

## Cunt

April 4, 2016: The guy calls on a Monday, leaving a message on the office voicemail, but it is his minutes-later follow-up email I receive first. He introduces himself as a graduate student thinking about taking my summer fiction writing class. The problem? He thinks my absence policy is too strict. He calls it “inhuman” in his phone message, repeating that word when he flags me down in the hall after my night class. As we talk, he tells me that he had another professor with an absence policy when he was an undergrad. He missed a week for medical reasons. “She failed me,” he says, “and I was, like, ‘well, you’re a cunt.’”

♦ ♦ ♦

Cunt. The word lashes out.

No, that’s not accurate. That’s only how I feel it. From his stance, it is more casual. Something to be slung around, dropped, forgotten.

I know that he isn’t calling *me* a cunt, though I have the potential to be one (and probably will be, if I stick to my policy—which I will). I understand, too, that he did not say this word to his other professor. He is talking about his feelings, representing them in words. This is his gut-level thought response. Still, I am speechless.

The kid seems well-spoken and intelligent. And not only well-spoken, but soft-spoken. His mouth wraps the word “cunt” in bunny fur. He laughs and smiles, almost but not quite blushing, his face boyish and jovial under his facial piercings. “You have to ignore curse words from me,” he says. “They’re just part of who I am.” Later he adds, “I’m queer. We use that word in my community. I have a shirt that says ‘cunt’ that I wear to class.”

♦ ♦ ♦

I comb through my feelings, sorting one from the other.

The one I’m surest of is this: the context in which he just used the word is hateful. He is not reclaiming a word made ugly by bigotry. He threw gender like a grenade.

Also, he has a clear misunderstanding of how words work if he believes that he can single-handedly define their meaning, as if they

hold no communally determined denotations or connotations. As if they have no history.

Not only does he ignore the context in which he used it, but he also ignores our current context. I am a professor, and potentially his professor. In social terms, I am closer to the woman he described than I am to him. This hallway snag is a professional interaction. I am a person who, if he takes my course, will grade his work and write letters of reference and support his career—or not.

Cultural context plays in as well. Henry Rawson's *Dictionary of Inveective* calls cunt "the most heavily tabooed word of all English words." The *Oxford English Dictionary* agrees, saying, "Despite widespread use over a long period and in many sections of society, cunt remains the English word most avoided as taboo." This student can assume that I have heard cunt used to deride women. That's what cultural context does; it creates a set of shared assumptions by which we can navigate word choice. I've heard cunt used playfully, too, and I can recognize the difference, but that is something less safe to assume.

♦ ♦ ♦

As a creative writing professor, I prevent students from silencing the stories of their classmates during workshop. Students uncomfortable with LGBTQ themes have called such work "inappropriate for class." More than once, students have refused to read their peers' work, as if refusal to read were a moral stance, but writers do not have the right to determine each other's subject matter. Just as more conservative students have the right to express their political and religious beliefs, so my LGBTQ students should write towards their own convictions, giving voice to experiences others would prefer closeted and unspoken. Defending free speech is fundamental to my beliefs.

Which leads me to this question: If I silence this student's word choice, am I infringing on his rights or merely defending my own? His anecdote is not a story written for class. It's a piece of his life story, related here in a campus hallway. The distinction is, in many ways, academic.

♦ ♦ ♦

As much as I try to unhear it, his words are laced with a subtext that I don't want to acknowledge, the assumption that his status as a gay man supersedes my status as a woman. His context is more important than my context. Any reasons I might have for balking at the word are irrelevant. Only his reasons for using it matter.

I don't want us split, staring each other down from opposite sides of a dichotomy. "Same team, same team!" I want to yell. Though we

are not, not exactly, I don't want to be aware of this. We should be fighting together in an ongoing battle against the larger social forces that would deny our equality. I don't want to have to figure out our relative positions on the great chain of being, the invisible hierarchy of oppressions determining so much of our daily lives. I'm sick of hierarchy. I'm sick of being aware of it.

♦ ♦ ♦

On the scale of insulting comments, calling another professor a cunt isn't the worst I've heard. Perhaps, I think hopefully, he sees using the word as a way of including me in his group, a person with whom he can throw cunt around. I would defend a community's right to take a word back, to reclaim. I'd love to think he's including me.

Yet his usage isn't reclaiming the word at all. He is using it in exactly the hateful spirit in which cunt evolved as an insult. His phrasing suggests that this other female professor slighted him not because of legitimate educational concerns, but because she has a vagina and is therefore mean-spirited and shrewish, or worse.

♦ ♦ ♦

He's claiming another privilege—one I have defended for all students. He wants not only the power to speak, but to claim language on his own terms and determine its meaning.

I want student writers to feel some ownership with language. It allows them to play, to nudge words a little here and there, to make us see words fresh and understand them in new and profound ways.

Only, he's forgotten that language is always a negotiation between user and receiver, between text and subtext, text and context. He has forgotten, that ultimately, we only get a little room to play because words are embedded in weighty histories. He has forgotten that every speaker requires a listener.

♦ ♦ ♦

Underneath these questions is the rumble of one thundering thought: How *dare* he use my own vagina as a tool against me!

♦ ♦ ♦

Then again, he's just a kid.

♦ ♦ ♦

A kid who sees me as inhuman. Or, at least, a kid who sees my syllabus as inhuman. But my syllabus is also an extension of me, the version of the professor me that I commit to the page in the form of policies and readings and assignments and schedules. He lobbed that word at me twice, I remind myself, before he stabbed with the sharper-bladed word. He, a consumer of education, is unhappy. I, the automaton professor, am to blame. He is the only human here. As the customer, he feels sure he is right.

♦ ♦ ♦

Even as I sort through all these arguments, knowing I could articulate at least some of them, they go unspoken. Where is my fight? My wit? My normal responses are MIA. Why? Because even as the thoughts are flooding my brain, I feel the pull of more powerful forces: I've been on campus for twelve hours. I'm hungry and tired and ready for home. And perhaps more importantly, I don't want to look like a prude.

♦ ♦ ♦

Prude: a word invoked to shame women into performing actions they themselves find shameful and, further, to prevent them from speaking out against ideas and behaviors they find offensive. Prude is an electric cattle prod of a word, a word designed to put us into the old binaries of virgin/whore, good/evil, cool/nerdy, Sandra Dee/Rizzo, naiveté/knowledge.

♦ ♦ ♦

I don't silence the student. I allow his words to silence me. I want to be cool, open-minded, fun. I don't want to get into it. I want to ask my kids about their day, put them to bed, make a sandwich, and sit in a quiet room where no one wants anything from me. "If he enrolls," I tell myself, "we'll deal with this then."

♦ ♦ ♦

A colleague of mine, an immensely talented Filipina poet, tells me that this is how to recognize micro-aggression: the exhaustion of not wanting to explain what you've already explained in a million other contexts, a million other times. I wonder about this. Confronting a professor three times (by phone, by email, in person) about her absence policy—a policy on a syllabus already vetted and approved by the English department's Master of Arts committee—doesn't feel like micro-aggression or passive

aggression. It's open aggression. It says, "I, a man, have decided to bring you, a woman, into line." It says, "I reject your role as a professor." It says, "I know better than you."

For two days, I parse the situation. I decide I'm not going to pursue it, and then I am, and then I'm not. His word was a slip, but it suggests a lack of boundaries and respect. I don't want to be guided by a bruised ego. I want to make certain I am not being vindictive. Finally, I ask our graduate coordinator if anyone has had problems with this student.

"No," she says, turning her desk chair to face me fully, "are you?"

"I'm not sure." I tell her about the phone call, the email, the hallway conversation. I confess I'm at a loss for what to do and that I'm fairly certain the answer is "nothing." I should have taken care of it, and I missed my chance. Finally, I ask if he had earned one of our teaching assistantships.

Yes, it turns out. The Masters committee awarded him an assistantship the previous morning. He will teach freshman composition this fall. Young women will be in his classroom, under his care, judged by his standards.

♦ ♦ ♦

I do not think of my vagina as a cunt. I do not think of it as a pussy or a box or a tuna boat or a honey pot or a snatch or a vertical smile or a bearded clam or sugar walls or a muff or a cock socket or a coochie or anything fishy. To be honest, I do not even think of it as a vagina. Unless I must name it, I don't. I reject "cunt," with its history of malice, and I cringe at the cold medicinal sound of "vagina." These names, all names, were constructed by others. I don't want to reclaim any of them. I'm uninterested.

It is a piece of me, a gender- and thereby self-defining characteristic that I keep to myself and yet wear on every inch of my skin. It maps the layout of my bones. It is my greatest vulnerability, a place where I am penetrable. I want to call it my strength as well, but that may be going too far. What it provides is akin to strength but separate from the masculine ideal strength normally evokes. I have no idea to what extent it defines my personality or limits my options. I can, and have, imagined the amputation of various body parts, the loss of a finger, the plucking of an eye, the severed foot. My vagina is part of my core, unsegmentable from the whole.

♦ ♦ ♦

I am reading etymologies this morning, curious about how my parts were named. I know enough about four-letter words to know that they tend to