

THE USE OF THE N-WORD: WE'RE TALKING OUT OF BOTH SIDES OF OUR MOUTH

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On the heels of Senator Robert Byrd's recent use of the term "white nigger" and California Lt. Governor Cruz Bustamente's Freudian slip at the Black Trade Unionists annual dinner, the N-word has resurfaced as a focal point for public debate. What is ironic is that while the majority of black Americans have expressed dismay, if not outrage, over the use of the word by these non-black public officials, as a group we have been relatively silent about the rampant use of the N-word by black entertainers, particularly rap artists and comedians.

The sad fact is that while the vast majority of Americans -- black, white and other -- are not particularly interested in the utterances of either Byrd or Bustamente, they are familiar with everything said by black celebrities like Chris Rock or DMX. And now the cultural products of the US are exported abroad, so a global audience is increasingly under the impression that the N-word is a content neutral, equal opportunity term.

If the majority of black Americans are still offended by the use of the N-word by anyone not black, then they must show the same vocal indignation when a black person uses the word - our current double standard does not send a clear message of where black Americans stand on this issue.

Through the many, many years of the word's history, black Americans have internalized the word and many of us even use it in our private conversations. Younger black Americans involved with the Hip Hop community have made some weak attempts to distinguish "nigga" as a familial term from "nigger," a slur. Unfortunately, these nuances, which are largely dependent on vocal inflections and the intent of the speaker, are lost on many white Americans and foreigners.

This became unnervingly apparent on a recent trip to South Africa, where young black American males could expect to be greeted with "What's up, my nigger?" by misled natives. The casual and frequent use of the N-word by black American rap artists, whose music is heavily imported into the country, didn't help young black South Africans see that the term is a slur. Similarly, white Europeans also steeped in American culture see no problem with using the N-word in our presence, whether they are reciting an American rap lyric or having a conversation.

In the public sphere the N-word cannot have duality: either it is a flatly forbidden racial insult, or else it is just another word because its pejorative meaning has dissipated.

By and large, black Americans still see the N-word as an egregious slur because, despite its various manipulations, at its core the N-word is connected with linguistic violence and the subjugation of black people. For older black Americans, the word still conjures up memories of the degradation of segregation and racial discrimination. Younger black Americans can look to the

atrocities committed against James Byrd, Amadou Diallo and Abner Louima for sufficient evidence that the original concept of a "nigger" as a sub-human still exists in America. Black Americans who stand for justice should not disrespect our history or our present-day realities by cavalierly using the N-word or allowing anyone else to do so.

Artistic freedom as supported by the First Amendment is often used as the justification for the use of the N-word in creative works. Many rap artists flatly state that the N-word is such an integral part of their language and that of their audiences, they couldn't possibly excise it from their lyrics: the old "keepin' it real" excuse. The key question to be asked is whether or not the use of the N-word helps to illuminate the breadth and scope of a creative expression; does it educate the audience, or does its use simply perpetuate ignorance and old stereotypes? Art is subjective and personal, and obviously there should never be a ministerial mandate that the N-word should never be used, but black Americans themselves need to be better arbiters of when it is appropriate and in what contexts.

What is most disturbing is that black Americans are allowing corporate media entities, be they record companies, radio stations, television stations or film companies, to define our group identity. At the end of the day, the majority of black entertainers or cultural workers cannot produce or broadcast any material that is not sanctioned by a white executive, while these white executives, under the guise of entertainment, are quite comfortable allowing blacks to use the N-word as well as a host of other derogatory terms.

As descendants of African people, inheritors of an oral tradition that has provided this country with much of its artistic and conceptual framework, we should understand the weight of words. Words like "nigger," "buck," "coon," "mammy" and "bitch" were used to dehumanize us and therefore helped to rationalize the brutality leveled against us for centuries. Therefore black Americans have to decide publicly whether they have indeed become "niggers" and have no reason to restrict the usage of the word, or whether they are human beings who demand that their history and their pain be respected around the world by rejecting this slur. For the record, I am down with Hip Hop, but don't call me "nigger."

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