

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT (OUT LOUD)

Zoë Simone Yi

Most nights I find myself lounging on my friend Naz's bed, even though his room smells kind of bad and is messier than mine. I'm not saying that our backgrounds were the determining factor of our friendship—me, mixed race and hailing from Oakland, and he, one of the very few African American theater students at our school—but they acted like a piece of gum stuck between us. We find ourselves talking about race politics more than anything else, sometimes obsessively. He often describes me as “woke,” as “awake and aware” to all of the ways that race smacks you in the face in daily life, to how racism isn't a topic but a reality. I distinctly remember talking with him one night about a day I'd had at a thrift shop on Avenue B in the East Village, one that I'd been frequenting because hipsters hailing from the Midwest hadn't overrun it quite yet. Browsing the jeans rack, I was caught in awkward synchronization with two other shoppers, looking in the same section at the same pace in the same direction, and I found myself eavesdropping on these two girls, both vaguely Latina or biracial or at least not fully Caucasian. One of them, the one holding all of their collective finds, abruptly said:

“Man, I really am the nigga in this relationship.”

I was taken aback. My mind went from mild amusement, to confusion, to horror—did she really just assign her role as the grunt worker to being an N-word? After I told Naz, I expected him to agree with me about the climate of self-hate surrounding the word that I'd encountered. Much to my chagrin, he laughed at me.

“You never heard of it like that?”

“Like what?”

“She meant she's the guy in the relationship.”

He chuckled at me like I was a total buffoon. I went over my reaction again and again, trying to justify it. Was I, in fact, a total buffoon? In theory, I was justified in my initial assessment: one girl was in the less-than-enviable

position, with less power and less enjoyment. She was disenfranchised and degraded even further being deemed the “nigga.” But on the other hand, if I had even attempted to explain my totally presumptuous thought process to either of those girls, I’m sure that they would have laughed at me the same way that Naz had. In that moment, I felt like an outsider, but only when I stepped back and looked at myself. Before, I’d felt in tandem with Naz—I legitimately empathized with him, especially when he vented his frustrations about misappropriations of African-American culture. I understood him not so much because I know firsthand the frustration of misappropriation and decontextualization, but rather because I understand the overwhelming exhaustion of feeling like the perpetrators simply don’t care to understand their contribution to larger, oppressive institutions like racism. They somehow manage to uphold an image of political correctness while still making people like Naz and me want to scream and throw furniture. The word hypocrisy comes to mind when non-African Americans say the N-word jokingly to each other, unabashedly quote the rap group N.W.A., or self-righteously reference the N-word because of a course they took last semester. Suddenly, faced with the real world usage of “nigga” down in Alphabet City, I was at a loss. There, in Naz’s room on the sixteenth floor of our 5th Avenue dorm, I was having a revelation fueled by the mundane conversation of two girls. It seemed inappropriate, and Naz’s somewhat disdainful reaction only solidified this feeling.

In her essay “Teaching the N-Word: A Black Professor, an All-White Class, and the Thing Nobody Will Say,” Emily Bernard recounts the intersection of the N-word in the real world and the pushback from those who feel they don’t, as non-African-Americans, have the right to say it. The context of her class doesn’t seem too different from my Avenue B experience. She, too, comes up against a war of contexts—a bunch of white kids who are very much outside of the spectrum of the N-word yet decided to face the word head-on within a college classroom. Are they trying to reverse the word? Trying to understand it better? Personally, after years of considering the N-word in an educational setting, hearing it in that thrift store, isolated and eavesdropping, left me bereft of all the logical, pedantic teachings I’d had up until then. I wonder if Bernard had thought about this potential tension, about the roadblock to self-awareness that seems insurmountable within the confines of a

formal classroom as opposed to an actual social experience. She cites one account, writing:

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. (53)

The N-word transcends itself, but where to? Despite their obvious unease, Bernard's students seemed less concerned about the word itself, a bastardized term for black derived from the Spanish word *negro* that was spread throughout nineteenth-century America. They project the potency of their fear, their discomfort, onto Bernard herself. She seems shocked not by their reactions to the word but rather, I imagine, by their lack of awareness of why they have so much trepidation. Lauren says she didn't want it in her mouth—but what is she so repulsed by? She signed up to talk about it, yet the overwhelming power of this word silences her. I agree that her silence gives the word explosive potential, but her fear of Bernard is the match on the fuse. I can picture Bernard shaking her head in resignation as she stands in front of her students—a slumbering dragon.

Bernard subtly points out the more insidious factor in her students' attitudes toward the N-word: despite their passion about *not* saying it, their fear revolves around her and her presence. In a way, aren't Bernard's students putting her in the context of annihilation without her permission? Standing tall as a college professor and the only African-American person in the room, in a clear position of power, she in no way emanates personal sensitivity to the word. Awareness, yes. But potential to be annihilated by her students' utterance of it? Not at all. That's not to say the N-word is something we can

just look past—it's clear from Bernard that the N-word is anything but harmless, especially within the context of who is saying it and at whom it's being directed. Contained in our own perception, the life beyond the word seems more loaded than the bomb itself.

It's Coachella, the biggest and most expensive music festival *ever*, the *crème-de-la-crème* of overpriced, star-studded public events, and there it is: the N-word. It was here that, as reported in a *Gawker* article by Jordan Sargent, a white kid was filmed mouthing along with Drake's "Crew Love." Specifically, he's seen at the moment in the song when Drake croons: "There's a room full of niggas." *Gawker* reports: "You'll notice that he even waves his finger in the air like Mariah Carey hitting a high note. You'll also notice the African-American girl standing shoulder-to-shoulder to his left. Is that post-racial?" (Sargent). In this instance, it seems like we're past the parodied, exaggerated white kids swamped in baggy jeans with their snap-backs on backwards, spewing racially charged and distinct epithets at each other (e.g. *What's up my nigga-a-a?!).* We're in a place where they're afraid to say it—those kids could be Bernard's college class and they've wised up. And yet the word seems to keep coming back.

Why would the word "nigger" have any place in the cushy barracks of Coachella, especially floating out of the mouth of this white kid? Is he destabilizing the fear of detonation around the N-word by loyally following along with Drake's lyrics? The backlash against the weight of the word seems to be growing; the Nates out there fervently believe that adopting it in a non-negative embrace is the key to fully defacing its power. It's funny to me, however, when I think about the word and all of its faces—negative, positive, casual, feared. For most of my life, I didn't have a perspective of the N-word aside from movies about the South (the creepily affectionate, twangy "nigger-boy" kind of use) and N.W.A.-type stuff (90's hardcore gangsta rap like Ice Cube's "The Wrong Nigga to Fuck With"). The polarized identity that the N-word has taken on or been assigned seems at odds with the reality. Gloria Naylor unearths this N-word tug-of-war in her essay "Mommy, What Does 'Nigger' Mean?" Naylor describes the day when she first encountered the word outside of her home. To her, the word wasn't unfamiliar, but one day in class after she mentioned how much higher her score was to a white boy sitting

near her, he spat it at her as a form of insult. To Naylor, beforehand “nigger” had been:

In the singular . . . applied to a man who had distinguished himself in some situation that brought their approval for his strength, intelligence, or drive . . . When used with a possessive adjective by a woman—‘my nigger’—it became a term of endearment for her husband or boyfriend . . . In the plural, it became a description of some group within the community that had overstepped the bounds of decency as my family defined it. (2)

Within Naylor’s world, the N-word seemed to reside peacefully. No bomb in sight—until the boy in her class threw his own definition at her. Naylor’s friends and family were already using the N-word in a non-negative way. Contextualized for their uses, and decontextualized from its original roots, it became less like the fear-inspiring monster that Bernard’s class cowered from. Comedian Donald Glover succinctly describes a less scary relationship with the word in his stand-up show *Weirdo*, saying: “See, Black people use the N-word for everything . . . mom, brother, sister . . . like love, hate, we use it for everything. I called a seatbelt a nigga earlier today . . . It just needs a little flavor, so I gave it the N-word.” The “flavor” he speaks of is, arguably, the taste that the kid at Coachella craved. From the outside, a word as charged as “nigger” being so casually reclaimed into everyday lexicon is a thing of comfort. It’s like a weight off of our shoulders—now we can say it! Paired with the glorified sensibilities of rap and hip-hop music, the desire to be included in something very romantic and enticing you’ve been barred from, a white teenage boy feels the empowerment—or entitlement—to stand next to an African American girl at Coachella and gleefully sing about “a room full of niggas” (Drake). But who gets to decide when we’ve reached the precipice of Racial Slur Utopia, when nothing offensive is offensive anymore?

I can’t relate to someone inured to the N-word. It’s not a moniker for who I am; I’m not racially related to it. But I’m drawn back to the tension that resides in and around the word. It’s not an unfamiliar kind of tension. It’s the same kind of discomfort that Bernard felt as the only African American woman in a class of white students specifically focused on African American literature. When dichotomies blend, extremities aren’t so polarizing. When it was a majority of white students, it seemed that the atmosphere around the

N-word bent to their whims, and Bernard had to take a backseat to be privy to the resulting chaos. Drake and Kanye West's songs seem to echo this sentiment—while both artists are at the helm of their work and in positions of power, they can't control their audience. What often results is a white kid at Coachella belting out the N-word at the top of his lungs because the lines between him and the word have been so blurred.

A familiar face came up while I was looking for pieces of art to exemplify the vague correlation between someone like me and the word "nigger." I stumbled upon a video installation piece titled *Fervor* by Shirin Neshat, a feminist, Iranian-expat, multi-media artist. In the piece, a woman in a chador and a man walk along a rural dirt road to mosque as the azan rings; they briefly catch each other's eyes, only to continue their separate ways. When they finally arrive at the mosque, we see that the large, gutted courtyard is filled with kneeling worshippers separated by gender and by a black screen. The difference is shocking; a sea of white shirts and dark heads of the men collides with a sea of chadors with pale faces peeking out from within. Still, the man and the woman, who before were so stark against the vast sky and bulging stretches of road, miraculously sense each other's presence through the screen. As they continuously inch their heads away from the frenetic preacher towards the other, forbidden side of the mosque, a heady undercurrent accompanies them.

I wonder if that's how the fans of "Crew Love" feel: as if using the N-word is this thrilling, symbolic act of taboo that somehow sparks an air of righteous rebellion within them. Zooming out, I wonder how these fans might perceive Neshat's video. Maybe their reading would touch upon the power struggle between women and the Islamic guidelines of Iranian society, or maybe the tragedy and helplessness of these two people, barred by the requirements of their religion. Maybe they would even question the tension between the state and the politics of the people. Perhaps the intersection of love and the rigid adherence to correctness would come up. How would Bernard's class react? Would they, too, immediately turn to authoritative bodies to account for the frustrating powerlessness of the protagonists' situation?

Neshat is indeed critiquing Iranian politics, specifically the post-1979 Islamic Revolution that transformed Iran's liberal atmosphere of the 60's and

early 70's. We get a glimpse of an Iran where private moments between men and women mirror the divisions within an actual mosque. Conversely, there is no divide between personal feeling and social expectation. The line between personal and propriety disappears.

More than just a critique of the complexities of Iran's politics, the exchange between the man and the woman and its unsatisfying climax might be a statement of personal struggle. *Fervor* seems to explore both the battle raging within Neshat as an Iranian woman and the one between Islamic regulations and women. Neshat invites us to consider not the Islamic aspects of the woman's chador, but rather the longing in her gaze. In the end the man and the woman pass again in total isolation, yet she still refuses to acknowledge him. She isn't reduced to a symbol of desire that forgoes all sense of appropriateness to approach the man; Neshat leaves her piece unresolved, much like the current tensions in Iran.

Neshat turns the discussion inward, simultaneously shedding a harsh light on her internal war of identity and making larger comments about how the political affects her personally. But I don't see this level of personal exploration in most people who choose to either appropriate or ignore the N-word. I don't see these people even attempting to see how the outside reflects onto us internally. Gloria Naylor's words pop back into my head: "Words themselves are innocuous; it is the consensus that gives them true power" (1). Theoretically I can say the N-word all I want and base the nature of it on other's reactions. But I'm not so convinced. Although the boy who called Naylor a "nigger" was hateful in his words, the fact that her family used it so casually, almost graciously, doesn't tip the scale one way or another. There's still the question of autonomy, the decision to say a word such as "nigger." Bernard was exploring that very relationship, how the word and its uses take a backseat to context. In what context is a person using or not using the word? In her struggle to reconcile this question, she recalls:

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.* (Bernard 55)

Like a tiger masquerading as a teddy bear, Bernard dampened the nature of the N-word. Nate's profuse desire to have permission to democratically use the N-word is fulfilled. But what's left is Bernard, snared in that persisting tension of her white husband's usage and history with the N-word, as well as her instinctive feelings about it. Bernard's critique of her own rationalization of this tension echoes that of *Fervor*. Neshat manages to acknowledge the presiding forces that accounted for her internal battle but she doesn't rely on them. The pride that Bernard felt, if only for a moment, in being able to explain the politics of the N-word under the guise of her personal experience only turned out to be a form of validation. She assigned a consensus to the word, just as Naylor posited people's inflection of the N-word as the main source of its power. Yet, what lingered was Bernard's undeniable sense of repugnance. What we do dangerously often is fail to realize that the N-word acts as a funnel through which deeper, more powerful implications are passing.

Maybe, then, it's not just a question of right and wrong, which implies an authority telling us what we can and can't do. As Neshat shows us, authority can only account for so much of our decision-making and identities. How we end up flowing around those barriers, filling in the cracks, is the juicy stuff. The new Kendrick Lamar album *To Pimp a Butterfly* just came out, rife with the N-word and already trending on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Soundcloud, Spotify, and everywhere else. There will always be those private spaces where authority won't reach, when Bernard won't be there to inspire the fear of detonation in her students or in the delusional excitement of a white kid at Lollapalooza who will chant along with Tyler, The Creator, in one of his more menacing "street" songs, unafraid of consequences or judgment. Maybe we have to face what Bernard chastised herself for overlooking, and what Neshat strived to understand in *Fervor*. It's not an easy fix, but it recognizes how inescapably, hopelessly and undeniably implicated we are in the problem. Maybe then it will become a little less hopeless, and we can start addressing what "the problem" really is. Just this week I was at another thrift store in Chelsea, this one a little bit more upscale. All the cashiers were

notably white or Asian. I remember bobbing my head to “You Got Me” by Erykah Badu and then to “Fight the Power” by Public Enemy as the melodies and beats drifted over the speakers. Then, after I’d retreated into my own sensory orbit, unaware of the subsequent DJing, I heard a faint voice over the speakers. Was it me or did it sound quieter? Then I realized it was “I Don’t Wanna To Be Called Yo Niga” by Public Enemy. In that moment, it might as well have been on full blast.

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