

JABARI ASIM

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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 JIVE: 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!”

“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.”

“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 little 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 Hargest’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. Hargest 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, Beatty, Ringgold, the anonymous poster artist, and Hargest 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, Hargest, and Beatty confirms the prescience 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 shenanigans 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 counternarrative 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

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, devised 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 denigrated 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-

tity 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 uniforming 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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