



## N-Word Works Cited Reference Sheet

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Use the following reference sheet when creating your research paper. **Tonight**, please find at least **one** additional resource online regarding the N-word or banned language (other vulgar/offensive language works here). Place the information below; it will later be added to our classroom database. I would encourage you to use the electronic library resources we discussed in class through the Chicago Public Library.

**Your resource should include the following:** Title, author(s), location of information (website title, newspaper title, etc.), date published, URL.



# History of the N-word

The history of the word nigger is often traced to the Latin word niger, meaning Black. This word became the noun, Negro (Black person) in English, and simply the color Black in Spanish and Portuguese. In early modern French, niger became negre and, later, negress (Black woman) was unmistakably a part of language history. One can compare to negre the derogatory nigger and earlier English substitutes such as negar, neegar, neger, and niggor that developed into its lexico-semantic true version in English. It is probable that nigger is a phonetic spelling of the White Southern mispronunciation of Negro.

No matter what its origins, by the early 1800s, it was firmly established as a derogative name. In the 21st century, it remains a principal term of White racism, regardless of who is using it. Social scientists agree that words like nigger, kike, spic, and wetback come from three categories: disparaging nicknames (chink, dago, nigger); explicit group devaluations ("Jew him down" or "niggering the land"); and irrelevant ethnic names used as a mild disparagement ("jewbird" for cuckoos having prominent beaks or "Irish confetti" for bricks thrown in a fight.)

Over time, racial slurs have victimized all racial and ethnic groups; but no American group has endured as many racial nicknames as Blacks: coon, tom, savage, pickaninny, mammy, buck, samba, jigaboo, and buckwheat are some. Many of these slurs became fully traditional pseudo-scientific, literary, cinematic, and everyday distortions of African Americans. These caricatures, whether spoken, written, or reproduced in media and material objects, reflect the extent, the vast network, of anti-Black prejudice.

The word, nigger, carries with it much of the hatred and disgust directed toward Black Africans and African Americans. Historically, nigger defined, limited, made fun of, and ridiculed all Blacks. It was a term of exclusion, a verbal reason for discrimination. Whether used as a noun, verb, or adjective, it strengthened the stereotype of the lazy, stupid, dirty, worthless nobody. No other American surname carries as much purposeful cruelty. The following shortlist is important information on the word's use and meaning:

**Naggers:** Acting in a lazy and irresponsible manner.

**Niggerlipping:** wetting the end of a cigarette while smoking it.

**Niggerlover:** Derogatory term aimed at Whites lacking in the necessary loathing of Blacks.

**Nigger luck:** Exceptionally, but undeserved good luck.

**Nigger-flicker:** A small knife or razor with one side heavily taped to preserve the user's fingers.

**Nigger heaven:** Designated places, usually the balcony, where Blacks were forced to sit, for example, in an integrated movie theater or church.

**Nigger knocker:** Axe handle or weapon made from an axe handle.

**Nigger rich:** Deeply in debt but flamboyant.

**Nigger shooter:** A slingshot.

**Nigger steak:** A slice of liver or a cheap piece of meat.

**Nigger stick:** Police officer's baton.

**Nigger tip:** Leaving a small tip or no tip in a restaurant.

**Nigger in the woodpile:** A concealed motive or unknown factor affecting a situation in an adverse way.

**Nigger work:** Demeaning, menial tasks.

Nigger (as a word) is also used to describe a dark shade of color (nigger-brown, nigger-Black), the status of Whites that mix together with Blacks (nigger-breaker, dealer, driver, killer, stealer, worshipper, and looking), and anything belonging to or linked to African Americans (nigger-baby, boy, girl, mouth, feet, preacher, job, love, culture, college, music, etc). Nigger is the ultimate American insult; it is used to offend other ethnic groups. Jews are called White-niggers; Arabs, sand-niggers; Japanese, yellow-niggers. Americans created a racial hierarchy with Whites at the top and Blacks at the bottom.

In biology, heredity refers to the transference of biological characteristics from a parent organism to offspring. The word, nigger, speaks to the human heredity of Black people. Defining which characteristics of a person are due to heredity and which are due to environmental influences is often a controversial discussion (the nature versus nurture debate), especially regarding intelligence and race.

The hierarchy was set up by an ideology that justified the use of deceit, exploitation, and intimidation to keep Blacks "in their place." Every major societal establishment offered legitimacy to the racial hierarchy. Ministers preached that God was White and had condemned Blacks to be servants. Scientists measured Black skulls, brains, faces, and genitalia, seeking to prove that Whites were genetically superior to Blacks. White teachers, teaching only White students, taught that Blacks were less evolved cognitively, psychologically, and socially. The entertainment media, from vaudeville to television and film, portrayed Blacks as docile servants, happy-go-lucky idiots, and dangerous thugs, and they still do this today. The criminal justice system sanctioned a double standard of justice, including its unspoken approval of mob violence against Blacks and there is still a similar double standard today. Both American slavery and the Jim Crow laws which followed were saturated by anti-Black laws and images. The negative portrayals of Blacks were both reflected in and shaped by everyday material objects: toys, postcards, ashtrays, detergent boxes, fishing lures, and children's books. These items, and countless others, portrayed Blacks with bulging, darting eyes, fire-red oversized lips, jet-Black skin, and either naked or poorly clothed.

In 1874, the McLoughlin Brothers of New York produced a puzzle game called "Chopped Up Niggers." Beginning in 1878, the B. Leidersdory Company of Milwaukee, WI., produced NiggerHair Smoking Tobacco. Decades later, the name was changed to BiggerHair Smoking Tobacco. A 1916 magazine ad, copyrighted by Morris & Bendien, showed a Black child drinking ink. The caption read, "Nigger Milk" (shown). In 1917, the American Tobacco Company had a NiggerHair redemption promotion. NiggerHair coupons were redeemable for "cash, tobacco, S&H Green stamps, or presents." The J. Millhoff Company of England produced a series of cards in the 1930s which were widely distributed in the United States. One of the cards shows ten small Black dogs with the caption: "Ten Little Nigger Boys Went Out To Dine."

This is the first line from a popular children's story called, "The Ten Little Niggers." it reads like this.  
Ten Little Nigger Boys went out to dine;  
One choked his little self, and then there were nine.  
Nine Little Nigger Boys sat up very late; one overslept, and then there were eight. Eight Little Nigger Boys traveling in Devon; one said he'd stay there, and then there were seven.  
Seven Little Nigger Boys chopping up sticks; one chopped himself in halves, and then there were six.  
Six Little Nigger Boys playing with a hive; a Bumblebee stung one, and then there were five.  
Five Little Nigger Boys going in for Law; one got in Chancery, and then there were four.  
Four Little Nigger Boys going out to Sea; A Red Herring swallowed one, and then there were three.  
Three Little Nigger Boys walking in the Zoo; the big Bear hugged one, and then there were two;  
Two Little Nigger Boys sitting in the Sun; one got frizzled up, and then there was one.  
One Little Nigger Boy living all alone; He got married, and then there were none.

In 1939, writer Agatha Christie published a book called Ten Little Niggers. Later editions sometimes changed the name to Ten Little Indians, or And Then There Were None, but as late as 1978, copies of the book with the original title were being produced. It was not rare for sheet music produced in the first half of the 20th century to use the word nigger on the cover. The Howley, Haviland Company of New York produced sheet music for the songs "Hesitate Mr. Nigger, Hesitate," and "You'se Just A Little Nigger, Still You'se Mine, All Mine." This last example was promoted as a children's lullaby. Some small towns used nigger in their names, for example, Nigger Run Fork, Virginia. Nigger was a common name for darkly colored pets, especially dogs, cats, and horses. So-called "Jolly Nigger Banks," first made in the 1800s, were widely distributed as late as the 1960s. Another common piece with many variations, produced on posters, postcards, and prints is a picture of a dozen Black children rushing for a swimming hole. The caption reads, "Last One In's A Nigger."

The civil rights movement, Supreme Court decisions, the Black empowerment movement, broad civil rights legislation, and a general embracing of democracy by many American citizens have worn down America's racial pecking order from slavery moving into Jim Crow period and today's institutional racism. Yet, the word nigger has not left and its relationship with anti-Black prejudice remains symbiotic, interrelated, and interconnected. Ironically, it is co-dependent because a racist society created nigger and continues to feed and sustain it. But, the word no longer needs racism, or brutal and obvious forms, to survive. The word nigger today has its own existence.

Another interesting and confusing experience in American speech is the use of nigger by African Americans. Poetry by Blacks is instructive; one can often find the word nigger used in Black writings. Major and minor poets alike have used it with startling results: Imamu Amiri Baraka, contemporary poet, uses nigger in one of his angriest poems, "I Don't Love You," and what was the world to the words of slick nigger fathers too depressed to explain why they could not appear to be men. One wonders how readers are supposed to understand "nigger fathers." Baraka's use of this imagery, regardless of his purpose, reinforces the stereotype of the worthless, pleasure-seeking "coon" caricature. Ted Joans's use of nigger in "The Nice Colored Man" is an example of explainable expression. Joans said he was asked to give a reading in London because he was a "nice colored man." Infuriated by the labels "nice" and "colored," Joan's wrote a quintessential rebellious poem. While the poem should be read in its entirety, a few lines will do:  
Smart Black Nigger Smart Black Nigger Smart Black Nigger Smart Black Nigger Knife Carrying Nigger Gun  
Toting Nigger Military Nigger Clock Watching Nigger Poisoning Nigger Disgusting Nigger Black Ass Nigger.  
This piece uses adjective upon adjective attached to the word nigger.

The reality is that many of these uses can be heard in present-day African-American society. Herein lies part of the difficulty: The word, nigger, endures because it is used over and over again, even by the people it insults. Writer Devorah Major said, "It's hard for me to say what someone can or can't say, because I work with language all the time, and I don't want to be limited." Poet and professor Opal Palmer Adisa claims that the use of nigger or nigga is "the same as young people's obsession with swearing. A lot of their use of such language is an internalization of negativity about themselves." Rappers, themselves poets, rap about niggers before mostly White audiences, some of whom see themselves as wiggers (White niggers) and refer to one another as "my niggah." Snoop Doggy Dogg's single, "You Thought," raps, "Wanna grab a skinny nigga like Snoop Dogg/Cause you like it tall/and work it baby doll." Tupac Shakur's "Crooked Ass Nigga" lyrics included, "Now I could be a crooked nigga too/When I'm rollin' with my crew." Also rap lyrics that degrade women and glamorize violence reinforce the historical Brute Caricature.

Erdman Palmore researched lexicons and said, The number of offensive words used correlates positively with the amount of out-group prejudice; and these express and support negative stereotypes about the most visible racial and cultural differences. When used by Blacks, nigger refers to, among other things, all Blacks ("A nigger can't even get a break."); Black men ("Sisters want niggers to work all day long."); Blacks who behave in a stereotypical, and sometimes legendary, manner ("He's a lazy, good-for-nothing nigger."); things ("This piece-of-shit car is such a nigger."); enemies ("I'm sick and tired of those niggers bothering me!"); and friends ("Me and my niggers are tight."). This final habit, as a kind word, is particularly challenging. "Zup Niggah" has become an almost universal greeting among young urban Blacks. When asked, Blacks who use nigger or its variants argue that it has to be understood in its situation; repeated use of the word by Blacks will make it less offensive. It's not really the same word because Whites are saying nigger (and niggers) but Blacks are saying niggah (and niggaz). Also it is just a word and Blacks should not be prisoners of the past or the ugly words that originated in the past.

These arguments may not be true to the real world. Brother (Brotha) and Sister (Sistha or Sista) are terms of endearment. Nigger was and still is a word of disrespect. More to the point, the artificial dichotomy between Blacks or African Americans (respectable and middle-class) and niggers (disrespectable and lower class) ought to be challenged. Black is a nigger, regardless of behavior, earnings, goals, clothing, skills, ethics, or skin color. Finally, if continued use of the word lessened its damage, then nigger would not hurt or cause pain now. Blacks, from slavery until today, have internalized many negative images that White society cultivated and broadcast about Black skin and Black people. This is mirrored in cycles of self- and same-race hatred. The use of the word, nigger by Blacks reflects this hatred, even when the user is unaware of the psychological forces involved. Nigger is the ultimate expression of White racism and White superiority no matter how it is pronounced. It is linguistic corruption, an attack on civility.

To a smaller scale, words other than Nigger also remain accepted public banter in White America. In 1988, on Martin Luther King's birthday, sports commentator Jimmy "The Greek" Snyder said (on national television) that Black people were better at sports because of slave plantation breeding techniques. "During the slave period, the slave owner would breed his Black with his big woman so that he would have a big Black-kid. That's were it all started." Another sports announcer, Billy Packer, referred to pro-basketball player, Allan Iverson, as a "tough

monkey." Another announcer, Howard Cosell, referred to Alvin Garrett, a pro football player with the Washington Redskins as "little monkey" during a Monday Night Football game. The comments made by Cosell and Packer did not go without any punitive consequences.

Nigger is one of the most notorious words in American culture. Some words carry more weight than others. But without trying to exaggerate, is genocide just another word? Pedophilia? Clearly, no and neither is nigger.

After a period of relative dormancy, the word nigger has been reborn in popular culture. It is hard-edged, streetwise, and it has crossed over into movies like Pulp Fiction (1994) and Jackie Brown (1997), where it became a symbol of "street authenticity" and hipness. Denzel Washington's character in Training Day (2001) uses nigger frequently and harshly. Richard Pryor long ago rejected the use of the word in his comedy act, but Chris Rock, Chris Tucker, and other Black male comedy kings use nigger regularly and not affectionately. Justin Driver, a social critic, makes a case that both Rock and Tucker are modern minstrels shucking, jiving, and grinning, in the tradition of Step 'n Fetchit. White supremacists have found the Internet an indispensable tool for spreading their message of hate. An Internet search of nigger using Netscape or Alta Vista locates many anti-Black web pages: Niggers Must Die, Hang A Nigger for America, Nigger Joke Central, and many others. Web searchers find what most Blacks know from personal experience, that nigger is an expression of anti-Black hostility. Without question, nigger is the most commonly used racist slur during hate crimes.

No American minority group has been caricatured as often or in as many ways as Black people. These misrepresentations feature distorted physical descriptions and negative cultural and behavior stereotypes. The Coon caricature, for example, was a tall, skinny, loose-jointed, dark-skinned male, often bald, with oversized, ruby-red lips. His clothing was either ragged and dirty or extremely gaudy. His slow, exaggerated walk suggested laziness. He was a pauper, lacking ambition and the skills necessary for upward social mobility. He was a buffoon. When frightened, the Coon's eyes bulged and darted. His speech was slurred, halted, and stuffed with malapropisms. His piercing, high-pitched voice made Whites laugh. The Coon caricature dehumanized Blacks, and served to justify social, economic, and political discrimination. Nigger may be viewed as an umbrella term, a way of saying that Blacks have the negative characteristics of the Coon, Buck, Tom, Mammy, Sambo, Pickaninny, and other anti-Black caricatures.

In 2003, the fight to correct the shameful availability of this word had positive results. Recently Kweisi Mfume, president and CEO of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), gave a speech at Virginia Tech. There everyone was informed that a landmark decision was made with the people at Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Recognizing their error, beginning with the next edition, the word nigger will no longer be synonymous with African Americans in their publication.

Nigger, like the false impressions it incorporates and means, puts down Blacks, and rationalizes their abuse. The use of the word or its alternatives by Blacks has not lessened its hurt. This is not surprising in a racial hierarchy four centuries old, shaping the historical relationship between European Americans and African Americans. Anti-Black attitudes, motives, values, and behavior continue. Historically, nigger, more than any other word, captures the personal hatred and institutionalized racism directed toward Blacks. In 2013, incidences such as Atlanta born restaurant entrepreneur Paula Dean and Oklahoma football player Reilly Coopers comfortable reference to the word against Blacks shows that it is alive in the White vocabulary and it still does great harm.

Contributing writers:  
Phil Middleton and David Pilgrim.

## “Mommy, What Does ‘Nigger’ Mean?”

by Gloria Naylor

Language is the subject. It is the written form with which I've managed to keep the wolf away from the door and, in diaries, to keep my sanity. In spite of this, I consider the written word inferior to the spoken, and much of the frustration experienced by novelists is the awareness that whatever we manage to capture in even the most transcendent passages falls far short of the richness of life. Dialogue achieves its power in the dynamics of a fleeting moment of sight, sound, smell, and touch.

I'm not going to enter the debate here about whether it is language that shapes reality or vice versa. That battle is doomed to be waged whenever we seek intermittent reprieve from the chicken and egg dispute. I will simply take the position that the spoken word, like the written word, amounts to a nonsensical arrangement of sounds or letters without a consensus that assigns "meaning." And building from the meanings of what we hear, we order reality. Words themselves are innocuous; it is the consensus that gives them true power.

I remember the first time I heard the word *nigger*. In my third-grade class, our math tests were being passed down the rows, and as I handed the papers to a little boy in back of me, I remarked that once again he had received a much lower mark than I did. He snatched his test from me and spit out that word. Had he called me a nymphomaniac or a necrophiliac, I couldn't have been more puzzled. I didn't know what a nigger was, but I knew that whatever it meant, it was something he shouldn't have called me. This was verified when I raised my hand, and in a loud voice repeated what he had said and watched the teacher scold him for using a "bad" word. I was later to go home and ask the inevitable question that every black parent must face – "Mommy, what does *nigger* mean?"

And what exactly did it mean? Thinking back, I realize that this could not have been the first time the word was used in my presence. I was part of a large extended family that had migrated from the rural South after World War II and formed a close-knit network that gravitated around my maternal grandparents. Their ground-floor apartment in one of the buildings they owned in Harlem was a weekend mecca for my immediate family, along with countless aunts, uncles, and cousins who brought along assorted friends. It was a bustling and open house with assorted neighbors and tenants popping in and out to exchange bits of gossip, pick up an old quarrel, or referee the ongoing checkers game in which my grandmother cheated shamelessly. They were all there to let down their hair and put up their feet after a week of labor in the factories, laundries, and shipyards of New York.

Amid the clamor, which could reach deafening proportions—two or three conversations going on simultaneously, punctuated by the sound of a baby's crying somewhere in the back rooms or out on the street—there was still a rigid set of rules about what was said and how. Older children were sent out of the living room when it was time to get into the juicy details about "you-know-who" up on the third floor who had gone and gotten herself "p-r-e-g-n-a-n-t!" But my parents, knowing that I could spell well beyond my years, always demanded that I follow the others out to play. Beyond sexual misconduct and death, everything else was considered harmless for our young ears. And so among the anecdotes of the triumphs and disappointments in the various workings of their lives, the word *nigger* was used in my presence, but it was set within contexts and inflections that caused it to register in my mind as something else.

In the singular, the word was always applied to a man who had distinguished himself in some situation that brought their approval for his strength, intelligence, or drive:

"Did Johnny really do that?"

"I'm telling you, that nigger pulled in \$6,000 of overtime last year. Said he got enough for a down payment on a house."

When used with a possessive adjective by a woman—"my nigger"—it became a term of endearment for her husband or boyfriend. But it could be more than just a term applied to a man. In their mouths it became the pure essence of manhood—a disembodied force that channeled their past history of struggle and present survival against the odds into a victorious statement of being: "Yeah, that old foreman found out quick enough—you don't mess with a nigger."

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. Parents who neglected their children, a drunken couple who fought in public, people who simply refused to look for work, those with excessively dirty mouths or unkempt households were all "trifling niggers." This particular circle could forgive hard times, unemployment, the occasional bout of depression—they had gone through all of that themselves—but the unforgivable sin was a lack of self-respect.

A woman could never be a "nigger" in the singular, with its connotations of confirming worth. The noun *girl* was its closest equivalent in that sense, but only when used in direct address and regardless of the gender doing the addressing. *Girl* was a token of respect for a woman. The one-syllable word was drawn out to sound like three in recognition of the extra ounce of wit, nerve, or daring that the woman had shown in the situation under discussion.

"G-i-r-l, stop. You mean you said that to his face?"

But if the word was used in a third-person reference or shortened so that it almost snapped out of the mouth, it always involved some element of communal disapproval. And age became an important factor in these exchanges. It was only between individuals of the same generation, or from any older person to a younger (but never the other way around), that *girl* would be considered a compliment.

I don't agree with the argument that use of the word nigger at this social stratum of the black community was an internalization of racism. The dynamics were the exact opposite: the people in my grandmother's living room took a word that whites used to signify worthlessness or degradation and rendered it impotent. Gathering there together, they transformed nigger to signify the varied and complex human beings they knew themselves to be. If the word was to disappear totally from the mouths of even the most liberal of white society, no one in that room was naive enough to believe it would disappear from white minds. Meeting the word head-on, they proved it had absolutely nothing to do with the way they were determined to live their lives.

So there must have been dozens of times that nigger was spoken in front of me before I reached the third grade. But I didn't "hear" it until it was said by a small pair of lips that had already learned it could be a way to humiliate me. That was the word I went home and asked my mother about. And since she knew that I had to grow up in America, she took me in her lap and explained.



Another African-American journalist whose comments on the "N" word are included here is William Raspberry. Raspberry goes a step further than Noble, arguing that the word continues to be hurtful because African Americans give it too much power.

Nigger. The word is almost magical in its negative power. Books—good books—have been banned because of its use. Race relations have been shattered, friendships broken and credibility destroyed by its mere utterance.

O.J. Simpson's defense lawyers have tried hard to prove that Los Angeles police detective Mark Fuhrman has said the word, knowing that if they succeed they effectively destroy him as a witness against a black defendant.

Its use by whites has been cited as justification for everything from tears to murder. It is that powerful.

Yet, the fascinating question for me is why have we given it such power?

Oh, yes, the power comes from us—black Americans. We can render it neutral (as when black friends use it in casual conversation); we can make it an obscenity as when one of us finds the word offensive even from the mouths of other blacks); and we can reduce it to banality (as a number of rap artists have succeeded in doing).

But the nuances apply only when the word is used by blacks. There's no benign or banal way for whites to use it. Mark Twain and "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman" have been barred from some classrooms because reading them requires that the word be pronounced in racially mixed company. . . .

Some readers will object to my notion that the N-word's power is conferred by blacks. The power, they will argue, comes from the relative power of whites over blacks in a country that once legalized slavery and then sanctioned second-class status for the descendants of black slaves. "Nigger," they will insist, is a white-created word, expressly designed to show maximum contempt for black people.

No doubt. But isn't this interesting: No definition of the word—no synonym, no lexicographer's phrase—can come anywhere close to the insult of the word itself. . . .

That's what makes it "perhaps the most offensive and inflammatory racial slur in English." Our own dread—our own evocation of everything from being sold like cattle, treated like children, or lynched like something hideous and inhuman—has given the N-word such power that we are incapable even of fashioning an equivalent insult for the person who uses it.

Not that we haven't tried. It hasn't worked, I'm convinced, because it takes two to play the magic-name game. Not only must we intend the grossest insult we are capable of imagining; the person against whom we use it must share our sense of the insult. For the most part, the others have declined to play the game. What would happen if we stopped playing it—if we chose not to give the word such power?

I remember the day I accidentally cut off another vehicle—a battered pickup—at a Washington intersection. The driver, a young Hispanic man, rolled down his window and, in an accent suggestive of recent arrival, yelled at me: "NEEger!" He then sped away.

I spent five seconds in seething resentment—both at this young immigrant and at the country that had so quickly taught him contempt for people who look like me. And then I laughed, and whatever power the word possessed that day dissipated into the air at Georgia and Kalmia. Is that a start?



December 1, 2001

## A Black Author Hurls That Word as a Challenge

By DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK

At halftime of a 1993 basketball game against Miami University of Ohio, Keith Dambrot, varsity men's basketball coach at Central Michigan University, called his team together to talk about the word "nigger." Mr. Dambrot, who is white, had overheard his African-American players call each other "nigger" to denote toughness and tenacity on the court. He asked the players permission to use the word in the same sense, and after they assented he adopted "nigger," too. A few weeks later, after administrative censure, sensitivity training and two campus protests, Mr. Dambrot lost his job and promptly filed suit.

His case is one of dozens analyzed in "Nigger," a new book by Randall Kennedy, an African-American scholar at the Harvard Law School. Mr. Kennedy recounts many unpleasant episodes, like the embarrassing use of the term by Senator Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia in a public appearance last March. But Mr. Kennedy also considers the newer, more complicated use of "nigger" as a term of affection by young African-Americans and their well-meaning white friends. All in all, he argues, the new uses are gradually helping to exorcise the word's power as America's "paradigmatic ethnic slur."

Even before the book's appearance in stores next month, its uncomfortable title has elicited considerable hand-wringing among the mostly white staff of its publisher, Pantheon Books, where some executives have even refused to say its name. It has also become the source of a certain mischievous amusement on the part of its African-American editor. And as advanced word spreads among other African-American scholars, the title has provoked denunciations from some who vehemently disagree with Mr. Kennedy's thesis even before they have read the book.

"When I show up on CNN, I get e-mails from racists calling me a nigger bitch, O.K.?" said Julianne Malveaux, an African-American economist and newspaper columnist, "so I don't think its use is taking the sting out of it. I think it's escalating at this point. You are just giving a whole bunch of racists who love to use the word permission to use it even more, like, 'I am not really using it, I am just talking about a book!'"

Patricia Williams, an African-American professor at Columbia Law School, objected to the title: "That word is a bit like fire — you can warm your hands with the kind of upside-down camaraderie that it gives, or you can burn a cross with it. But in any case it depends on the context and the users' intention, and seeing it floating abstractly on a book shelf in a world that is still as polarized as ours makes me cringe." Houston A. Baker Jr., an African-American professor of English at Duke University, agreed about the title: "I see no reason whatsoever to do this, except to make money. It is a crude marketing technique unworthy of someone with the kind of penetrating intelligence that Professor Kennedy has."

For his part, Mr. Kennedy said he felt no qualms about the sensational title, adding, "I write a book to be read."

He said he had come up with the idea for the book, which grew out of a series of lectures, after idly typing the word "nigger" into a database of court cases. He found over 4,000 entries. Even before prosecutors in the O. J. Simpson case argued that hearing a witness's use of the word might unduly bias a jury, courts have often grappled with the caustic power of the word's history. Some courts have ruled that hearing the word "nigger" constitutes a provocation to violence similar to receiving a physical blow. Others have determined that speaking the word as an insult can disqualify a prosecutor or judge from his job. Lawyers have argued that a juror's utterance of the word in earshot of other jurors can invalidate their deliberations.

Mr. Kennedy writes approvingly of entertainers' penchant for "nigger." The comedian Lenny Bruce expounded the idea that repeating the word "nigger" could defang its derogatory impact, capitalizing on the word's shock-value in the process. But Mr. Kennedy notes that African-American rappers and comedians do not concern themselves much with whether they are encouraging white racists or disarming them. "They say, 'We don't feel constrained that we have to burnish the image of the Negro — we think this is fun and we are going to do it,'" Mr. Kennedy said. "Frankly, I felt inspired by that."

Erroll McDonald, Mr. Kennedy's editor at Pantheon and one of the few senior African-American editors in book publishing, was delighted with the manuscript. "I appreciated its importance instantly," he said, "It is just such a curious word that provokes atavistic passions in people, and I thought it was time for a proper reckoning with it." He continued: "I for one am appalled by that euphemism 'the N word.' It seems an elision of something that would be better off talked about. There are some people out there talking about the 'N- word' that do regard a certain section of the population as niggers."

Mr. McDonald enjoyed the reactions of colleagues, almost all of them white. He carried a piece of paper around the office with the word "nigger" written on it, asking people to pronounce it. Presenting the idea at a planning session in January, he asked about 45 editors and other executives to say it unison. In both cases, some refused.

"I think it is pretty fun," Mr. McDonald said, imagining customers asking a bookstore clerk, "Can I have one 'Nigger' please? Where are your 'Niggers?'" He added, "I am not afraid of the word 'nigger.'"

Some of the sales and marketing executives, however, were nervous, partly about how to publicize a book some would not name aloud and partly about the subtitle. Mr. McDonald picked the subtitle, "A Problem in American Culture," which appeared in the Pantheon catalog sent to reviewers and stores. But at a sales conference in August, some executives worried that consumers might think "nigger" referred to African-Americans and that by implication African-Americans were the "problem," said Joy Dallanegra-Sanger, who is white and the marketing director of the division of Random House that includes Pantheon.

Mr. McDonald disagreed but acquiesced. "I always thought of 'nigger' as an imaginary construct, like 'goblins' or 'elves.' I never thought they actually existed, but apparently they do in the minds of some." The subtitle was changed to "The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word," clarifying that the subject was a word and not a person.

In the past, librarians and bookstore owners have sometimes removed books from their shelves for containing the word "nigger" in the title, including "The Nigger of the Narcissus," by Joseph Conrad. But several bookstores, including some catering mainly to African-Americans, said that they planned to stock Mr. Kennedy's book. Several noted the comedian Dick Gregory's 1964 autobiography, "Nigger." He wrote at the time that he hoped the word would become obsolete, but he also joked that it was advertising for the book.

John McWhorter, an African-American linguist and the author of the forthcoming book "The Power of Babel" (Henry Holt), read an early copy. He said he shared Mr. Kennedy's hopeful fascination with the changing uses of the word among young African-Americans and even their white friends, suggesting that the book might further dilute the opprobrium the word carries. "Pretty soon we are going to have a book called 'Nigger' that is going to be sitting in front of every bookstore in the United States, and that will be one more step toward taking the power of the word away."

The most immediate effect, however, is likely to be an escalation of the debate over the politics of its use. Richard Delgado, a Mexican-American professor at the University of Colorado Law School, who has argued for restrictions on hate-speech, said that he, too, feared that Mr. Kennedy's defense of the term's novel uses would encourage racists. But Mr. Delgado also said that Mr. Kennedy risked slighting other ethnic groups by underestimating the power of other slurs. Calling "nigger" the "paradigmatic" ethnic slur was "parochial," Mr. Delgado said.

For his part, Mr. Dambrot, the basketball coach who lost his job for using the word, said he favored open discussion, even of his own mistake. He lost his suit and worked as a stockbroker for five years before he found another job coaching basketball, for a high school in Akron, Ohio. This year he finally returned to coaching a college team, at the University of Akron.

"I try to use the whole situation as an educational tool for the kids," he said. "I explain that you have to understand how different people understand your words. Be careful what you say. Every decision you make can effect the rest of your life, and my life can be case study for that."

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# CALLING OUT THE SYMBOL RULERS

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## *A FENCE SIEVE LANGUAGE*

STEVE STOCKDALE

*A culture cannot be discriminatingly accepted, much less be modified, except by persons who have seen through it—by persons who have cut holes in the confining stockade of verbalized symbols and so are able to look at the world and, by reflection, at themselves, in a new and relatively unprejudiced way.*

*Aldous Huxley, "Culture and the Individual" (1963)*

During the first months of 2007, the American public, politicians, and media have banded together to up-armor our “confining stockade of verbalized symbols.” Instead of cutting holes through which to self-reflexively evaluate ourselves, our language, and our behaviors, we have reinforced our ancient, pathological attitudes toward words and the people who use them.

The Don Imus affair (Google: *nappy-headed hos, jigaboos and wannabees, Rutgers women’s basketball, MSNBC, CBS radio, WFAN, the Rev. Al Sharpton*) consumed the most print space and air time. But let’s not forget some of the other examples of language behaviors that have prompted outrage, lawsuits, indifference, or in some cases, applause.

- Isaiah Washington, an actor on the television series “Grey’s Anatomy,” checked into a rehab center and began counseling after using the word *faggot* in reference to another actor on the show. (1)
- Ann Coulter, the blonde darling of a certain segment of conservative Republicans, joked during a presentation to the Conservative Political Action Conference that, “I was going to have a few comments on the other Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards, but it turns out you have to go into rehab if you use the word ‘faggot,’ so I — so kind of an impasse, can’t really talk about Edwards.” (2)
- The family of a high school freshman filed a lawsuit against officials at Maria Carillo High School in California claiming the school denied the First Amendments rights of their daughter. The family is Mormon. The

utterance at issue concerns the daughter's response to classmates who needled her with questions such as, "Do you have 10 moms?" She replied, "That's so gay." School officials gave her a warning on the grounds that it has an obligation to protect gay students from harassment. The parents' suit claims the phrase *that's so gay* "enjoys widespread currency in youth culture." The girl says the phrase means, "That's so stupid; that's so silly; that's so dumb." (3)

- The day after he officially announced his candidacy for the Democratic party's nomination for President, Senator Joe Biden (D-Delaware) said of fellow candidate Senator Barack Obama (D-Illinois), "I mean, you got the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy," Biden said. "I mean, that's a storybook, man." He was immediately besieged with controversy over the words "clean" and "articulate." (4)
- Four days later, Senator Obama illustrated how quickly "what goes around comes around" when he used the word "wasted" to refer to the lives of U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq. (5)
- A partner from one of the most prestigious law firms in the country, Fulbright & Jaworski, visited the law school at Duke University for recruiting purposes. During the course of an interview, the partner recounted a story about one of the firm's founders (Leon Jaworski) and his commitment to justice in the 1920s. Jaworski represented a black man accused of murder in Waco, TX, and faced a district attorney who used "the n word" to refer to the accused. A student who heard the story objected and complained, the dean of the law school wrote a letter to the entire law school, and the chairman of the executive committee at Fulbright & Jaworski traveled to Duke to apologize. (6,7)
- New York City Councilman Leroy Comrie embarked on a campaign to 'voluntarily' ban "the n word." His campaign was featured in an "investigative report" on "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart" by the "investigative team" of Larry Wilmore (an American black) and John Oliver (a British white). During the report, Oliver refers only to "the word" and leaves it to Wilmore to fill in the blanks with the word *nigger*. (8)
- "The Colbert Report," with Stephen Colbert, immediately followed Stewart's show and featured an interview with Jabari Asim, author of the new book, *The N Word: who can say it, who shouldn't, and why*. (9)
- City officials of the Bronx in New York City labeled a new German army training video as "racist" and demanded an apology from the German military. The video depicts an instructor describing a scenario to a trainee

this way: “You are in the Bronx. A black van is stopping in front of you. Three African-Americans are getting out they are insulting your mother in the worst ways. Act!” (10)

- Rush Limbaugh began referring to Senator Barack Obama and actress Halle Berry, each of mixed-race parentage, as “Halfrican Americans.” (11)

These examples come from just a four-month period. But they reveal just how confining our stockade of verbalized symbols has become.

In other words, it’s become almost impossible to talk sensibly about how we talk. Forget about cutting holes ... we can’t even make a dent.

Not that some haven’t tried. Compare and contrast these attempts at explanation, elucidation, or explication:

If you’re 10 or 100, *nappy-headed ho* means the same thing.

Al Sharpton on “Real Time with Bill Maher” (12)

Did you want to name the book *The N Word* and they said, no, you’ve got to call it *The N Word*, or did you say, I want to name this book *The N Word* and they assumed you meant, you know, the ‘n word’ when in fact you meant the ‘n word’? The ‘n word’ has become so anonymous [sic] with the ‘n word’. Is saying the ‘n word’ pretty much like saying the ‘n word’? Because, I would never say the ‘n word,’ but I don’t want somebody to think I’m saying the ‘n word’ by saying the ‘n word.’

Stephen Colbert to Jabari Asim (9)

It’s really hard to address the language of racism without somehow directly engaging in that language.

Jabari Asim to Stephen Colbert (9)

[After letting loose with 47 “equal opportunity” racial and religious epithets ...] There is absolutely nothing wrong with any of those words, in and of themselves. They’re only words. It’s the context that counts. It’s the user. It’s the intention behind the words that makes them good or bad. The words are completely neutral. The words are innocent. I get tired of people talking about ‘bad words’ and ‘bad language.’ Bullshit! It’s the context that makes them good or bad.

George Carlin (13)

It doesn't matter, the origins of curse words. What matters is that civilization has decreed —arbitrarily, obviously—that certain words are inherently obscene.

Dennis Prager (14)

Words don't 'mean,' only a person does. There is no meaning in a word. We sometimes talk about this as the 'container myth.' Now you can put something in a glass—water, dirt, sand, anything. A glass will hold something, and we can talk about this as a 'container.' A word, however, is not a container in the way a glass is. A container of 'meaning' is a man, a woman. It's you. It's you listening, it is I talking. It is I listening, it's you talking. A word doesn't 'mean.'

Irving J. Lee (15)

Understandably, the use of the word offended the student.

Katharine T. Bartlett, Dean, Duke University School of Law (7)

There is no excuse for what happened on this campus. There is no context for which that is permissible conduct.

Steven Pfeiffer, Fulbright & Jaworski (6)

It seems that two conflicting views are at work here, leading to these questions:

1. Do words have "inherent" meanings that exist and apply irrespective of speaker, listener, or context?
2. Do words have variable meanings that depend on context?
3. Is it more appropriate to talk in terms of "offensive language," in which specific 'bad' words (profanities, obscenities, epithets) *cause* offense, justify outrage, and demand apology?
4. Is it more appropriate to talk in terms of "language that some find offensive," that recognizes that each individual *may respond* according to his or her own standards of what offends them?
5. Do actions like banning, censoring, and penalizing certain words and terms aid or hinder our individual and societal efforts to "cut holes" through our current culture, to progress beyond our prejudices and stereotypes?

From my general semantics perspective, it's pretty easy to answer *no*, *yes*, *no*, *yes*, and *hinder*. What makes this so difficult for most people to understand? Or, what makes it so rewarding for people to perpetuate the "word=thing" identifications? I offer four inter-related possibilities.



## Control

Language has always been used as a means for rulers to exercise their power over their dominion. Religious leaders, politicians, business bosses, military commanders, teachers, parents, lawyers ... virtually everyone is subject to someone else's controlling or directive language. We have been conditioned to respond to certain words in specific, somewhat predictable ways. Go to church and you can expect to hear language intended to provoke penitence, guilt, grace, thankfulness, humility, or charity. Go to a political rally and you'll get bombarded with carefully crafted words to evoke patriotism, civic duty, fear, pride, outrage.

As Alfred Korzybski observed in *Science and Sanity*, "those who rule the symbols, rule us." Rulers need predictable results and desired reactions. They need their constituents to identify the labels of choice with the rulers' desired attitudes and behaviors. If the people chose to deliberately and extensionally evaluate the assertions expressed by their rulers, then the rulers might well be forced to rule on substance, rather than by symbol.

## Cop-out: Denying Personal Responsibility

Alfred Fleishman, co-founder of public relations giant Fleishman-Hillard, Inc., advocated general semantics in his own unique, street-wise way. One of the simple observations he would share with delinquent and troubled teenagers in St. Louis was, "Just because you call me a son of a bitch, that doesn't make me a son of a bitch." He encountered hundreds of youngsters in detention schools and jails who automatically reacted to being called a name ... just words ... in ways that caused pain, suffering, and despair to their victims, their families, and ultimately themselves. They didn't stop to think that they could react any differently to the name. The label (*boy, nigger, asshole, etc.*) made them do it. The devil must be in those words; remember comedian Flip Wilson's character Geraldine's universal excuse? "The devil made me do it."

A different aspect of personal responsibility is described by Irving J. Lee, who used the term "bypassing" to describe another aspect of lazy, indiscriminant listening. He explained that a listener has two choices when encountering language that isn't quite clear. The aware, responsible listener will ask the speaker, "What do you mean?" or pause to consider what the speaker might have intended. The lazy, unaware listener will immediately proceed to evaluate what the speaker says as if it were the listener talking; in other words, he will assume (or demand) that the speaker uses the same words in the same way as himself. He will maintain that it's the speaker's responsibility to use the 'right' words, rather than the listener's responsibility to evaluate the speaker's intent.

In the latter case, the listener/reactor denies his own responsibility for interpreting, evaluating, and appropriately responding to the words of the speaker. The words (symbols) 'cause' the response, just as Pavlov's bell caused his dog to respond.

### **Misunderstanding 'Reality'**

As we learn more and more about our brains and nervous systems, Korzybski's formulation of the abstracting process continues to be validated. The brain orders and constructs our experiences from our sensory interactions through the nervous system to our ultimate evaluations of pleasure, pain, fear, etc. Therefore, like everything else, 'meaning' is constructed by each of us, individually and uniquely. As Charles Sanders Pierce put it, "We don't get meaning, we respond with meaning."

However, a lot of people don't quite understand this or don't want to understand it. There are still many who believe that there is an "objective reality" out there that ought to be perceived "as it is." They rail against "relativism" without acknowledging the inevitable relativism that results from the natural functioning of six billion different nervous systems. Which one of those six billion is the right one to say what 'is' the true meaning or the inherent purpose of a statement, an event, or a symbol?

### **Identifying the 'Map' as the 'Territory'**

Those who advocate eliminating or even banning certain words and phrases do not seem to grasp the symbolic nature of words. They misplace or misallocate their ire toward the word itself rather than on the underlying attitude, beliefs, and behaviors of the individuals who use the word.

Although Jabari Asim tries to straddle a difficult line in proposing that some people can use the word nigger but others shouldn't, I support his statement quoted previously. From a historical context, you cannot teach *Huckleberry Finn* without using the language of the time and understanding the attitudes of the time. Neither can you arbitrarily dictate (or request, in the case of Councilman Comrie) that *nigger* be stricken and banned from music lyrics.

The hip-hop world took a lot of the collateral damage from the initial Imus bomb, to the extent that rap/hip-hop icon and impresario Russell Simmons co-authored a statement that read, "We recommend that the recording and broadcast industries voluntarily remove/bleep/delete the misogynistic words 'bitch' and 'ho'" as well as "a common racial epithet."

As if "bleeping" accomplishes anything other than calling attention to itself and, by extension, what got bleeped.

If one thinks through the logical consequences of “bleeping,” one comes full circle to the realization that it’s the *context*, not the *word*, that establishes the basis for offense. Even without benefit of visually observing the following phrases spoken, do you have any doubt as to what the “bleep” stands for?

“I said *drop your bleeping gun!*”

“Go bleep yourself.”

“Get the bleep out of here.”

“You dirty son of a bleep!”

“This tastes so bleeping good ...”

Leave it to the comedians to shine illuminating light on this shadowy subject. In their “investigative” report on Councilman’s Comrie’s quest to ban a “word with no meaning,” Wilborne and Oliver point out the potential consequences:

OLIVER: Leroy, are you at all concerned that we are banning one of the most versatile words in the English language? It can be used as a noun ...

WILBORNE: Yo, yo, whassup, my *nigga*?

OLIVER: A verb ...

WILBORNE: Hey, man, don’t *nigger* those potato chips.

OLIVER: An adjective ...

WILBORNE: Oh, so now you *nigger* rich?

OLIVER: And adverb ...

WILBORNE: Man ... that’s some *niggerly* [bleep].

OLIVER: Are we kissing goodbye to all of this?

COMRIE: I think that all of those usages are just vile and need to be stopped.

OLIVER: What do you say to rappers who need that word in terms of a rhyme scheme?

COMRIE: Need the word? I don’t think you need the word.

WILBORNE: I’m not sure about that Leroy. Finish this phrase ... *I’m not saying she’s a gold digger, but she ain’t messin’ with no broke ...*

COMRIE: Hmm. (to himself) *I’m not saying she’s a gold digger, but she ain’t messing with no broke ... fool.*

WILBORNE: (pause) Do you understand how rap works, Councilman?

Wilborne and Oliver understand that context determines meaning, and, like George Carlin two generations before them, realize that the English language offers unlimited opportunities to poke comedic fun at our arbitrary and multiple usages. As Carlin pointed out thirty years ago, even order establishes context: “You can prick your finger. But don’t finger your prick!”

A more serious reason to object to any type of ban, particularly with epithets, is

that these words carry such strong social stigmas that their usage may serve a valuable purpose. Like the canary in the mine, or smoke that signals the possibility of burning embers, racial and religious epithets can alert us to the possibility of prejudice, bias, and hate within the speaker. If you ban the language, these people may comply with the ban and not say the word, but they may well continue to harbor the feelings and attitudes that may lead to discriminatory and prejudiced behaviors.

Huxley continued his “hole cutter” metaphor with this observation:

What the would-be hole cutter needs is knowledge; knowledge of the past and present history of cultures in all their fantastic variety, and knowledge about the nature and limitations, the uses and abuses, of language.

We can learn a lot from our daily news outlets and entertainment programs regarding our attitudes towards language. Unfortunately, we (English-speaking Americans) seem to be backsliding toward the 19th century in terms of our dependence on the cultural crutch of verbal taboos. Consider how prematurely quaint the words of anthropologist Margaret Mead seem, as reported in an unnamed local newspaper in 1969:

Anthropologist Margaret Mead says that the current binge of written and spoken four-letter words will also pass providing everyone doesn't become uptight about it. It's this uptightness in the current phraseology that is at the heart of the problem. We are in a temporary period when it is exciting to light up some-thing that was dark, saying words that were forbidden, exhibiting all sorts of things that weren't allowed before, but this excitement is going to wear out. (16)

Until we exit this “temporary period” (going on 38 years now) in which we insist on righteously playing “got ‘cha!” with *offensive language*, our public discourse about racism, sexism, violence, drugs, and even taxes will never progress to the substantive from the superficial.

We must be vigilant, however, in clearly discerning and discriminating between the effective uses and the manipulative or ignorant *abuses* of language. The more we focus on the words, labels, and categories, the less we concern ourselves with the individuals who use those symbols, and the individuals upon whom those symbols are slapped. Because the words of Irving J. Lee will forever apply: *We tend to discriminate against people to the degree we fail to distinguish between them.*

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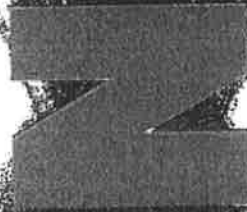
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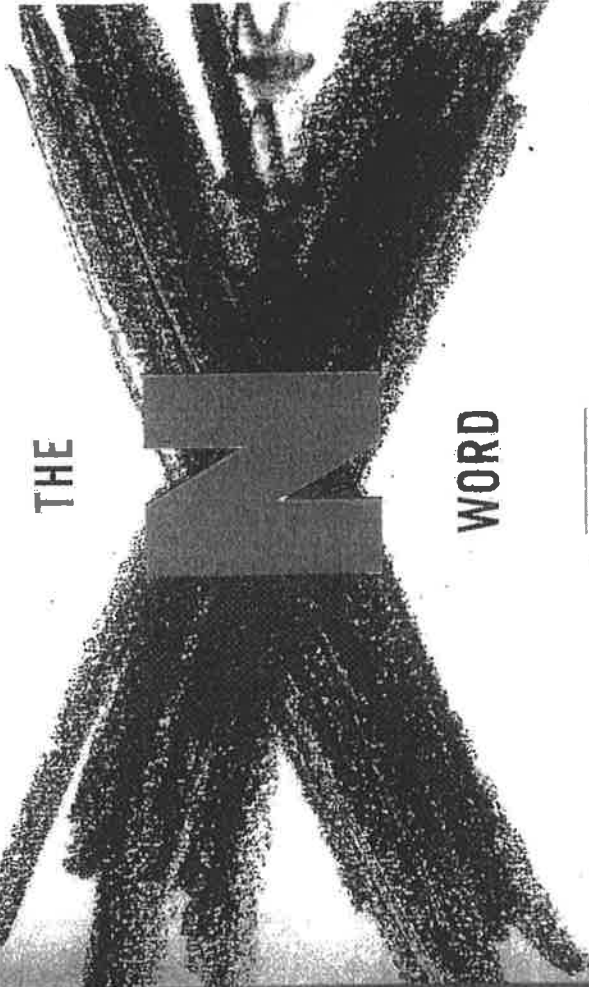


WORD

THE



WORD



who can say it, who shouldn't, and why

# The **N** Word

Who can say it,  
who shouldn't,  
and why

JABARI ASIM



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY  
BOSTON • NEW YORK 2007

JABARI ASIM



“Honky?”

“Honky is a racial epithet used for white people made popular by a man named George Jefferson in the 1970s,” Silky says. He goes on to declare that in the future, all black people will be free, before he shoots the slaveholder many times.

The whole scene is self-consciously preposterous but manages to show that for slaves, racial oppression not only included forced servitude and crippling social inequality but extended to language itself. As we have seen, slaves were not even allowed the luxury of silence — they were forced to sing on command, to laugh when not amused. Only through superhuman intervention are the slaves in Chappelle’s sketch given leave to say what’s on their mind. While challenging, albeit in comic terms, the dominant narrative of blacks as debased “niggers,” Chappelle demonstrates that calling a white man “honky” does nothing to change the balance of power. He has to explain what the epithet means because, unlike “nigger,” it has no tradition of “racial folklore grounded on centuries of instinct, habit and thought” to give it weight and substance. While “nigger” has traveled smoothly through the centuries, “honky” has no significance outside the era in which it briefly flourished. As outrageous as the comedian’s performance is, it is charged throughout with an awareness of history. In this sense Chappelle confirms Greg Tate’s observation that young black men can at times “ironically respond to language as a tool of oppression by disempowering it with crazed black wit.”

#### “QUEER THEORY”

In *Do You Speak American?*, a 2005 survey of national speech habits, Robert MacNeil and William Cran noted that “queer” has “lost some of its homophobic sting in the general culture.” They asked the black gay activist Calvin Gibson whether gays’ use of queer is “analogous to blacks’ using ‘nigger’ but being offended if white people did.”

## Nigger vs. Nigga

It’s okay to have that Nigga in you. . . . Ain’t nothing wrong with bein’ a Nigga. There’s somethin’ wrong with being a “nigger” — but not a Nigga.

— Bernie Mac, 2001

IN *JUBA TO LIVE: A Dictionary of African-American Slang*, Clarence Major wrote that the N word can function as a term of endearment when exchanged by blacks, whose usage reflects “a tragicomic sensibility that is aware of black history.” That tragicomic sense continues to infuse defensible usage, and not just during black-black dialogue. In “Time Haters,” one of my favorite sketches from Dave Chappelle’s show, the comic meets Major’s requirements in a skit that is only indirectly about the N word.

According to its ludicrous premise, Chappelle and his squad of righteous colored avengers invade historical scenarios on behalf of ethnic minorities who have suffered unjustly. The scene begins with their arrival at a Southern plantation, where a white slaveholder is abusing his black captives. When Silky (Chappelle) orders the slaveholder to cease and desist, the white man asks him who he is.

“We are the time haters,” Silky explains. “We’ve traveled all the way back through time . . . to call you a cracker.”

The white man brandishes a whip, but Silky produces a pistol and issues an order: “Reach for the sky, honky!”



"That's exactly what it's like," Gibson replied. "I believe it's because people feel disempowered and this is one way to empower themselves. If we can use the word *queer* so many times that it just becomes a normal word in our language without any consequences, then I think we see ourselves as being more empowered. So — it sort of proves the point that you can change the meaning of words."

Does it indeed? I'm not at all suggesting that such change is impossible, but in this instance it is a romantic conclusion at best. The proposed analogy of "queer" and "nigger" is equally wistful. To begin with, homosexuals don't insist that heterosexuals refrain from using "queer" to describe homosexuals, hence the substantial popularity of mainstream television programs such as *Queer as Folk* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Need I describe the reaction to a program called "Nigger Eye for the White Guy"?

Second, the N word doesn't appear to have lost much of its sting in the general culture. If anecdotal evidence is any indication, liberal white professionals often react as strongly to it as their black counterparts do. One white colleague told me it is still "the only word that produces visceral unease. . . . I cringe inwardly when I hear it on a hip-hop record." Outside hip-hop's boundaries, it remains an underground word. Whereas, for instance, "queer studies" is a generally accepted colloquialism among (gay and straight) intellectuals interested in lesbian, gay, and transgender issues, few if any academics devoted to the study of African-American life and culture have seen fit to describe their work as "nigger studies."

"Queer" and "gay" didn't emerge as commonly used epithets until the 1900s. By the 1950s, "gay" had been embraced by those whom it was formerly used to condemn; "queer" followed in the 1980s, when it was taken up by gay rights and AIDS activists. Compare the short shelf lives of those insults to the seemingly immortal N word, which was used to describe blacks in America as far back as 1619. As seen in our discussion of "honky," we find that "queer" and "gay" are not attached to a commensurate folklore grounded on "centuries of instinct, habit and thought."

In addition, "queer" and "gay" have always had other meanings that have nothing to do with sexual identity. "Queer," for instance, has meant odd ("My little horse must think it queer / to stop without a farmhouse near"), and "gay" has meant lively or merry ("gay Paree," "when our hearts were young and gay"). "Nigger," in stark contrast, is not one of those words of innocuous meaning that morphed over time into something different and harmful; it has always been tethered to notions of race and racial inferiority.

What's more, to regard all members of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered communities (LGBT) as "queer" could be a well-intentioned but ignorant misstep — the type of mistake we'd quickly condemn in a racial context. "Queer" as an identity "is only accepted by a fraction of the LGBT community and rejected by the majority," Matthew Frederick Streib argued in a January 2004 column in the *Cornell Daily Sun*. "Many people who are supposed to be included under the queer umbrella do not identify with the word and may even detest it," he wrote. For this reason, "calling the LGBT movement 'the queer movement' is like calling the NAACP the NAAN."

Michelangelo Signorile, a well-known gay journalist, has also observed that "not all gay people are happy to be called queer. Many would rather stick with the GLBT terminology than be called something that was once a slur and that literally means they're unusual. As in the past, these differences seem to occur along generational lines. No major gay and lesbian political group uses the word queer. They don't want to alienate anyone, let alone confuse the politicians they're lobbying."

Finally, there is the question of whether "queer" and "gay" are in fact as defanged as we'd like them to be. Despite the rise of positive homosexual characters in films, literature, and television — and despite the gradual growth of school clubs for gay teens and school programs promoting tolerance — "that is so gay" ranks among the most venomous insults one American teenager can sling at another.

## "IF NIGGERS COULD FLY"

In his debut novel, *White Boy Shuffle* (1996), Paul Beatty performs an act of linguistic dismantling that evokes "the crazed black wit" celebrated by Greg Tate. Beatty's youthful protagonist, Gunnar Kaufman, fails to navigate his new neighborhood until he decodes the local lingo, a fluid glossary of slang, insults, and curses fairly crackling with sarcasm and nervous energy. A self-described "cultural alloy, tin-hearted whiteness wrapped in blackened copper plating," young Gunnar had lived happily in Santa Monica, "where Black was being a nigger who didn't know any other niggers." Fearing that her children are being deprived of a "traditional black experience," Gunnar's mom moves the family to an inner-city Los Angeles community. In Hillside, Gunnar discovers, "Language was everywhere. Smoldering embers of charcoal etymology so permeated the air that whenever someone opened his mouth it smelled like smoke."

He might have added that every time someone opened his mouth, the N word fell out. Hostile cops seek Gunnar's gang affiliation by asking him to identify "your crimeys, your homies, your posse? You know, yo' niggers." Friends are greeted with "my nigger." Enemies, on the other hand, get "Nigger, what the fuck you looking at?" A litte neighbor girl calls herself Vamp a Nigger on the Regular Veronica. The prevailing neighborhood philosophy allows no brooding over small tragedies because "niggers got to get up and go to work tomorrow."

Gunnar realizes that he's finally beginning to fit in after a conversation with a popular student. "He called me 'nigger,'" Gunnar reflects. "My euphoria was as palpable as the loud clap of our hands colliding in my first soul shake." Only by mastering the many meanings of "nigger" — and being welcomed into "niggerness," as it were — does Gunnar begin to acclimate himself to the new black world he has entered.

Because Gunnar casts a skeptical eye toward anyone who tries to make it through life without acknowledging the absurdity of it all,

he recognizes and occasionally revels in the inescapable conundrums attached to issues of identity and belonging. Beatty flirts with farce as he takes his hero to adulthood and life as a celebrated writer. The grown-up Gunnar continues to wrestle with the idea of blackness and whether membership has its privileges. One of his best-known poems is called "If Niggers Could Fly":

If niggers could fly, where would we alight? We orbit a treeless world, nest on eaveless clouds, unable to stop flapping our wings for even a second, in constant migration to nowhere.

Much later in the book, a deeply disillusioned Gunnar urges his fellow blacks to abandon America, to "toss our histories overboard" along with our expectations that justice and equality will ever be ours among a people who refuse to behave toward us in a principled manner. Before he arrives at that somber realization, he leads readers on a wild and wordy ramble (one of his nicknames is "the underground neologist") through urban L.A. and exclusive Boston academia, puncturing pretensions and providing a poet's-eye view of the unlikely clash and merge of various subcultures, including street gangs and creative writing workshops. Life is ludicrous, he seems to suggest, and our preoccupation with "niggers" and other forms of smoldering etymology is a defining symptom that distracts us from more meaningful concerns.

As we have seen, comics and writers have not been the only black artists to address the N word as metaphor and symbol of this nation's failure to make satisfactory amends for its long tradition of racial injustice. The multimedia specialist Faith Ringgold's *The Black Light Series: Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger* (1969) is an especially well-executed example of such encounters. At first glance, the 36 x 50-inch oil on canvas appears to be a straightforward if mildly stylized portrait of an American flag. A second glance reveals the word "die" hidden in the stars. The stripes, meanwhile, are shown to be made from the word "nigger." It's a simple but effective piece that appears to warn blacks to beware the trap of uncritical patriotism or face deadly consequences. Created after the assassinations

of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. and in the midst of escalating calamities in Vietnam, the painting suggests a sense of fatalism commensurate with the mood of the country.

Quite similar in spirit and tone is "I Wants You, Nigger," a mock recruitment poster (circa 1970) that parodies the famous Uncle Sam image created by James Montgomery Flagg in 1916. In this version, Sam encourages potential recruits to "become a member of the world's highest paid black mercenary army." Enlistees will receive "valuable training in the skills of killing off other oppressed people!" Finally, Sam urges his quarry "Die Nigger Die — you can't die fast enough in the ghettos. So run to your nearest recruiting chamber!"

A contemporary form of such pointed satire can be found in Tana Hargett's installations *Bitter Nigger, Inc.* (2001) and *New Negrotopia* (2003), both of which offer knowing, sardonic comments on the commodification of blackness. They revolve around a fictional corporation whose "products" include pharmaceuticals aimed at blacks and situation comedies featuring black themes (courtesy of a subsidiary, the Bitter Nigger Broadcast Network). The "products" are introduced through a mock trade show booth advertising the virtues of Tominex ("the go along to get along pill") and garnished with reassuring slogans such as "Bitter Nigger Pharmaceuticals is committed to alleviating the bothersome effects of racism." There is also a mission statement from "Chairwoman and CEO" Tana R. Hargett that proudly informs potential stockholders, "in the last 8 months Bitter Nigger's ideas have doubled, viewer investment in Bitter Nigger, Inc. has more than tripled, and the value of our relevancy stock has grown eightfold." Meanwhile, *New Negrotopia* touts the delights of a planned amusement park that will include such entertainments as *Atlantic Adventure*, a 3-D interactive experience of the *Middle Passage*, and a *Cotton Bales* on the Mississippi water ride.

In varying degrees, the work of Chappelle, Beaty, Ringgold, the anonymous poster artist, and Hargett can be said to represent that crucial tragicomic sense that Major described, approaching the N

word and its attendant baggage with an appropriate consideration of context and history.

Picking up on an idea from Albert Camus, the African-American writer Chester Himes once observed: "Racism introduces absurdity into the human condition. Not only does racism express the absurdity of the racists, but it generates absurdity in the victims. . . . Racism creates absurdity among blacks as a defense mechanism. Absurdity to combat absurdity." The work of artists such as Ringgold, Hargett, and Beaty confirms the presence and validity of Himes's statement.

#### GANGSTA-ASS NIGGAS

When I was growing up, calling someone a "nigger" was only slightly less offensive than talking about his mother. I still remember a typical comeback that girls would deliver with a snap of their fingers and a toss of their pigtails: "I'm not a nigger. I'm a nigger-o." ("Negro" was never pronounced with a long e in my neighborhood.) Even kids in kindergarten, new to the world of "the dozens" and dirty jokes, seemed to instinctively grasp that the N word had about it a stench of powerlessness that was to be avoided at all costs. It so perfectly embodied a life full of futility, empty of purpose. Young as we were, we understood that it carried a hate strong enough to turn on us and consume us. "When you're called a nigger," James Baldwin wrote, "you look at your father because you think your father can rule the world — every kid thinks that — and then you discover that your father cannot do anything about it. So you begin to despise your father and you realize, oh, that's what a nigger is."

But times have changed. Back then, we imitated the cool teenagers and proud young men who greeted one another on the street with elaborate handshakes and "What it is?" or "What's happenin', brother?" These days, most young men I see greet one another with "Whassup, nigga." All they've kept is the handshake.

Other developments may be contributing to this epochal shift,

but none has done so as emphatically as the hip-hop subgenre known as gangsta rap. From 1979, when "Rapper's Delight" was released, until 1988, when "Straight Outta Compton" went gold, the N word was seldom uttered on hip-hop recordings.

All that changed when N.W.A. (short for Niggas Wit Attitude) became a national sensation with "Straight Outta Compton." This record was not the earliest example of gangsta rap, but it was the first to attract large numbers of converts from all over the country. Essentially a collection of hip-hop odes to urban dysfunction, "Straight" mixes infectious beats with vicious imagery and often clever lyrics. With his obsessive focus on drugs, double-crossing "bitches," and hardcore violence, the lyricist Ice Cube emerged as the poet laureate of ghetto pathology and spawned an apparently endless horde of imitators. Atop Dr. Dre's groove-heavy production, Cube and his colleagues recite the N word approximately 46 times, only slightly more than it is uttered in *Jackie Brown* and far less than the 215 times it occurs in *Huckleberry Finn*. Multiple listenings nullify such comparisons, of course, although the tally provides some measure of the group's move toward even more hardcore lyrics on its follow-up CD, *Efil4Zaggin*. Released in 1991 to widespread acclaim (and controversy, too), it contains approximately 185 utterances.

More important than how many times the N word was said is how it was used. N.W.A.'s ideas about being "a nigga" are largely derivative of Iceberg Slim (whose influence on Ice Cube isn't limited to his choice of a rap moniker) and could be assembled and loosely described as the Gangsta's Guide for Real Niggas. Little of the gangsta rap produced in the years since N.W.A.'s emergence differs much from the guidelines they laid down. In many instances, they use "nigga" to refer to mere ordinary, law-abiding men or to lowlifes unworthy of respect. "Real niggas" is an appellation reserved for those who have earned it. In the N.W.A. cosmos, life is only about "bitches and money." To get plenty of both, real niggas must run the streets, smoke weed, guzzle malt liquor, trust no one except members of their clique, and be prepared to kill without a

moment's hesitation. This is the model that has been slavishly adhered to for the past eighteen years in such gangsta rap anthems as "Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z." by 2Pac, "Hurt Niggas" by Mobb Deep, "Jigga My Nigga" by Jay-Z, and "Niggas Bleed" by the Notorious B.I.G.

The hustler plots described in these songs usually unfold in an insular world. The villains tend to be disrespectful "niggas," or "bitches runnin' game," and the racial realities of the surrounding universe are limited mostly to references to prison and oppressive police. In stark contrast to the "bad nigger" tales of previous generations, the protagonists are seldom portrayed as rebels against an unfair system whose "standing up to the Man" inspires both fear and admiration in their timid neighbors. There are notable exceptions, such as the Geto Boys' "Damn It Feels Good to Be a Gangsta" (1999), which enlivens a typical litany of dysfunction with a barbed political twist. While the first three verses relate the adventures of a "real gangsta-ass nigga" making deals and "ridin' around town in a drop-top Benz," the last verse takes listeners out of the 'hood and into the White House. There the new president of the United States hints at a Republican conspiracy, boasts of his Mafia ties, and pledges to allow "a big drug shipment" to pass undisturbed into a poor community in exchange for the Mob's help in fixing the election. Whereas the typical gangsta merely flexes his gat when he feels disrespected, the president has more dramatic means at his disposal. He warns, "Other leaders better not upset me or I'll send a million troops to die at war." Unlike many similar raps, this offering presents an aerial view that reveals the Geto Boys' small-time she-nanigans as the delusional fantasies they are; real power is shown to be beyond the reach of "real niggas."

Another striking departure comes from N.W.A.: "Why do I call myself a nigger, you ask me?" So begins "Niggaz 4 Life," which tries to answer that question. While the group often presents a grandiose view of themselves, they also see themselves as both targets of white oppression and agents of their own destruction. In their view, blacks will be called "niggers" by the larger society no matter what

they accomplish in terms of wealth, education, or professional status, so there's little purpose in trying to shake off the word. Striving for progress through the few legitimate channels available to them is a waste of time, so instead they choose to embrace the absurdity of life by becoming a nigga, "a young brother who don't give a fuck about another." In a world without compassion, it's every nigga for himself.

In this instance, while the group's logic is questionable, their treatment of the N word is not. Their use of it is overtly self-conscious and infused with macabre wit and an awareness of history. This is positively Ellisonian in comparison to lesser, derivative raps that have also tried to address what has become gangsta rap's existential riddle. Consider, for example, "Niggaz Theme" by the rapper Ja Rule. For him the question "What is a nigga?" has but one answer: "Rob a bitch, slap a bitch."

Supporters defend such lyrics as keeping it real, or merely reflecting accurately what is said and done in urban neighborhoods on a daily basis. But that explanation fails to account for other rappers, whose "reports" on the same conditions use far different language. "Nigger" and/or "nigga" appear far less frequently in the work of socially conscious rappers such as Chuck D of Public Enemy, Mos Def, Common, and Lauryn Hill, although they also address such potentially explosive issues as inner city poverty, racial discrimination, and relations between black men and women. Just as much of black cultural output can be considered as a counter-narrative to the majority culture's enduring myth of black inferiority, the work of intellectually astute hip-hop artists can be heard as a counternarrative to gangsta rap's legacy of rampant nihilism. Because much of gangsta rap turns a blind eye to history, it often abets a white supremacist agenda by keeping alive dangerous stereotypes linking African Americans to laziness, criminal violence, and sexual insatiability. Instead of standing up to "the Man," gangsta rappers serve as his henchmen.

The greater tragedy may very well lie in majority audiences' preference for the more titillating and bloodthirsty material, an affinity

confirmed by gangsta rap's regular reign at the top of the pop charts. Like the voyeuristic whites peering in the window while Nigger Charley made love, mainstream audiences continue to overlook the positive and the thoughtful in favor of the illicit and the sensational. By cavorting colorfully in the margins of modern life, gangsta rappers reinforce a sense of belonging in members of their audience who have deep roots in society's snug interior. Like the modern minstrels in *Bamboozled*, self-proclaimed "real niggas" make majority audiences laugh, they make them cry, they make them feel glad to be Americans.

#### WARRING IDEALS

Concomitant with the rise of gangsta rap is the notion that incorporating the N word into everyday speech somehow deconstructs it and removes its power to offend. The great poet Sonia Sanchez has written of her own efforts in this direction. Learning that a group of her young black students had been chased home by a group of older white students who called them "niggers," she wrote a poem about it. "That word ain't shit to me," the poem declares. "I'll say it slow for you — niiiiggger."

Sanchez intended to help the students arm themselves against such insults by stripping the words of their old meanings. "If they could chase someone with just one word, then they have the power, but if you could stop the word's importance by replacing it with something new, then you had the power," Sanchez wrote. "I tried to reinvent the word to give them the new power. And that's what you have to do. I empowered those children . . . when they stopped and turned with their interpretation of the word nigger, they were at a new place with themselves."

Mos Def is one of the most impressive rappers currently working. Aside from "Mr. Nigga," a trenchant comment on the limits of wealth and fame, his body of work shows no particular interest in the N word. But he sympathizes with rappers who, like Sanchez, believe the epithet can be disinfected. As he sees it, "If you define