00:04

The minute she said it, the temperature in my classroom dropped. My students are usually laser-focused on me, but they shifted in their seats and looked away.

00:18

I'm a black woman who teaches the histories of race and US slavery. I'm aware that my social identity is always on display. And my students are vulnerable too, so I'm careful. I try to anticipate what part of my lesson might go wrong. But honestly, I didn't even see this one coming. None of my years of graduate school prepared me for what to do when the N-word entered my classroom.

00:47

I was in my first year of teaching when the student said the N-word in my class. She was not calling anyone a name. She was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. She came to class with her readings done, she sat in the front row and she was always on my team. When she said it, she was actually making a point about my lecture, by quoting a line from a 1970s movie, a comedy, that had two racist slurs. One for people of Chinese descent and the other the N-word. As soon as she said it, I held up my hands, said, "Whoa, whoa." But she assured me, "It's a joke from 'Blazing Saddles,'" and then she repeated it.

01:33

This all happened 10 years ago, and how I handled it haunted me for a long time. It wasn't the first time I thought about the word in an academic setting. I'm a professor of US history, it's in a lot of the documents that I teach. So I had to make a choice. After consulting with someone I trusted, I decided to never say it. Not even to quote it. But instead to use the euphemistic phrase, "the N-word." Even this decision was complicated. I didn't have tenure yet, and I worried that senior colleagues would think that by using the phrase I wasn't a serious scholar. But saying the actual word still felt worse.

02:18

The incident in my classroom forced me to publicly reckon with the word. The history, the violence, but also -- The history, the violence, but also any time it was hurled at me, spoken casually in front of me, any time it rested on the tip of someone's tongue, it all came flooding up in that moment, right in front of my students. And I had no idea what to do.

02:47

So I've come to call stories like mine points of encounter. A point of encounter describes the moment you came face-to-face with the N-word. If you've even been stumped or provoked by the word, whether as the result of an awkward social situation, an uncomfortable academic conversation, something you heard in pop culture, or if you've been called the slur, or witnessed someone getting called the slur, you have experienced a point of encounter. And depending on who you are and how that moment goes down, you might have a range of responses. Could throw you off a little bit, or it could be incredibly painful and humiliating. I've had lots of these points of encounter in my life, but one thing is true. There's not a lot of space to talk about them.

03:43

That day in my classroom was pretty much like all of those times I had an uninvited run-in with the N-word. I froze. Because the N-word is hard to talk about. Part of the reason the N-word is so hard to talk about, it's usually only discussed in one way, as a figure of speech, we hear this all the time, right? It's just a word. The burning question that cycles through social media is who can and cannot say it. Black intellectual Ta-Nehisi Coates does a groundbreaking job of defending the African American use of the word. On the other hand, Wendy Kaminer, a white freedom of speech advocate, argues that if we don't all just come and say it, we give the word power. And a lot of people feel that way. The Pew Center recently entered the debate. In a survey called "Race in America 2019," researchers asked US adults if they thought is was OK for a white person to say the N-word. Seventy percent of all adults surveyed said "never."

04:51

And these debates are important. But they really obscure something else. They keep us from getting underneath to the real conversation. Which is that the N-word is not just a word. It's not neatly contained in a racist past, a relic of slavery. Fundamentally, the N-word is an idea disguised as a word: that black people are intellectually, biologically and immutably inferior to white people. And -- and I think this is the most important part -- that that inferiority means that the injustice we suffer and inequality we endure is essentially our own fault. So, yes, it is ...

05:52

Speaking of the word only as racist spew or as an obscenity in hip hop music makes it sounds as if it's a disease located in the American vocal cords that can be snipped right out. It's not, and it can't. And I learned this from talking to my students.

06:13

So next time class met, I apologized, and I made an announcement. I would have a new policy. Students would see the word in my PowerPoints, in film, in essays they read, but we would never ever say the word out loud in class. Nobody ever said it again. But they didn't learn much either. Afterwards, what bothered me most was that I didn't even explain to students why, of all the vile, problematic words in American English, why this particular word had its own buffer, the surrogate phrase "the N-word."

06:57

Most of my students, many of them born in the late 1990s and afterwards, didn't even know that the phrase "the N-word" is a relatively new invention in American English. When I was growing up, it didn't exist. But in the late 1980s, black college students, writers, intellectuals, more and more started to talk about racist attacks against them. But increasingly, when they told these stories, they stopped using the word. Instead, they reduced it to the initial N and called it "the N-word." They felt that every time the word was uttered it opened up old wounds, so they refused to say it. They knew their listeners would hear the actual word in their heads. That wasn't the point. The point was they didn't want to put the word in their own mouths or into the air. By doing this, they made an entire nation start to second-guess themselves about saying it. This was such a radical move that people are still mad about it. Critics accuse those of us who use the phrase "the N-word," or people who become outraged, you know, just because the word is said, of being overprincipled, politically correct or, as I just read a couple of weeks ago in The New York Times, "insufferably woke." Right?

08:33

So I bought into this a little bit too, which is why the next time I taught the course I proposed a freedom of speech debate. The N-word in academic spaces, for or against? I was certain students would be eager to debate who gets to say it and who doesn't. But they weren't. Instead ... my students started confessing. A white student from New Jersey talked about standing by as a black kid at her school got bullied by this word. She did nothing and years later still carried the guilt. Another from Connecticut talked about the pain of severing a very close relationship with a family member, because that family member refused to stop saying the word.

09:34

One of the most memorable stories came from a very quiet black student from South Carolina. She didn't understand all the fuss. She said everyone at her school said the word. She wasn't talking about kids calling each other names in the hall. She explained that at her school when teachers and administrators became frustrated with an African American student, they called that student the actual N-word. She said it didn't bother her at all. But then a couple of days later, she

came to visit me in my office hours and wept. She thought she was immune. She realized that she wasn't.

10:23

Over the last 10 years, I have literally heard hundreds of these stories from all kinds of people from all ages. People in their 50s remembering stories from the second grade and when they were six, either calling people the word or being called the word, but carrying that all these years around this word, you know. And as I listened to people talk about their points of encounter, the pattern that emerged for me as a teacher that I found most upsetting is the single most fraught site for these points of encounter is the classroom.

11:03

Most US kids are going to meet the N-word in class. One of the most assigned books in US high schools is Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" in which the word appears over 200 times. And this isn't an indictment of "Huck Finn." The word is in lots of US literature and history. It's all over African American literature. Yet I hear from students that when the word is said during a lesson without discussion and context, it poisons the entire classroom environment. The trust between student and teacher is broken. Even so, many teachers, often with the very best of intentions, still say the N-word in class. They want to show and emphasize the horrors of US racism, so they rely on it for shock value. Invoking it brings into stark relief the ugliness of our nation's past. But they forget the ideas are alive and well in our cultural fabric.

12:28

The six-letter word is like a capsule of accumulated hurt. Every time it is said, every time, it releases into the atmosphere the hateful notion that black people are less. My black students tell me that when the word is quoted or spoken in class, they feel like a giant spotlight is shining on them. One of my students told me that his classmates were like bobbleheads, turning to gauge his reaction. A white student told me that in the eighth grade, when they were learning "To Kill a Mockingbird" and reading it out loud in class, the student was stressed out at the idea of having to read the word, which the teacher insisted all students do, that the student ended up spending most of the unit hiding out in the bathroom.

13:29

This is serious. Students across the country talk about switching majors and dropping classes because of poor teaching around the N-word. The issue of faculty carelessly speaking the word has reached such a fevered pitch, it's led to protests at Princeton, Emory, The New School, Smith College, where I teach, and Williams College, where just recently students have boycotted the

entire English Department over it and other issues. And these were just the cases that make the news. This is a crisis. And while student reaction looks like an attack on freedom of speech, I promise this is an issue of teaching.

14:19

My students are not afraid of materials that have the N-word in it. They want to learn about James Baldwin and William Faulkner and about the civil rights movement. In fact, their stories show that this word is a central feature of their lives as young people in the United States. It's in the music they love. And in the popular culture they emulate, the comedy they watch, it's in TV and movies and memorialized in museums. They hear it in locker rooms, on Instagram, in the hallways at school, in the chat rooms of the video games they play. It is all over the world they navigate. But they don't know how to think about it or even really what the word means.

15:13

I didn't even really understand what the word meant until I did some research. I was astonished to learn that black people first incorporated the N-word into the vocabulary as political protest, not in the 1970s or 1980s but as far back as the 1770s. And I wish I had more time to talk about the long, subversive history of the black use of the N-word. But I will say this: Many times, my students will come up to me and say, "I understand the virulent roots of this word, it's slavery." They are only partially right. This word, which existed before it became a slur, but it becomes a slur at a very distinct moment in US history, and that's as large numbers of black people begin to become free, starting in the North in the 1820s. In other words, this word is fundamentally an assault on black freedom, black mobility, and black aspiration.

16:23

Even now, nothing so swiftly unleashes an N-word tirade as a black person asserting their rights or going where they please or prospering. Think of the attacks on Colin Kaepernick when he kneeled. Or Barack Obama when he became president. My students want to know this history. But when they ask questions, they're shushed and shamed. By shying away from talking about the N-word, we have turned this word into the ultimate taboo, crafting it into something so tantalizing, that for all US kids, no matter their racial background, part of their coming of age is figuring out how to negotiate this word. We treat conversations about it like sex before sex education. We're squeamish, we silence them. So they learn about it from misinformed friends and in whispers.

17:25

I wish I could go back to the classroom that day and push through my fear to talk about the fact that something actually happened. Not just to me or to my black students. But to all of us. You know, I think we're all connected by our inability to talk about this word. But what if we explored our points of encounter and did start to talk about it?

17:52

Today, I try to create the conditions in my classroom to have open and honest conversations about it. One of those conditions -- not saying the word. We're able to talk about it because it doesn't come into the classroom. Another important condition is I don't make my black students responsible for teaching their classmates about this. That is my job. So I come prepared. I hold the conversation with a tight rein, and I'm armed with knowledge of the history. I always ask students the same question: Why is talking about the N-word hard? Their answers are amazing. They're amazing. More than anything though, I have become deeply acquainted with my own points of encounter, my personal history around this word. Because when the N-word comes to school, or really anywhere, it brings with it all of the complicated history of US racism. The nation's history and my own, right here, right now. There's no avoiding it.

19:09

(Applause)