

[Contextualizing the N-word Controversy at the University of Kansas](#)

Blog Post published by Tyler D. Parry on Tuesday, January 12, 2016

Contextualizing the N-word Controversy at the University of Kansas

Clayton Finn, African American Studies Major, California State University-Fullerton

The recent events at the University of Kansas regarding Dr. Andrea Quenette's use of the N-word in her classroom have raised pertinent questions about linguistic reference to racial vitriol in a college classroom setting. During a classroom discussion of racial discrimination on campus, Quenette claimed, "As a white woman I just never have seen the racism...It's not like I see 'Nigger' spray painted on walls..."[1] This remark, coupled with other apparently racially insensitive statements she made, instigated a student response that, in the form of an open letter published online,[2] has called for her termination. Quenette has voluntarily gone on leave, pending the university's investigation, but regardless of any disciplinary action called for or that may be taken by the university, it is important to consider the implications of such actions and the students' accusations, particularly in association with Quenette's mention of the N-word.

Public uses of the N-word are almost always surrounded by controversy, especially when deployed by a white individual. Through slavery, minstrelsy, the Jim Crow era, and the Civil Rights Movement, white racists in the United States deployed "nigger" to pontificate their deepest racial hatred. Despite attempts at redefinition and reappropriation of the term, this history echoes in the minds of many Americans whenever the N-word is mentioned in a social setting. In the open letter, Quenette's use of the term is described as "inhospitable," "anti-Black," and "terroristic." [3] The students claim that her speech violated school policy and is not covered under the First Amendment, but are such accusations warranted?

It appears that the students have referenced Quenette's *mention* of the N-word as a racially malicious *use* of the term. This is not to say that her usage was not racially insensitive. In fact, her self-proclaimed ignorance of racial discrimination and disparity, further discussed in the letter, makes it apparent that Quenette was racially insensitive on multiple occasions, possibly dampening the potential for open-minded, inviting classroom conversation about controversial topics. Yet, the students' response emphasizes her use of the N-word, which was evidently not deployed with its historically intended racial vitriol but was simply mentioned in reference to forms of discrimination. She contends that her use of the term was cited pertaining to discriminatory acts students from the University of Missouri recounted in association with the recent protests. Though, her general insensitivity seems to have lost the students' faith in her as an instructor, which can be seen as a failure in and of itself.

The question is raised of whether or not the N-word should be deployed in the classroom under any circumstances. It is hard to imagine a context that would not invite controversy, but it is

possible that such a controversial term can be beneficially employed to reiterate its social and historical power. One can imagine an instance, perhaps in the reading of a historical document or piece of literature, where students could gain a deep sense of the N-word's social implications through an audible proclamation of the term (instead of its colloquial abbreviation). Social, cultural, and historical literacy concerning the term's racial weight should always be encouraged in such a setting, and thus, sensitivity and intentionality is paramount. In contemplating the students' reaction to Quenette's claims, we must consider how the policing of simple references to the N-word in educational settings could be a dangerous step towards classroom censorship that would make it difficult to openly discuss hotly debated issues.

If the students' allegations are true, Quenette appears to have made several racially insensitive and probably offensive claims that, paired with her self-recognized ignorance of racial issues, damage her overall standing as a professor. Though, the focus on her mention of the N-word appears to be misunderstood. Despite it possibly being inappropriately referenced, the students' description of the situation as "terroristic" neglects to recognize the nuance of her *mention* of the term, interpreting her claim as a racially malicious *use*.^[4] Controversies regarding censorship and the N-word's appropriateness often draw attention away from scholarly analysis of the term's history and evolving connotations. While criticizing insensitivity and prejudice, it is important to further the scholarship on racial epithets, analyzing why and how terms such as the N-word evoke such a visceral response and encouraging education on the linguistic tools through which racism is perpetuated.

References:

Aleem, Zeeshan. "Students at Kansas University Want a Professor Fired for Using the N-Word." *Mic*, November 24, 2015. Accessed January 12, 2016. <http://mic.com/articles/129082/students-at-kansas-university-want-a-professor-fired-for-us...>

Miller, Mike. "University Professor Uses 'N-Word' in Class to Make a Point. Now's She's Under Investigation." *Independent Journal*. Accessed January 12, 2016. <http://www.ijreview.com/2015/11/477960-kansas-professor/>.

Schumacher, Amy. "An Open Letter Calling for the Termination of Dr. Andrea Quenette for Racial Discrimination." *Medium*, November 17, 2015. Accessed January 12, 2016. <https://medium.com/@schumaal/what-follows-is-a-letter-collectively-written-by-the-students...>

End Notes:

[1] Amy Schumacher, "An Open Letter Calling for the Termination of Dr. Andrea Quenette for Racial Discrimination," *Medium*, November 17, 2015, <https://medium.com/@schumaal/what-follows-is-a-letter-collectively-written-by-the-students...>

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

Posted in:

[Of the Study of Race and Culture in America](#)