarious. When I got home, he listened to the tape they gave me at the station. He said he wanted to use the interview in one of his classes.

A few days later, I told him what Janice said about dating a white man, that she won't because she is afraid he will call her a nigger. As I told him, I felt an unfamiliar shyness creep up on me.

"That's just so far out of . . . it's not in my head at all." He was having difficulty coming up with the words he wanted, I could tell. But that was okay. I knew what he meant. I looked at him sitting in his chair, the chair his mother gave us. I can usually find him in that chair when I come home. He is John, I told myself. And he is white. No more or less John and no more or less white than he was before the interview, and Janice's reminder of the fear that I had forgotten to feel.

I TELL MY STUDENTS in the African-American autobiography class about Janice. I say, "You would not believe the indignities I have suffered in my humble attempts to 'move this product,' as they say in publishing." I say, "I have been surrounded by morons, and now I gratefully return to the land of the intellectually agile." They laugh.

I flatter them, in part because I feel guilty that I have missed so many classes in order to do publicity for my book. But I cringe, thinking of how I have called Janice, another black woman, a "moron" in front of these white students. I do not tell my students she is black.

"HERE IS A STORY FOR your students," John tells me. We are in the car, on our way to Cambridge for the weekend. "The only time I ever heard 'nigger' in my home growing up was when my father's cousin was over for a visit. It was 1988, I remember. Jesse Jackson was running for president. My father's cousin was sitting in the kitchen, talking to my parents about the election. 'I'm going to vote for the nigger,' my father's cousin said. 'He's the only one who cares about the workingman.'"

John laughs. He often laughs when he hears something extraordinary, whether it's good or bad.

"That's fascinating," I say.

The next time class meets, I tell my students this story.

"So what do we care about in this sentence?" I say. "The fact that John's father's cousin used a racial epithet, or the fact that his voting for Jackson conveys a kind of ultimate respect for him? Isn't his voting for Jackson more important for black progress than how his father's cousin *feels*?"

I don't remember what the students said. What I remember is that I tried to project for them a sense that I was untroubled by saying "nigger," by my husband's saying "nigger," by his father's cousin's having said "nigger," by his parents'—my in-laws—tolerance of "nigger" in their home, years ago, long before I came along. What I remember is that I leaned on the word "feels"



with a near-sneer in my voice. *It's an intellectual issue*, I beamed at them, and then I directed it back at myself. *It has nothing to do with how it makes me feel.*

AFTER MY INTERVIEW WITH Janice, I look at the white people around me differently, as if from a distance. I do this, from time to time, almost as an exercise. I even do it to my friends, particularly my friends. Which of them has “nigger” in the back of her throat?

I go out for drinks with David, my senior colleague. It is a ritual. We go on Thursdays after class, always to the same place. I know that he will order, in succession, two draft beers, and that he will ask the waitress to help him choose the second. “What do you have on draft that is interesting tonight?” he will say. I order red wine, and I, too, always ask the waitress’s advice. Then, we order a selection of cheeses, again soliciting assistance. We have our favorite waitresses. We like the ones who indulge us.

Tonight, David orders a cosmopolitan.

We never say it, but I suspect we both like the waitresses who appreciate the odd figure we cut. He is white, 60-something, male. I am black, 30-something, female. Not such an odd pairing elsewhere, perhaps, but uncommon in Burlington, insofar as black people are uncommon in Burlington.

Something you can’t see is that we are both from the South. Different Souths, perhaps, 30 years apart, black and white. I am often surprised by how much I like his company. *All the way up here*, I sometimes think when I am with him, *and I am sitting with the South, the white South that, all of my childhood, I longed to escape*. I once had a white boyfriend from New Orleans. “A white Southerner, Emily?” My mother asked, and sighed with worry. I understood. We broke up.

David and I catch up. We talk about the writing we have been doing. We talk each other out of bad feelings we are harboring against this and that person. (Like most Southerners, like the South in general, David and I have long memories.) We talk about classes. I describe to him the conversation I have been having with my students about “nigger.” He laughs at my anecdotes.

I am on my second glass of wine. I try to remember to keep my voice down. It’s a very nice restaurant. *People in Burlington do not want to hear “nigger” while they are eating a nice dinner*, I say, chastising myself. I am tipsy.

As we leave, I accidentally knock my leg against a chair. *You are drunk*, I tell myself. *You are drunk and black in a restaurant in Burlington. What were you thinking?* I feel eyes on me as I walk out of the restaurant, eyes that may have been focused elsewhere, as far as I know, because I do not allow myself to look.

LATER THAT EVENING, I am alone. I remember that David recently gave me a poem of his to read, a poem about his racist grandmother, now dead, whom he remembers using the word “nigger” often and with relish. I lie in bed and reconstruct the scene of David and me in the restaurant, our conversation about “nigger.” Was his grandmother at the table with us all along?



The next day, I see David in his office, which is next to mine, on the other side from Todd. I knock on the door. He invites me in. I sit in a chair, the chair I always sit in when I come to talk to him. He tells me how much he enjoyed our conversation the night before.

"Me, too," I say. "But today it's as if I'm looking at you across from something," I say. "It has to do with race." I blame a book I am reading, a book for my African-American autobiography class, Toi Derricote's *The Black Notebooks*.

"Have you read it?" David is a poet, like Derricote.

"No, but I know Toi and enjoy her poetry. Everything I know about her and her work would lead me to believe that I would enjoy that book." He is leaning back in his chair, his arms folded behind his head.

"Well, it's making me think about things, remember the ways that you and I will always be different," I say abruptly.

David laughs. "I hope not." He looks puzzled.

"It's probably just temporary." I don't ask him my question about his grandmother, whether or not she is always somewhere with him, in him, in the back of his throat.

JOHN IS AT AN African-American studies conference in New York. Usually, I am thrilled to have the house to myself for a few days. But this time, I mope. I sit at the dining-room table, write this essay, watch out of the window.

Today, when John calls, he describes the activity at the conference. He tells me delicious and predictable gossip about people we know, and the divas that we know of. The personalities, the in-fighting—greedily, we sift over details on the phone.

"Did you enjoy your evening with David last night?" he asks.

"I did, very much," I say. "But give me more of the who-said-what." I know he's in a hurry. In fact, he's talking on a cell phone (my cell phone; he refuses to get one of his own) as he walks down a New York street.

"Oh, you know these Negroes." His voice jounces as he walks.

"Yeah," I say, laughing. I wonder who else can hear him.

TODD IS MARRIED TO Hilary, another of my close friends in the department. She is white. Like John, Todd is out of town this weekend. Since their two boys were born, our godsons, John and I see them less frequently than we used to. But Hilary and I are determined to spend some time together on this weekend with our husbands away.

Burlington traffic keeps me away from her and the boys for an hour, even though she lives only blocks away from me. When I get there, the boys are ready for their baths, one more feeding, and then bed. Finally, they are down, and we settle into grown-up conversation. I tell her about my class, our discussions about "nigger," and my worries about David.

"That's the thing about the South," Hilary says. I agree, but then start to wonder about her grandmother. I decide I do not want to know, not tonight.



I do tell her, however, about the fear I have every day in Burlington, crossing that street to get back and forth from my office, what I do to guard myself against the fear.

“Did you grow up hearing that?” She asks. Even though we are close, and alone, she does not say the word.

I start to tell her a story I have never told anyone. It is a story about the only time I remember being called a nigger to my face.

“I was a teenager, maybe 16. I was standing on a sidewalk, trying to cross a busy street after school, to get to the mall and meet my friends. I happened to make eye contact with a white man in a car that was sort of stopped—traffic was heavy. Anyway, he just said it, kind of spit it up at me.”

“*Oh, that’s why,*” I say, stunned, remembering the daily ritual I have just confessed to her. She looks at me, just as surprised.

## December 2004

I AM WALKING DOWN a Burlington street with my friend, Anh. My former quilting teacher, Anh is several years younger than I am. She has lived in Vermont her whole life. She is Vietnamese; her parents are white. Early in our friendship, she told me her father was a logger, as were most of the men in her family. *Generations of Vietnamese loggers in Vermont*, I mused. It wasn’t until I started to describe her to someone else that I realized she must be adopted.

Anh and I talk about race, about being minorities in Burlington, but we usually do it indirectly. In quilting class, we would give each other looks sometimes that said, *You are not alone*, or *Oh, brother*, when the subject of race came up in our class, which was made up entirely of white women, aside from the two of us.

There was the time, for instance, when a student explained why black men found her so attractive. “I have a black girl’s butt,” she said. Anh and I looked at each other: *Oh, brother*. We bent our heads back over our sewing machines.

As we walk, I tell Anh about my African-American autobiography class, the discussions my students and I have been having about “nigger.” She listens, and then describes to me the latest development in her on-again, off-again relationship with her 50-year-old boyfriend, another native Vermonter, a blond scuba instructor.

“He says everything has changed,” she tells me. “He’s going clean up the messes in his life.” She laughs.

Once, Anh introduced me to the boyfriend she had before the scuba instructor when I ran into them at a restaurant. He is also white.

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” I said, and put out my hand.

“I’ve never slept with a black woman,” he said, and shook my hand. There was wonder in his voice. I excused myself and went back to my table. Later, when I looked over at them, they were sitting side by side, not speaking.

Even though Anh and I exchanged our usual glances that night, I doubted



that we would be able to recover our growing friendship. *Who could she be, dating someone like that?* The next time I heard from her, months later, she had broken up with him.

I am rooting for the scuba instructor.

“He told me he’s a new person,” she says.

“Well, what did you say?” I ask her.

“In the immortal words of Jay-Z, I told him, ‘Nigga, please.’”

I look at her, and we laugh.

IN LIEU OF A FINAL class, my students come over for dinner. One by one, they file in. John takes coats while I pretend to look for things in the refrigerator. I can’t stop smiling.

“The books of your life” is the topic for tonight. I have asked them to bring a book, a poem, a passage, some art that has affected them. Hazel has brought a children’s book. Tyler talks about *Saved by the Bell*. Nate talks about Freud. Dave has a photograph. Eric reads “The Seacoast of Despair” from *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*.

I read from *Annie John* by Jamaica Kincaid. Later I will wonder why I did not read “Incident” by Countee Cullen, the poem that has been circulating in my head ever since we began our discussion about “nigger.” *What held me back from bringing “Incident” to class?* The question will stay with me for months.

The night of our dinner is an emotional one. I tell my students that they are the kind of class a professor dreams about. They give me a gift certificate to the restaurant that David and I frequent. I give them copies of *Some of My Best Friends* and inscribe each one. Eric demands a hug, and then they all do; I happily comply. We talk about meeting again as a class, maybe once or twice in the spring. The two students who will be abroad promise to keep in touch through our Listserv, which we all agree to keep going until the end of the school year, at least. After they leave, the house is quiet and empty.

Weeks later, I post “Incident” on our Listserv and ask them to respond with their reactions. Days go by, then weeks. Silence. After more prodding, finally Lauren posts an analysis of the poem, and then her personal reactions to it. I thank her online, and ask for more responses. Silence.

I get e-mails and visits from these students about other matters, some of them race-related. Eric still comes by my office regularly. Once he brings his mother to meet me, a kind and engaging woman who gives me a redolent candle she purchased in France, and tells me her son enjoyed “African-American Autobiography.” Eric and I smile at each other.

A few days later, I see Eric outside the campus bookstore.

“What did you think about ‘Incident’?”

“I’ve been meaning to write you about it. I promise I will.”

In the meantime, *Nigger* is back in its special place on my bookshelf. It is tucked away so that only I can see the title on its spine, and then only with some effort. ❖