

The following blog post was written for HST 262 - History of the N-word: Race and Language in U.S. History, taught by Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor, Smith College, Fall 2018. The blog post assignment asks students to think deeply about course topics, and make an argument using historical, literary, and cultural evidence. The question addressed below is why is talking about the n-word hard.

My Life in N-Words

By Cai Sherley

I have very distinct memories of reading *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in seventh grade. I remember costumes, acting out scenes, book reports, Mark Twain's rivers, and learning that Huckleberry was a martyr. But mostly, I remember the N-word. I remember the looks my classmates gave me every time it reared its head in the printed letters of our old, marked up copies. They looked to me for answers, confirmation, clemency. I had nothing to give.



Image by author

The N-word is hard to talk about because, in the US specifically, it is a constant reminder of a time in our country's history (an ongoing time) that the government and a large percentage of its citizenship will not and cannot acknowledge or come to terms with. It is a weed to some, a flower to others, an herb somewhere else. It is a word white people know they are not supposed to admit to using, except for the ones who do. It is a word black people hate and are offended by, except for when we aren't. Class, geography, ethnicity, gender, color, all inform who says the N-word, when, where, to-whom, and why.

I went to private elementary school with a lot of white kids and I never said it. I went to public high school and used it with my black friends, and the gay white boy who hung out with us. I started doing theater and stopped using it again. When I spent half of my junior year of high school on a commune in California, I had a heated argument with two male friends, one Black and one Mexican, because I was offended by their use of the word with each other. They said it was fine because everyone used it back home in Oakland, and in the end simply agreed not to say it in my presence. The staff of the commune were entirely white, and none of them intervened in our argument. I came to Smith unsure if I, a middle class lighter skinned queer black person, should use it. My black parents, who I would never dream of cursing around growing up, started cursing in conversation with me when I came home from my first semester