

of college. Now, I use the N-word at home with my father, who grew up in working class Memphis, and sometimes my mother, who grew up on the Southside of Chicago. My afro-Dominican partner never uses it, but I use it in her presence, and I say it with specific black friends, but not all. I hold my breath during Cardi B's "Bodak Yellow" to see if my white friends dare to say it. If drunk, sometimes they do.

The N-word is hard to talk about because it is everywhere and also forbidden. We hear it and say it but no one seems to be able to agree on what it means, and therefore how to proceed. White boys say "what's good my n-word" to each other in the hallways of my public high school. Someone calls Obama the "n-word president" in footage on the five-o'clock news. My grandmother mutters about "this n-word" while cleaning the dishes on a Sunday night after a full day of church services. When white friends look to me for validation of their woke-osity, I sometimes think, n-word please! For me, it is a hard word to talk about with anyone, myself included, because everyone feels differently. But it is hardest to talk about in the classroom, especially when that classroom is predominately white. It is an exercise in public anxiety and shame, where no one is being honest and everyone is afraid. The N-word is hard to talk about because we are afraid of it, particularly in monitored, racially mixed settings. I know all semester I will be wondering who says it at home and denounces it at our Monday meetings. I do not know that these discussion can be made easy, and I don't know if they should be.

Perhaps you can only talk about the N-word when you do not feel watched, evaluated, judged. Watched by who? N-words, probably.