

hip-hop as a survival mechanism, as a means of making something from nothing, then the act becomes compulsory. It's an act of empowerment. When we call each other 'nigga,' we take a word that has been historically used by whites to degrade and oppress us, a word that has so many negative connotations, and turn it into something beautiful, something we can call our own. I know it sounds cliché, but it truly becomes a 'term of endearment.'"

Rappers and others with similar views about "nigger" have chosen to indicate their efforts to turn insult into affection by giving it a new spelling, helpfully provided by N.W.A. in "I Ain't the One": "I'm a ruthless N-I-double-G-A." According to such thinking, "nigga" can be used without malice between blacks and also to distinguish acceptable forms of black behavior from uncouth ones, which shall remain the exclusive province of "niggers." How this new concept can be reconciled with the "real niggas" who gleefully commit rapes, murders, assaults, and thefts in countless rap songs — or with those "niggas" who hate knowledge and torment black people in Chris Rock monologues — has thus far gone unexplained. Should we, for instance, disregard N.W.A.'s "One Less Bitch," which declares: "A nigga is one who believes that all ladies are bitches"?

The logic behind the new spelling breaks down further when one recalls that racist whites have used "nigga" nearly as often as they've used "nigger." To accept the validity of "nigga," we'd have to forget those lovely "nigga songsters" that used to grace the music parlors of respectable white families in nineteenth-century America. We would also have to wink at all those segregationist senators — Helms, Thurmond, Stennis, et al. — who used to insist that "Negro" sounded just like "nigga" when pronounced with a Southern accent.

Not everyone in the hip-hop community sees a distinction between "nigga" and "nigger." In the opinion of Davey D, a respected critic and writer in the San Francisco Bay area, "the use of the word with either spelling is disparaging." In March 2002, he posted an article on his Web site about a spat between the Philadelphia rappers

Shorty and Beanie Siegel. Shorty, who is white, refused to retract his use of the N word in a rap he created to ridicule Siegel, who is black. He told Davey D that he used the n-i-g-g-a version of the term, which, in his opinion, is merely slang and nothing more. According to a very skeptical Davey D, Shorty "emphatically insisted that he is not a racist and he did not want to send out the wrong message." Jennifer Lopez, who is Puerto Rican, offered a similar defense when she was chastised for using the N word in "I'm Real," a hit song released in July 2001. Davey D predicts that future entanglements stemming from the two spellings will surely follow, complicating everything from racial harassment complaints to court proceedings involving hate crimes.

Tupac Shakur, the celebrated gangsta rapper who continues to attract a huge following several years after his violent death, advised an unusual attempt to give "nigga" a positive spin. N-I-G-G-A, he said, was an acronym for Never Ignorant and Getting Goals Accomplished. To my knowledge, few if any of his followers have endorsed his proposed innovation. Perhaps Tupac's effort, like Bernie Mac's revisionist comment quoted at the beginning of this chapter, was prompted by that same irrational mixture of attraction and repulsion that many African Americans feel toward the unlikeliest of words. As with so many other tensions animating our hard and tedious journey on this storied continent, the roots of those conflicting impulses can likely be found in W.E.B. Du Bois's durable concept of double-consciousness. "One ever feels his twoness — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." It makes sense if you think about it: Why wouldn't our language also reflect that bifurcated vision?

WITTGENSTEIN'S LABYRINTH

The new spelling has continued to loosen the inhibitions of non-blacks, who apparently feel free to write or utter the N word in the

name of comedy or camaraderie, even though their approaches are more likely to produce confusion. The ever-watchful Davey D has reported receiving “letters from white kids who tried to explain that they only use the word when they rap.”

Ongoing attempts to tinker with the N word will undoubtedly yield new and unpredictable consequences, the very thought of which brings to mind Wittgenstein’s labyrinth. Wittgenstein described language as a maze: “You approach from one side and know your way about: you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about.” If we follow the N word into the labyrinth, where will it lead?

It may point the way to outlandish conceits: the convicted white traitor John Walker Lindh, for example, who as a teen was fond of posing on the Internet as an African American. “It [the N word] has, for hundreds of years been a label put on us by Caucasians,” he once posted, “and because of the weight it carries with it, I never use it myself.” It may lead to movies like Larry Clark’s *Kids*, a 1995 film in which white and Latino adolescents sling “nigger” among themselves with a breezy lack of concern and nary a nod to the possibility of offense.

Or it could lead to the humor Web site Onion.com, which has parodied hip-hop cosmology in an article headlined “God Finally Gives Shout-Out Back to All His Niggaz: “Right about now, I want to send a shout-out to each and every nigga who’s shown Me love through the years,” said the Lord, His booming voice descending from Heaven.” Later God is quoted giving a ghetto-fabulous blessing: “All y’all niggaz, y’all be My niggaz.”

It can lead to approval. For Dave Chappelle, non-black usage of the N word is just another convincing demonstration of the dominance of black culture. “I love the irony of it,” he said. “Every time I hear one white kid call another white kid ‘nigger,’ it makes me smile. And I think that it might be one of the best things that’s happened to race relations in quite a long time.” As much as I admire Chappelle, I can’t help wondering if, say, an Asian-American man would be similarly encouraged by the sight of one black kid

calling another black kid a “gook” or a “jap.” Would he see the exchange as a sign of racial progress?

It can lead to vigilance. Raye Richardson, a bookstore owner in the Bay Area, told *Savoy* magazine: “I don’t give white people the right to use the word until they clean up the conditions they made that attempted to relegate me to a nonhuman status. I believe racial equality will make the word powerless. At that time, yes, but until that time, don’t even say it. You have not earned the right.”

It can lead to indignation. A'Lelia Bundles, an African American reviewing Edward Ball’s *Sweet Hell Inside* for the *New York Times*, took issue with the white author’s alleged fascination with the term “nigger rich.” She explained that it is “used ironically among some middle-class African-Americans to describe their affluence relative to truly wealthy whites and much poorer whites and blacks.” But, she wrote, “one wishes he had provided more context in his explanation of the phrase and employed more editorial sensitivity by not using it as a section title.”

It can lead to shock, as it did for David Sylvester, an African American from Philadelphia. Bicycling across Africa in 2004 to raise money for a memorial scholarship fund, he encountered a hip-hop clothing store in Lilongwe, Malawi, called Niggers. When he asked the two black male proprietors about the name, they responded to his American accent. One of them thumped his chest proudly, Sylvester recalled, and said, “P-Diddy New York City! We are the niggers!”

Deeply disturbed by the incident, Sylvester wrote an essay about it and sent it to thirty-five friends on the Internet. They passed it along to others, and Sylvester soon received 600 responses from all over the globe. “I rode over 12,000 miles on two continents through 15 states and 13 countries and broke two bikes in the process to get to a store in Africa called Niggers,” Sylvester lamented in his essay. He went on to blame himself and other African Americans who have casually allowed the N word to enter everyday discourse. “I was wrong. We are wrong,” he contended. “There is no justification for an infraction of this magnitude. The word and the sentiment

behind it are flat out wrong. We have demigrated and degraded ourselves to the point that our backwards mindset has spread like a cancer and infected our source, our brothers, our sisters, our Mother Land."

It can lead to unexpected encounters. Writing in the November 1999 issue of the *Idaho Observer*, an antifederalist paper, the white editorial writer Hari Heath presented a bold proclamation. "Times have changed and we need a new definition for nigger," he declared. "It ain't about black and white any more. . . . 'Nigger,' under a new definition for our current times, is any one who files a 1040 form."

It can also lead right back to the ugliness we started with. The tenuous present met the irresistible past in Heath, who couldn't conclude his column without inserting a bit of racist badinage: "We is all niggers now. Dat's right, whitey, yo got chains an shackles keeping yo down, an yo is such a fool dey got you thinking it's jewelry!"

To exhibit any flexibility about the slur is to risk getting lost and frustrated, which is probably why members of the N word Eradication Movement have adopted a zero-tolerance platform. Rather than wander through the blind alleys and hairpin turns of the labyrinth, they'd prefer to step outside its boundaries and blow the whole thing up. The movement's call for total elimination seems perilously narrow to me. It doesn't include an explanation of how our artists and scholars can tell our story — the American story — without the N word. Should the work of artists such as Stevie Wonder, Faith Ringgold, and yes, N.W.A. — all of whom have skillfully used the epithet — be summarily dismissed because they failed to meet such strict criteria or would they be grandfathered in?

To most observers, those who oppose any use of the N word are wasting time and energy on a quixotic campaign that distracts us from other issues that could benefit from organized activism. George Orwell would disagree. In "Politics and the English Language," he wrote that "the decadence of our language is probably curable. Those who deny this would argue, if they produced an ar-

gument at all, that language merely reflects existing social conditions, and that we cannot influence its development by any direct tinkering with words and constructions. So far as the general tone or spirit of a language goes, this may be true, but it is not true in detail. *Silly words and expressions have often disappeared, not through any evolutionary process but owing to the conscious action of a minority*" (emphasis mine).

His point is well taken, but the conscious action to which he alludes would require something close to unanimity among blacks, a seemingly insurmountable obstacle given the dramatic diversity of black reactions to the N word. I cannot imagine, for instance, Jay-Z and DMX joining an effort to rid the world of "nigger" or "nigga." But I will never say never because I'm aware that any forecast made while navigating the American racial landscape is a foolhardy exercise. The ground has been known to shift without warning, forming fissures capable of opening up and swallowing boulders whole. When the dust clears, fertile vistas are sometimes revealed where rocky, unyielding terrain had once stretched toward the horizon. For example, twenty years ago, could anyone have predicted that the earth would move enough to enable the stern visage of Malcolm X — once the most reviled black man in America — to stare back at us from a postage stamp?

PRIVATE SPEECH, PUBLIC SPEECH

"Language is also a place of struggle," bell hooks reminds us. Ultimately, struggles involving the N word and other forms of toxic language become intensely personal conflicts, waged and decided within our individual selves. Alone with our thoughts, impulses, and emotions, we are at liberty to weigh the arguments and make a choice at a protective remove from the clamor and heat of Orwellian crusades. The primacy of individual choice and the esteem with which we Americans regard freedom of expression complicates our attitudes toward the N word. Like most of us, I embrace the sanc-

tivity of personal space. The thought of language police (or any other kind of police) patrolling our kitchens, bedrooms, and parlors for evidence of rude chatter chills me to my marrow. No speech is improper under one's own roof.

My concern is with the public square, where I believe the N word and other profane expressions have no rightful place. Out in public is where we depend on polite speech, in the words of the linguist Edward Sapir, to "act as a socializing and unifying force." In a public space, say on a subway train, I should not expect my fellow commuters' tacit permission to assault their ears with "nigger"-laden speech any more than I should expect their acceptance of my shouting into a cell phone or scrawling obscenities on the windows and seats. But my obligations to others regarding civility and decency end at my doorstep, where I'm free to enter and sing along with my Ja Rule CDs as exuberantly as I please. Conversely, if you are white, whether you refer to me as a "nigger" when you're at home is of little consequence to me. Unlike blacks who wonder how commonly the term is used among white people when there are no black people around, or Mos Def, whose song "Mr. Nigga" voices the suspicion that whites who refrain from public utterances of the N word will "say it out loud again / When they deal with their close associates and friends," I'm willing to acknowledge a distinction between private speech and public behavior.

Abraham Lincoln reportedly was fond of telling "nigger" jokes in private. In public he issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Audiotapes confirm that Lyndon Johnson frequently spoke of "niggers" in private conversations. In public he presided over civil rights legislation that helped transform the daily lives of black Americans. Talking privately with Alex Haley, Malcolm X expressed his disgust with his former associates by denouncing them as "niggers." In public he demonstrated by example the importance of blacks conducting themselves with courage and dignity. "A man may have as bad a heart as he chooses," said Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., "if his conduct is within the rules." It seems to me that the same reasoning should apply to language.

REMEMBERING

As we have noted, most whites now adhere to post-civil rights notions of public decorum, while increasing numbers of blacks — especially younger ones — go about blissfully heedless of them. Their fondness for calling one another "nigger" (ostensibly in the spirit of friendship or defiance) marks what Ralph Ellison would call "an odd swing of the cultural tide." One of the most curious paradoxes of the past few decades is the phenomenon of blacks, only recently allowed to romp freely in a language that has often betrayed them, dallying with that language in a way that threatens the legacy of all those whose words and deeds challenged the national narrative — those whose efforts, as I suggested earlier, wrote black Americans into existence.

I suppose there's nothing wrong with attempting, however erratically, to transform a word that has so long demeaned us. What's more troubling is the lack of imagination such attempts seem to suggest. Our slave ancestors made the most of limited means when they prepared meals from pork entrails deemed inedible by the whites they served; now, in the twenty-first century, to subsist on our former masters' cast-off language — even in the name of revising it — strikes me as the opposite of resourcefulness. Our modern vocabularies, unlike the empty larders of slaves, are well stocked.

Some have argued in defense of the N word that the gratuitous use of it may be ill-considered and inappropriate, but it is not illegal and therefore should be tolerated as one would a boor who repeats the same tiresome anecdote at every cocktail party he attends. This reasoning may work for some. But for me, even more significant than the law and the freedoms it guarantees is the purposeful example of my forebears. It is on their instructive standard that I attempt to model my own conduct, in and out of doors.

When Lemuel Haynes composed "Liberty Further Extended" in 1776, he wrote: "I think it not hyperbolic to affirm, that even an African, has Equally as good a right to his Liberty in common

with Englishmen." He made no mention of "niggers." When David Walker published his remarkable *Appeal* in 1829, he addressed it to "my dearly beloved Brethren and Fellow Citizens." He did not mention "niggers." When W.E.B. Du Bois published his landmark collection of essays in 1903, he called it *The Souls of Black Folk* — not "niggers." When Marcus Garvey formed his organization in 1916, he called it the Universal Negro Improvement Association. He made no mention of "niggers." In his speech at the March on Washington in 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. said, "America has given the Negro people a bad check"; he did not say America has given "niggers" a bad check. A year later, Malcolm X began his "Ballot or the Bullet" speech with a greeting to "Brothers and Sisters and Friends," not "niggers" and friends. In her 1971 lecture at Tougaloo College, Fannie Lou Hamer urged, "Stand up, black men, this nation needs you." She did not say "Stand up, niggers."

"Africans." "Negroes." "Black men." "Brothers." "Sisters." "Fellow Citizens." Each falls off the tongue with ease. None is hard to pronounce.

If the epic struggle of blacks in the United States — a quest that the national narrative of white supremacy has often tried to distort — teaches me anything, it is that there is no god higher than history. To ignore its commandments seems not only blasphemous but also counterproductive.

DREAMING WORLDS

"Negro, Seen in Dream, Causes Death of Girl." So screamed a headline in the *Atlanta Constitution* during the hysterical September of 1906. I repeat it here to illustrate the space that the stereotypical monstrous black male has often occupied in the collective white American imagination. The easy credibility of Caucasian killers such as Charles Stuart, a Bostonian who in 1989 murdered his pregnant wife and blamed it on a mythical black man, and Susan Smith, who in 1994 attributed the drowning deaths of her children to

a nonexistent black carjacker, demonstrates the extent to which imaginary black marauders still stalk the dark alleys of the Caucasian mind. By no means do they wander there alone: they keep strange company with the legion of counterimages that have recently jostled into view of newscasters and CEOs, of college presidents and secretaries of state — but few if any of those latecomers has yet shown the power to provoke equally strong, durable, and dramatic responses.

Because we are a vastly outnumbered minority, our image as African Americans will always be to some extent determined by the majority's capacity and willingness to evolve beyond its hallucinatory and crippling prejudices. Even so, it is the African-American imagination that concerns me most. What of our capacity to imagine? I for one can still visualize the "nigger," and perhaps because I'm a man, I usually see him as a man, odious and shiftless, violent and stupid, contemptuous of black women and obsessed with white ones — a self-hating, devilish phantom whose footsteps can still be heard as we tread through the tentative early years of the twenty-first century. Like the "nigger" in that dead girl's dream, he continues to haunt my sleep.

"The American image of the Negro lives also in the Negro's heart," James Baldwin observed, "and when he has surrendered to this image life has no other possible reality." While I don't share Baldwin's extreme pessimism, I'm drawn to his evocation of "surrender." As we have seen, "nigger" rightly belongs to the realms of art, scholarship, journalism, and history, none of which can be effectively pursued without critically engaging the word. For us ordinary folk, however, mindlessly uttering the epithet may very well be a form of giving in. As long as we embrace the derogatory language that has long accompanied and abetted our systematic dehumanization, we shackle ourselves to those corrupt white delusions — and their attendant false story of our struggle in the United States. Throwing off those shackles would at least free us to stake a claim to an independent imagination.

"To imagine a language is to imagine a way of life," Wittgenstein wrote.

"I dream a world," wrote Langston Hughes. I entertain similar visions in which the language we use helps us determine a new and invigorating reality. I imagine a way of life derived from our purest, wisest, fiercely loving selves. I dream of a world where "nigger" no longer roams, confined instead to the fetid white fantasy land where he was born.

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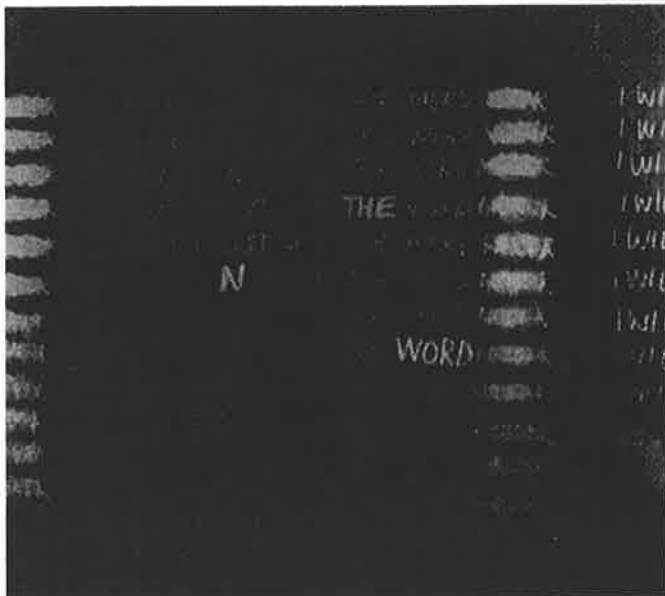
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A tough lesson about the N-word

Should a Chicago Public Schools teacher have used "nigger" in a sixth-grade class?

By Steve Bogira @stevebogira



PAUL JOHN HIGGINS

Lincoln Brown wasn't thrilled with his given name when he was small. "Stinkin' Lincoln," kids would call him. "I wanted to have a normal name like my brothers," he said. (They're named Christopher, Peter, and Jonathan.) But by the time he was in high school, "I liked the way people would react. I had done a lot more reading and learned about the civil rights movement, and I was a fanatic about Civil War history. People would ask me, 'Like the president?' 'Yeah, like the president.'"

In the 1960s, Brown's father, Bernard Brown, assisted a black community group that was working on employment issues on the near-west side. He also was arrested once during a protest downtown against Chicago school segregation. "My dad thought Abraham Lincoln was one of those people who redefined the country, and he was proud to name me after him," Lincoln Brown said. The elder Brown was an esteemed Hyde Park resident—he was dean of Rockefeller Memorial Chapel on the University of Chicago campus from 1979 through 1995.

For those and other reasons, Lincoln Brown seems an unlikely person to use verbally abusive language in a class of sixth graders, almost all of them African-American. But

that's what principal Greg Mason said he did on an October morning in 2011, in room 216 of Hyde Park's Murray Language Academy, where Brown is a teacher. (Brown is white, and Mason is black.)

Brown's alleged offense was using the word "nigger" in class.

Brown, who was suspended without pay for five days, sued the Chicago Board of Education as well as Mason, contending his First Amendment right of free speech was violated. It's a modern version of *Brown v. Board*—with semantics, rather than segregation, at the core of a dispute about race in the classroom.

"*Nigger* is and has long been the most socially consequential racial insult," Harvard law professor Randall Kennedy, who's African-American, wrote in his 2002 book, *Nigger*. Kennedy searched court cases in the LexisNexis database as of 2001 and found "kike" in 84 cases, "wetback" in 50, "gook" in 90, "honky" in 286—and "nigger" in 4,219.

While it's still used contemptuously, "nigger" isn't always negative, Kennedy observed. When African-Americans are speaking to each other, "nigger," and especially its more genial cousin, "nigga," can be an affectionate greeting, a compliment, or a term of respect, he wrote. "The black comedians and rappers who use and enjoy *nigger* . . . eschew boring conventions, including the one that maintains, despite massive evidence to the contrary, that *nigger* can mean only one thing," Kennedy wrote.

Or, as the rapper Mos Def told *Blaze* magazine in 1999: "When we call each other 'nigga,' we take a word that has been historically used by whites to degrade and oppress us, a word that has so many negative connotations, and turn it into something beautiful, something we can call our own. I know it sounds cliché, but it truly becomes a 'term of endearment.'"

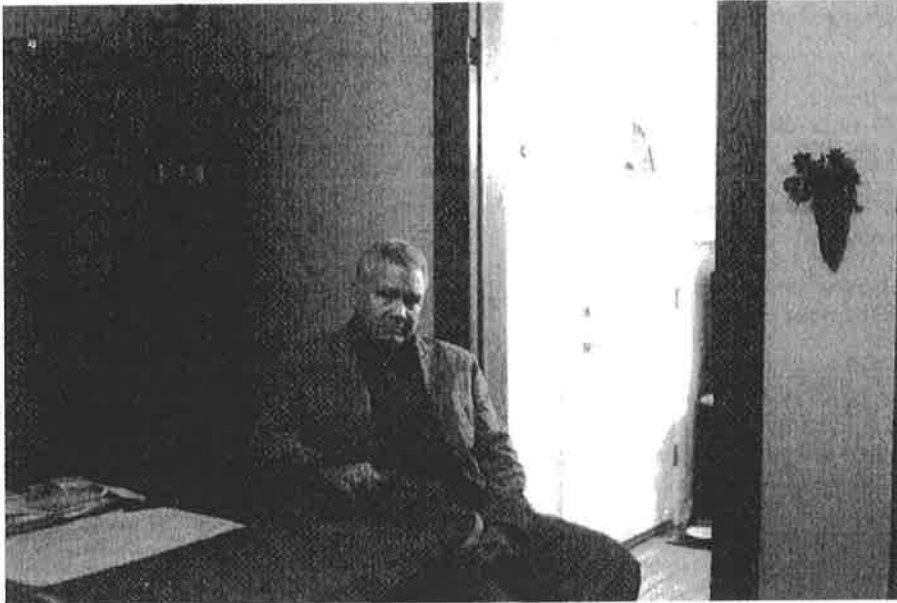
Although in gangsta rap, not always. Consider Rick Ross, in "Hold Me Back": "Niggas ain't gettin' money, but they got an opinion. . . . Niggas watch who you fuckin' just to hate on your bitches. . . . They all pussy-ass niggas, pussy-ass niggas."

Brown wasn't stressing the word's softer side to his sixth graders in room 216 that day. Quite the opposite, he told me. And as his lesson's aftermath would show, a spontaneous examination of the use of "nigger" can have complications that go beyond the word itself.

Brown is still teaching at Murray, and Mason is still the principal. Mason didn't return my calls for this story. Chicago Public Schools officials also wouldn't comment. "It would be inappropriate for us to discuss ongoing litigation," spokesperson Robyn Ziegler said.

Brown, who will turn 50 in March, has been a teacher for 21 years, all of them in predominantly African-American grade schools on the south side. He's taught science, social studies, history, and writing. He's blue-eyed and pink-complected, and has a fleshy face and dimpled chin. He was dressed in workout clothes the two times we talked in person. He has a nervous demeanor, but speaks with utter certainty about himself, and is not inclined toward understatement. He seemed weary and embattled. "I'm just someone who wants to do my job the best I can possibly do it, and not be afraid to be who I am with my students."

Mason has been friendly to him since he sued, Brown said—which only makes Brown more uncomfortable. "Obviously, his handlers are telling him not to do anything stupid and antagonize me in any way. He still calls me by my first name, which is terribly annoying because I believe he's lost that privilege. I mean, he accused me of some pretty horrific things. He slaps me on the shoulder like nothing's wrong, and he commends me for the work I'm doing. I say, 'Thank you, Mr. Mason,' 'Yes, Mr. Mason.' It's extremely painful."



Murray Language Academy teacher Lincoln Brown: "I'm just someone who wants to do my job the best I can possibly do it."

JEFFREY MARINI

"There is nothing necessarily wrong with a white person saying 'nigger,' just as there is nothing necessarily wrong with a black person saying it," Kennedy wrote in his book. "What should matter is the context in which the word is spoken—the speaker's aims, effects, alternatives. To condemn whites who use the N-word without regard to context is simply to make a fetish of *nigger*."

To know a person's aims, it may help to know his history.

Brown went to public schools—Ray Elementary in Hyde Park, then Kenwood Academy. Both schools were predominantly black. The families of most of his white friends either moved out of the neighborhood before his friends reached high school age, or their kids went to private schools.

Whites and blacks were largely segregated at Kenwood. Brown was in accelerated classes, whose students were mostly white. In the cafeteria, the white kids sat at the front "and then there was this expanse of empty tables, and then going around the corner it was all the other students." White kids didn't go to the school dances.

Brown said he nonetheless had many African-American friends at Kenwood, including a girlfriend. "I think it was more difficult for African-Americans who were friends with us—they were called whitey and things like that."

He tried to play basketball his freshman year, but he was the only white player and got beat up a couple of times by teammates in the locker room. "I decided not to play because the coaches weren't really supporting me the way they should, and my parents were worried about it." He did play baseball, and that was a better experience. He and two teammates were the only three whites in the league Kenwood played in, he said. "We'd go to some really bad neighborhoods, and a lot of the African-Americans on our team would kind of huddle around us to make sure nothing happened to us."

He got his undergraduate degree in child psychology at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, then spent several years pursuing a master's in journalism at the University of Minnesota. But he was having trouble finishing, and before he did his mother told him about a "Teach for Chicago" program that would allow him to work while studying toward a master's in education at Loyola University. "I was kind of floundering, and I wanted some structure in my life, so I decided to do that," he told me.

He was accepted into the program, and in 1992, after one summer at Loyola, he and his classmates were dispatched to schools near the Robert Taylor Homes housing project on the south side. Brown was assigned to teach fifth- and sixth-grade classes at Farren Elementary, at 51st and State. The kids were black and poor, and many had drug-addicted parents.

"The first day I met the students, a kid about my size, even bigger, said he wasn't

gonna be taught by no white boy," Brown recalled. "So I grabbed him by his collar and just chewed him out, and told him if he ever called me a white boy again I'd knock his teeth out.

"If I hadn't done that then I probably wouldn't have been as successful," he said. "I had to show them that I was gonna stand up for myself—that I wasn't gonna say, 'Oh, well, I'm white, let's sit down and talk about racial inequality.'"

He said he was only bluffing about hitting the boy. "I saw so much abuse of kids at that school—and I reported it. I would never hurt or hit anyone."

Brown said the boy became a loyal student. "I had him for three years. He said, 'You be like a reverse Oreo cookie—black on the inside, white on the outside.'" Brown considered that the ultimate compliment.

"I got really attached to the kids there," he said. "I always talked to them like equals. It was incredibly important that I establish structure. The only thing some of these kids had was school." Among his colleagues in the teaching program, "I was the only one who stayed—everyone else quit."

After four years at Farren, he was ready to move on. He taught at three other south-side grade schools between 1995 and 2004. His displeasure with principals was often a factor in his decision to leave a school.

When Brown was teaching eighth grade at Bret Harte in Hyde Park in 2003, he began using curriculum material offered by the Southern Poverty Law Center's *Teaching Tolerance* magazine to help his students learn about the civil rights movement and the Holocaust. In a letter published in the magazine, Brown said the material had "enhanced my students' understanding of their own African American roots." He added that he'd always encouraged his students "to delve into the important issues of our society."

In 2004, the woman who then was principal at Murray called him and offered him a job. He'd applied to the school a year earlier. "It was my dream job, because it was a magnet school and it was multiracial with high expectations for students."

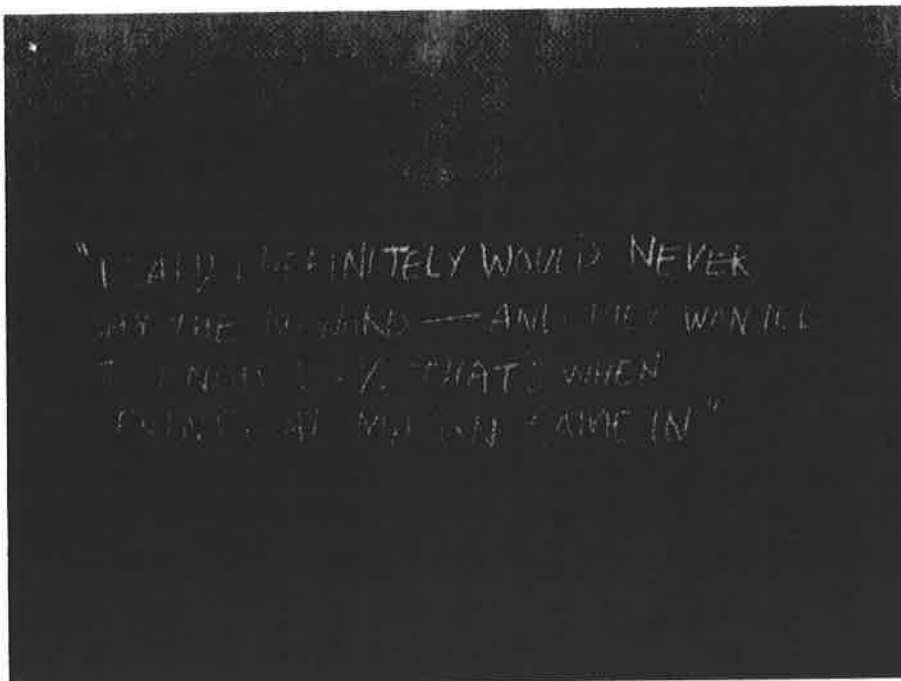
The principal who hired Brown at Murray soon quit. Her replacement was a principal Brown had worked for before and liked. But in 2008, he retired and was replaced by Mason, who'd been an assistant principal at a south-side elementary school.

Brown told me he got along with Mason at first, "but I was seeing things that were very disturbing." One of his colleagues, a teacher Brown respected, got suspended twice by Mason. "I'd never even heard of such suspensions before, and I've taught in some of the worst schools." (The teacher Brown's talking about, who's still at Murray, confirmed being suspended twice by the principal, but declined to comment further.)

Then early in 2011, Brown himself was suspended. He said he'd come upon a sixth-grade student in the hallway who was wearing a full-size backpack. Brown said he thought this was still against CPS rules, as it once was. He said he'd warned the student repeatedly not to wear the backpack. In the hallway, he told the boy to hand it to him. Brown unzipped it, intending to remove its contents and take away the backpack. Books spilled to the floor. Brown pulled out a couple other items, the last of which was a pair of boxer shorts. The student grabbed the shorts from Brown, stuffed them in his pocket, and ran off.

The boy had been in counseling and had previously been hospitalized, but Brown said he was in the dark about most of that. The student was out of school for a time after the incident, and one of his parents complained that Brown had caused him emotional trauma. Mason told Brown that a ban on backpacks was up to a school's principal, and he had no such rule.

Mason charged Brown with "cruel, immoral, negligent, or criminal conduct or communication to a student, that causes psychological or physical harm." Brown fought the charge at first, but ultimately agreed to accept a one-day suspension without pay. He said he did so because "I just needed closure," and because Mason assured him the suspension "would remain in Murray's file, never to be seen by anyone else."



The episode that led to Brown's second suspension took place six months after his first one—on October 4, 2011.

Brown was preparing to teach a grammar lesson to sixth graders that morning in room 216. He heard a commotion in the hallway before the students entered the room, he told me. He went out to the hall and saw two girls yelling at each other. Other students were gathered around them, and some of the boys were laughing.

He thought he could handle the situation better inside the classroom, and so he got everyone into 216. He saw one of the two girls passing a note, and he took it from her. It was a rap of about ten lines. Brown told me he wanted to ease the tension in the room and distract the girls to avert a fight—so he started reading the rap in a singsong voice. The students "were cracking up, seeing this old white dude doing this," he said.

But then he noticed that the other girl wasn't cracking up—she was crying. Another girl in the classroom told Brown that the rap was aimed at the girl who was crying. "And so I went to her and apologized profusely," Brown told me. He asked her if she wanted to go talk with the assistant principal about the matter, but she said she didn't want to miss class. The girl from whom he'd confiscated the note admitted writing it, but said the crying girl had first written a rap ridiculing *her*.

Some of the boys in the room were begging him to finish the rap, he said. But by then he'd seen what else was in it. "It had 'bitch' and 'fuck,' and it had the word 'nigger' in it two or three times," Brown told me. He recalled that he tore up the note in front of the class. "I said, 'I'm not reading any more because it's really hurtful, and secondly, it has some words in it that I just find disgusting.' They of course wanted to know what they were, and I said I refuse to say anything derogatory towards females or towards anyone's race. I said I definitely would never say the N-word—and they wanted to know why.

"That's when Mason came in. He has this habit of just walking in and sitting down. I never thought that I should not continue this, because the kids were very much interested. And I said the word—I said 'nigger.'"

As he said the word to me, Brown looked like he'd just tasted something spoiled. He told me he wanted his students to hear the word from someone they respected, because he thought it'd make them consider their own use of it. He said he told the students it was one of the hardest words for him to say—that it made him sick to his stomach. He told me he used it in the discussion only that once, and used "N-word" the rest of the time.

"And I said, 'It doesn't sound right coming from my mouth, does it?' And they all said, 'No, it doesn't.'" Brown told the students he heard them using the word often on the playground, and asked them why it was OK for *them* to say it. "One of them said, 'It's

part of our culture,' and I said, 'Then why don't your parents like it?' 'It's not *their* culture.'

"I was telling them, 'People are stereotyping you because of the types of words that you use. And also it hurts because your parents went through hell being called that regularly.' I started talking about the history of the word and how prevalent racial stereotyping is."

Brown told me that the two girls who'd been on the verge of fighting were deeply involved in the discussion and reconciled during the class: the girl who'd written the rap apologized to the other girl, the two girls hugged, and their classmates applauded. This happened after Mason left the room, Brown said. Both girls "came up at the end of the class and thanked me."

By the end of class, Brown was elated, he said. He felt that because he hadn't sidestepped a difficult issue, his students "could trust me more, and that they were closer to me."

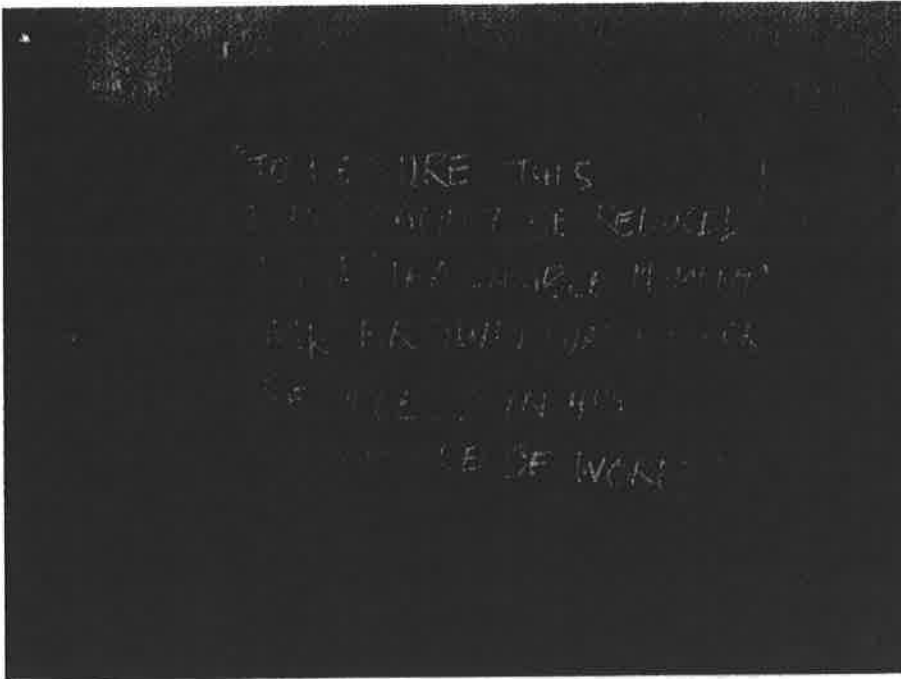
Mason's recollection of the class, however—which he committed to writing as part of the discipline process—was a bit different. He acknowledged that he wasn't present for the whole period—he came after the class started, left before it finished, and was gone for a few minutes in between when he was called to the main office.

As Mason wrote later: "The very insistent [sic] I entered the room, I heard Mr. Brown discussing with the entire class of students on the word, 'Nigger.' 'Even today, I still hear people use the word Nigger,' stated Mr. Brown. He continued the discussion by asking the class, 'can anyone explain to me why blacks can call each other a nigger, and not get mad, but when whites do it, blacks get angry.' Mr. Brown allowed three students to answer the question."

Mason also noted that the morning after the class, he'd asked some of the students what they recalled about the use of the word "nigger" in class. One of them told him that during a discussion about bullying prompted by the rap, "the teacher just brought up the word 'Nigger' out of the blue," the principal wrote.

Mason gave his written summary to Brown 13 days after the incident, in a "pre-discipline hearing" notice. Brown consulted with a lawyer and wrote his own summary that day. He wrote that after he confiscated the note, "I quickly explained to the students the inappropriate nature of the poem, reading a portion of it to demonstrate the bullying nature of some of the lines." He didn't mention the two girls reconciling in the classroom; he said that after class, he asked the two girls to talk with the assistant principal about the incident, and that later that day, one of them told him that with the assistant principal's help, they'd worked out their differences.

Brown observed in his written response to Mason's allegation that in 21 years as a CPS teacher, he'd never before been accused of using racially abusive language. He added that during his career, "there have been instances when I found it necessary to stop a lesson to deal with a situation involving the most immediate needs of my students" and that the misconduct accusation was a result of his statements in the classroom being taken out of context.



The sixth graders in the classroom that day were homeroom students of Rashida Foluke, who recently retired after 30 years of teaching, including 20 at Murray. Foluke saw her students after the class Brown taught that day. They "were not upset by the conversation that had taken place in [Brown's] classroom," she said, "so I'm assuming they felt he handled it OK. From what the kids said, he tried to explain to them that the word was inappropriate to use, and why.

"The only thing I think he could have done differently is not use the word," Foluke added. She's African-American, and thinks the word should be avoided by whites and blacks alike.

Controversies over use of the word in classrooms aren't rare. Last April, Jeff Miller, a veteran high school history teacher in Portland, was put on paid administrative leave after saying "nigger" in class. A student in the class told the *Oregonian* that Miller used the word while impersonating a racist white southerner during a lesson on race relations. The student said Miller was an "inspiring" teacher and "a breath of fresh air," and other students later rallied in Miller's support. (He's since returned to teaching at the school.)

In April 2011, a teaching assistant at the University of Connecticut used the word in an anthropology class on racism while discussing how a slur stereotypes and demeans. A student filed a complaint against him, but an administrator sided with the TA.

Also in 2011, an Alabama publisher, NewSouth Books, replaced "nigger" with "slave" in a new edition of *Huckleberry Finn*. The book, published in 1885, has "nigger" in it 219 times, and has been banned by some school districts. NewSouth argued that substituting for the word would allow more school districts to teach the classic, but the publisher was besieged by critical e-mails when it announced its plan.

In 2008, Neil Lester, dean of humanities at Arizona State University, began teaching a class—described as the first of its kind—devoted to exploring the word "nigger." Lester's aim is "to have some critical and historical discussions about it and not pretend that it doesn't exist," he told the Southern Poverty Law Center's *Teaching Tolerance* magazine in the fall of 2011. Lester, who's African-American, also talked in the article about how an elementary school teacher might teach the word. Brown, who reads *Teaching Tolerance* regularly because of his use of its curriculum materials, told me he read the Lester interview a few days before the episode in room 216.

Brown said he didn't get any complaints from parents after the class or hear anything negative about it from students. He said he didn't think Mason had had a problem with anything that happened in the classroom, since he never interrupted. Brown told me he assumed "that what I was doing was something he was very interested in, and for the right reason."

But when Mason called Brown to his office on October 17, 2011, he accused Brown of using "verbally abusive language" in front of students, and of "cruel, immoral, negligent, or criminal conduct or communication to a student, that causes psychological or physical harm."

The principal conducted a hearing in his office eight days later. Brown attended with a lawyer. In the hearing, Mason asked Brown how the discussion on the day in question was connected to the grammar lesson. Brown said it wasn't—that he sometimes changed his lessons and felt he'd had a "teachable moment" that day.

"How long would you say a teachable moment lasts?" Mason asked.

"As long as it takes," Brown said.

On November 10, Mason rendered his written decision. He noted at the outset that he'd use "the 'N-word', or 'N-----' in replace [sic] of 'nigger'" throughout the rest of the document "because of the derogatory connotation of, and controversial associated with of [sic] the word."

He said use of the word "at its worse [sic] can incite individuals to act violently toward the initiator, and at its best, cause individuals to engage in debate with no clear resolve."

The principal went on: "A topic like this, and especially to 11 year old students, require [sic] careful thought, connection to the structured standards-based curriculum, parent notification—perhaps, consent, and a monitor to bear witness to the discussion. Even with all this in place, are the benefits of the discussion worth the risk of offering [sic] one or more students, thus perpetuating the hurt already felt by many in this country?"

Mason added: "To be sure, this topic cannot be reduced to a 'teachable moment.' Mr. Brown was rather reckless in his choice of words." He suspended the teacher without pay for five days.

Brown appealed Mason's decision, and that December he had a hearing in a CPS office downtown. According to the hearing officer's summary, Mason said Brown had engaged in "inappropriate discussions" with his students that included the word "nigger," and that there hadn't been a "contextual relationship" between the discussions and what Brown should have been teaching.

Brown's lawyer, Terence Flynn, argued that the board had no written policy prohibiting use of the word "nigger." He also said Mason hadn't understood the context: Brown had led a discussion about bullying, a discussion prompted by a note from a student in which the word had been used.

To Brown's dismay, the hearing officer noted that Brown had been suspended the previous April.

In February 2012, Brown received the CPS decision: "The evidence proved that you engaged in inappropriate discussions with sixth grade students during instructional time." The five-day suspension was upheld.

After Brown filed his suit in federal court last February, there was a flurry of stories about the episode at Murray. Commentators were divided on the propriety of Brown's actions and Mason's response. On its editorial page, the *Sun-Times* said: "Every indication is that the teacher, Lincoln Brown, was unfairly suspended . . . for being the best kind of teacher—the kind who dares to teach the hardest stuff." But *Sun-Times* columnist Mary Mitchell, who's African-American, thought Brown had "overstepped his boundaries. . . . Most black people are offended when white people say n----- and it really doesn't matter that Brown was trying to make a point."

Brown's lawsuit contends he was punished for "attempting to teach tolerance and civility to his students" which "apparently is not tolerated by Defendant School Board and its agents." It also asserts that Brown was deprived of due process because of the "vague" policies he allegedly broke. The suit seeks statutory, compensatory, punitive, and exemplary damages.

The board has asked Judge Edmond Chang to dismiss the case, claiming that Brown doesn't have a First Amendment right to use the word "nigger" in a sixth-grade classroom. The board's lawyers say there was no due-process violation—the prohibition against verbally abusive language is clear and understandable, and Brown was given a

chance to make his case before he served his suspension. The board's lawyers also point to case law that holds that a due-process violation by a governmental body must "shock the conscience," which they say a five-day suspension doesn't do.

The motion to dismiss the suit is pending. The parties are due back in court on Monday.

The incident in classroom 216 could be viewed as a conflict between two people as much as it is a conflict about one word. But at its core, Brown asserted, it's about teachers being allowed to take on challenging subjects when they arise.

"When you're trying to teach something very important, and you feel you have command of your audience, and you feel comfortable in your own skin, those are some of the most important moments of being an educator," he said. "I think that teaching is the most difficult job, and it doesn't have to be. You're expected to do so much, but you're not treated with the respect you should be treated with.

"I would like a jury or judge to concur that how I was treated was unfair, unreasonable, was bullying, and unjust," he said. "And also, I would like to have the opinion of the legal community that there's merit to having these kinds of conversations in schools, because no one's having them anywhere else."

Jena Cutie helped research this story.

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N-word has no place in society

By Leonard Pitts, Jr. (lpitts@miamiherald.com)

Published in the Miami Herald on October 8, 2008



Dear Chris Rock:

I apologize in advance for the language that will shortly follow. And yes, there is a certain irony there, given that you are one of the most profane men on the planet.

Also one of the funniest. That's why I eagerly anticipated your new HBO special, *Kill The Messenger*, which premiered a few days ago, even though I knew there would inevitably come a moment that made me embarrassed for you.

And sure enough, it came. During your routine, you noted how, last year, the NAACP held a symbolic "burial" of the N-word. "Well," you said, through that evil Cheshire cat grin of yours, "tonight is Easter." There followed a long and sometimes labored deconstruction of when, according to you, the word is permissible, all in illustration of your thesis that it is "context" that determines whether or not a word is offensive.

I was reminded of a quote that appears in the afterward of *The Slaves' War* by Andrew Ward, about the Civil War as seen through the eyes of black women and men. The speaker is an old woman, an escaped slave who had been reprimanded by a missionary for calling her fellow slaves "niggers."

She replied, "We are niggers. We always was niggers and we always shall be. Nigger here, and nigger there. Nigger do this and nigger do that. We've got no souls. We's animals. We's black and so is the Evil One."

The Bible doesn't say the devil is black, protested the missionary.

"Well," the old woman said, "white folks say so and we's bound to believe them, 'cause we's nothing but animals and niggers. Yes, we's niggers! Niggers! Niggers!"

Chris, this column runs in upwards of 200 papers, and I won't be surprised if some editors regard the above as too raw for print, if they seek to soften it by replacing the offending letters with dashes. But if I had my druthers, it would run dash free in large red type and be required reading for every black person in America. You will seldom read more vivid evidence of the psychological maiming to which white people subjected black ones in this country and of the profound self-loathing that infected us as a result.

Dehumanizing language

You find that loathing in the preference some of us still profess for light skin and lank -- or so-called "good" -- hair, in the belief some of us still hold that to be intellectually excellent and speak standard English is to "act white," in the conviction some of us still harbor that only a white professional truly knows what he or she is doing. And you see it, too, in the addiction some of us still suffer to the soul-killing language of our oppressors.

White people -- the majority of them at least -- understand how grotesque and dehumanizing that language is. Meanwhile, black folks run around making lame excuses and lamer justifications. I mean really, Chris, "context"? Negro, please.

I was, as I'm sure you were, a big fan of Richard Pryor. But I never admired him more than when he renounced his use of that word. Pryor understood, I think, that his art was a social construct and as such, carried social responsibilities. He acknowledged, in other words, a need to be intentional in, and accountable for, the things he said.

Compare that to Kanye West, who told Time magazine three years ago that he doesn't like the N-word and has tried substitutes but can't find anything with the same "impact." Or, compare it to you, smart, canny observer of human foibles, universally recognized as one of the most talented men in show business, yet still addicted to the same self-delimiting language a slave woman once used.

I'm not mad at her. She was just days removed from a system that had spent a lifetime teaching her, in every interaction of every day of every year, that she was a soulless thing little different from hogs and dogs. But Chris, that was 150 years ago.

What's your excuse?

Post-Reading Questions

1. Why is Leonard Pitts', Jr. angry with Chris Rock's use of the n-word? What "excuse" does Chris Rock give for using the n-word? Is his disagreement with Chris Rock's use of the word generational? In other words, is the divide in the African American community one of the younger generation not understanding the older generation and vice versa? Or is the divide something that goes deeper beyond age?
2. Can the n-word be redefined? Can African Americans like Chris Rock *successfully* redefine the n-word to mean something different even cool or will it always be too controversial? Why or why not?
3. To what extent would Pitts, Jr. support or reject the censorship of the n-word in *Huck Finn*? Explain your answer with support from the text.

A WORD'S MEANING CAN OFTEN DEPEND ON WHO SAYS IT

Gloria Naylor

Gloria Naylor was born in 1950 in New York City. When Martin Luther King was assassinated, Naylor became determined to make the world a better place, and she worked as a missionary for Jehovah's Witnesses for seven years before deciding to pursue her writing interests. She graduated from Brooklyn College of the City University of New York in 1981 and then earned her M.A. in Afro-American Studies at Yale University in 1983. She has written four novels about black experience, especially the black female experience: The Women of Brewster Place (1982), Linden Hills (1985), Mama Day (1988), and Bailey's Cafe (1992). She calls them her "novel quartet," and they explore the emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and sexual aspects of human experience, respectively.

In an interview Naylor once commented on her experiences as a child in the 1960s: "They [her parents] were trying to protect us from pain. . . . They never talked much about the racial problems that were going on in America. . . . I would hear it at school and see it on television, but we never got that sort of talk in our home." Unfortunately, the protection can only work so long: "Eventually you are going to get hurt. So it is a matter of trying to ward off the moment when that would happen." "A Word's Meaning Can Often Depend on Who Says It," first published in the "Hers" column in The New York Times, recounts the moment that the hurt first occurred for Naylor.

BEFORE READING

Connecting: Have you ever been called a "name," a derogatory label that signaled someone's prejudice toward you? How did that act make you feel?

Anticipating: Why do people call others "names"? What are the implications of labeling people in such ways?

1 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 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 connotation 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 impor-

tant 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.

Past-Reading Questions

Please answer these questions on binder paper.

1. How does Naylor’s family use of the n-word differ from the way in which the third grader uses the word towards Naylor? Why are these uses different?
2. To what extent do you agree with Naylor’s argument that the black community can transform the n-word “to signify the varied and complex human beings they knew themselves to be”? Why? Explain your reasoning.
3. To what extent would Naylor support or reject the censorship of the n-word in *Fuck Finn*? Support your response with evidence from the text.

Name _____



**David Banner, Hip
Hop Artist**

“David Banner joins the fight over the N-word”

By Miki Turner

Published on MSNBC.com on 27 August 2007



Miki Turner, Writer

Before Mississippi-born rapper and budding actor David Banner was labeled the angriest black man in America, I had no idea who he was. And you probably didn't either. What you should know, however, is that this dude equates his manhood with speaking out instead of speaking up.

For the past few weeks Banner — whose real name is Levell Crump — has been engaged in a verbal beat down with the good reverends Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, because they are leading the charge in the war against rap and hip hop. He's also been critical of Oprah Winfrey, because she has steadfastly refused to invite anyone on her show whose lyrics contain the N-word, bitch or ho.

I was about halfway through my 30-minute telephone interview with Banner, a 33-year-old college-educated man who renamed himself after a comic book character, when I concluded that his motives in this war weren't exactly pure. Although he made some very valid points about the plight of young black males in America and the problems we have in this country in general, his credibility as the newly self-appointed spokesman for the rap/hip-hop community took a sharp blow when he tried to defend his continual use of profanity and the N-word in his lyrics; and as he went on ranting about the evil being spewed by Sharpton and Jackson.

He's living somewhere beyond the left wing.

Perhaps that is why Banner appears to be fighting this never-ending battle without the public support of his peers. Maybe Snoop, Ludacris, Nelly and 50 Cent also realize that he's mouthing off now to stir up publicity for his new CD — “The Greatest Story Ever Told” — which is dropping in October, or that he just likes the sound of his own misguided rhetoric.

It's one thing, however, to fight the good fight for creative expression, but it's quite another thing to wage war when your pistol is packed with greed.

What is even more disturbing, however, is that Banner has been publicly disrespecting his elders, which is a serious no-no in African and black American cultures. Harriett Tubman, W.E.B. DuBois, Martin Luther King Jr. and James Brown must surely be rolling over in their respective graves.

‘I'm really not angry’

He's talking loud, but saying nothing that would enable people to take him seriously. So, I had to ask: “Brother, what's your beef?”

“I'm really not angry,” Banner said in a voice that bore just a slight trace of his Mississippi roots.

"I'm making so much money now that I'm really happy! They always try to paint young black man angry. I'm not angry. That's why I smile. I'm telling the truth."

The truth is that the Sharpton-Jackson crusade against rap and hip hop is affecting Banner's bottom line and he's extremely ticked off about it. He's quick to mention how much money he lost by not promoting his last CD, "Certified" because he was too busy organizing a Katrina relief concert in 2005.

"I was out there doing their job for them," said Banner, a former student government president in college.

"Why does it take a gangsta rapper to talk about these issues? It's not my job and it's at my career's detriment. Al Sharpton said I didn't have a 'Banner' year last year. I didn't because I was doing his damn job. I didn't promote my album; I promoted the pain that was going on with Katrina."

Although Jackson hasn't publicly acknowledged Banner's criticisms, Sharpton's office recently issued a less-than-classy statement after Banner had told reporters that Sharpton could (perform oral sex on him). After initially questioning the rapper's sexuality, Sharpton then took the high road, saying that he would "just pray for him."

Guys, cock fighting is both illegal and immoral.

'Young black males don't have anybody'

But there were some things that Banner — who is best known for his hit "Like a Pimp" — said that resonated with me. Young black males are inarguably the most maligned species on the planet. It seems as though whenever they take two steps forward, someone or something is pushing them three steps backwards. Consequently, hope is a word they can neither spell nor comprehend.

Many of rap's brightest stars come from impoverished environments where this is the case. That reality makes them angry and their emotions are manifested in their lyrics. That doesn't always make it right, but it does make it real. And that's why these caged birds don't always sing the songs we want to hear.

"It's nothing but music," Banner said emphatically. "Everybody points the finger at rap because it's young black males. Young black males don't have anybody to come to their rescue — not even themselves. We'll beef with 50 Cent, we'll beef with T.I., we'll beef with Nelly, but we won't come to Akon's rescue when he's blamed for the 14-year-old being in the club when it wasn't his responsibility to check everyone's I.D."

"It's like Snoop said, 'Maybe I was raised by a mama on crack or gang bangers. Maybe I don't know no better. Teach me. Love me. Hold me.' The reflection of black people is with their black parents and what they did or did not do. What they did or did not teach us."

That's why Banner wants Sharpton, Jackson and Winfrey to let it be.

"I'm really disappointed that there are so many bad things that are going on," Banner said. "From the Jenna 6, to the young kids that got killed in Jersey to the young man in New York who got killed coming out of his bachelor party. There are so many things that they could attack and that they can concentrate on."

He could rap about that without using offensive language.

“As for Oprah, at least Bill O’Reilly will put the rappers on his show and go to head-to-head with them,” he added. “I have more respect for Bill O’Reilly than I do for Oprah. They’re always trying to paint us as militant. No, we’re not militant. Oprah Winfrey, Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, if you stop attacking the way I live, then we won’t have any problem. I will admit there’s a problem in hip hop but that is only a reflection of the bigger picture. It’s about America’s sickness and America’s problem.”

Banner, of course, doesn’t think there’s a problem with lyrics that glorify violence, perpetuate negative stereotypes, disrespect women and contain a word that has been historically used to demean and oppress an entire culture for centuries. As he sees it, the N-word has made him a young, rich black male and that’s the only reason people of all hues are upset and want it banned.

“The problem is (rap) has lasted a lot longer and made a whole lot more money and made a whole lot more noise than they would have expected us to. The thing is — and I really need you to print this — America’s new word for (N-word) is hip hop.”

Now that I can get with.

‘Kids want to hear it’

But even though there have been movements to permanently retire the word from the lexicon, Banner said that he’s going to continue to use it as long as “kids want to hear it. I’m a Bible with a Playboy cover on it. It don’t matter how they get the information.

“The problem is not young black men, it’s the old white folks who put the word out there in the first place.”

What he fails to understand is that those of us like Sharpton, Jackson and Winfrey who are old enough to know what it feels like to be called that word, are still recovering from the knife wounds we received back in the day. They hurt then, but in many ways the pain is even more intense now that the word is often used as a term of endearment among the seemingly lost generations.

Banner really needs to ask somebody.

What’s even more twisted is the fact that Banner said if one of his young white fans called him the N-word he would “beat them bloody.”

We need to join the Rev. Al in prayer.

The prudent thing for Banner to do at this point would be to schedule a meeting with the men and the woman he’s been attacking. I don’t think Oprah would be down for it — she’s got an empire to run and souls to save — but I’m assuming that the men of the cloth would be willing to forgive and forget and use their collective wisdom to try and increase the peace in what seems to be an unwinnable, generational war of words.

But Banner says he isn’t willing to do so. He thinks Sharpton and Jackson have “lost their way.”

Funny, they probably think he’s driving with a faulty GPS system, too. I know I do.

Let’s just hope Banner finds his way back before he loses any more money and has no one to blame but himself.

