

Nigger vs Nigga: Is it time to abolish the N word?

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By Deborah Gabriel

Just as there are a myriad of opinions over whether to call time on the N word, so there are differing opinions over its origins. The African American Registry suggests on its website that the word originated from the Latin word for black, 'niger' but also speculates that it might be a misspelling of the word 'negro', as pronounced by white southerners.

There have been other suggestions that the word nigger is straightforward mis-spelling of the word niger, both in reference to the country 'Niger' and the Latin word for black 'niger.' In an article in the Washington Post in 2001 by Randall Kennedy entitled: *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, the title of his book, the author says that the Virginia tobacco founder John Rolfe recorded the first African shipment to Virginia in 1619 as 'negars.' He also writes: "A 1689 inventory of an estate in Brooklyn, New York, made mention of an enslaved 'nigger' boy."

These are early documented references to the use of the word in the 17th century. But it is clear that regardless of its precise origins there is a general consensus that by the 18th century, one hundred years later, that the word nigger had acquired negative connotations that are the cause of much of the consternation about its use today, three hundred years later.

The African Registry is unequivocal about this, stating: "In the 21st century, it remains a principal symbol of white racism regardless of who is using it. The word nigger carries with it much of the hatred and disgust directed toward Black Africans and African Americans." It goes on to describe the word nigger as "a term of exclusion" which fosters racism and which reinforces negative stereotypes about black people. "No other American [name] carries as much purposeful cruelty," it says.

Much of the hostility on the use of the word is directed at black youths who are charged with bringing the word nigger or nigga into common usage. In his book: *Niggers, Negroes, Black People and Africans*, author Paul Grant observes that young blacks sought to take ownership of the word by changing its spelling: "It is fashionable for many young Afrikans (particularly males) to co-opt the word nigger into their vocabulary (often spelt Nigga), in a rather vain and pathetic attempt to subvert the meaning of the word."

But Grant charges that the outrage expressed by the brothas that use the word themselves when they hear whites using it is sufficient evidence to prove that this strategy has failed. Prolific Poet Aazeem would seem to typify the N word user that Grant refers to. Aazeem told Black Britain: "I use the N word myself but with a different meaning when referring to certain distorted mentalities amongst our people. But it really disturbs me when Caucasians use it, especially those who think that by its use they are automatically counted as 'down' and 'black.' I actually got into a debate with a Caucasian woman the other day about it."

Aazeem told Black Britain that he is only too aware of the dilemma that ensues when black people use the N word in public and amongst white people who then charge that if blacks can use the N word then so can they and we should not be offended.

American photographer Oggi Ogburn who also worked as an aide to the much revered Dr Chancellor Williams in 1975 when Williams was 74 and losing his sight and Ogburn was 33, like many African Americans of his era associate the word nigger with its use by Klu Klux Klan members and other racists and feel it recalls painful memories of the times when 'niggers' were lynched, burnt to death and subjected to the worst crimes of humanity to crowd chants of 'burn nigger burn,' or 'die nigger die.'

Ogburn told Black Britain: "Growing up the word nigger used by a white person was and still is a negative." Like many others Ogburn blames largely those within the hip hop fraternity for reviving the word nigger when many African Americans would like to see the word confined to the pages of history. Ogburn charged: "During this new age of hip hop the word has been used so much in music and film that the negativity got lost."

Endorsing Ogburn's sentiments, recent graduate Emil Harper from Miami told Black Britain: "The N word has morphed into common use among young blacks in America due to the overwhelming influence of the hip-hop community. Whilst they (the rappers) have dismissed the notion that they are responsible for its use, it can be heard on hundreds of CDs that have been released since the mid 1980s."

The battle is on to abolish the N word

The website *Ban The N Word* (BTNW) is a campaign established in 2004, it says : "To put an end to the widespread acceptance and use of insulting, derogatory, degrading, demeaning, malicious, venomous, debilitating, and self-defeating word."

Explaining its reason for launching the campaign, BTNW describes the term nigger as : "A passively slick form of psychological, social, mental and spiritual abuse," and it is not alone. Abolish The N Word (ATNW) is another website which sprung up this year, perhaps frustrated that the pace of change has not been fast enough. Its site carries powerful images of African Americans being hung as a grim reminder of what happened to 'niggers.'

Describing themselves as a group of 'Brooklynites' of the old school era, they state: "Until the pain of this word no longer lingers in society for any of us, we cannot continue to use the "N" word. Every time we use the "N" word it is a slap in the face of our elders and a blatant disrespect to our ancestors. We have not only lost our minds, but we've lost consciousness." Aside from websites, campaigns organised by mothers, fathers and other concerned persons are gathering pace across America. Ogburn told Black Britain: "In recent times people with cultural responsibility have been instructing the younger generation on the negativity of the word."

Articulating why the term nigger is so derided, recent college graduate Harper told Black Britain that the acceptance of the word nigger in common usage in America is an indicator that some black people are still victims of the slave mentality: "We have accepted the degrading term used to identify our race as sub-human to the world and our ignorance turned it into a badge of self shame that scars all that we have

accomplished since the end of the Civil War.”

Placing the terminology and experience of black people in a historical context, Harper argues that through slavery white people aimed to create a race of mentally substandard people who were only capable of doing menial chores (slave labour). He told Black Britain: “African Americans have labored for years to get out from under the myth that our race was mentally unable to match intelligence with the Caucasians. The sacrifices and efforts of our ancestors went for nothing when we took to calling each other by that same degrading title.”

But Social Solutions expert Twilight Bey from Los Angeles recently said that the term Nigga describes a condition under which black some people behave towards other blacks in ways which are a result of the fact that collectively we are all living under white supremacy and continue to suffer from the legacy of colonialism and chattel enslavement. Until that condition no longer exists, some blacks will continue to feel justified in using the term ‘Nigger’ as a rebuke and as chastisement for the black who has gone stray, psychologically speaking.

But Harper is unrelenting in his condemnation of the prolific use of the word. He told Black Britain: “The difference between Nigga and Nigger is nothing but the proper pronunciation of the word. The proponents of the word will try to convince you that there is a difference between the words but they both mean basically the same thing. They are ethnic slurs, offensive terms for Black people.” Unlike the brothas who use the N word but who are resentful when whites use it, as someone who does not utter the N word, Harper says he is not bothered when whites use it: “It doesn't bother me if a white person uses the N-word because I have grown up knowing there were people out there that hated me and wanted to hurt me.”

On the other hand, Harper told Black Britain blacks who use the N word need to free themselves from the slave mentality that they haven't fully shaken off: “If they are okay with being disrespected by the use of such terms then the people are in a sad state.” Harper argues that African Americans know that the N word is wrong but are too afraid to leave their comfort zones to outlaw its use. He told Black Britain: “We are hurting ourselves, our children, parents and our race specifically by even perpetuating this term.”

Concluding, Harper told Black Britain: “When I hear it coming from an African American I am filled with pity, knowing that they haven't got a clue as to the damage they are doing African Americans everywhere.” Looking ahead to the future, Ogburn told Black Britain: “It is my hope that this trend does not continue lest we fall to the racist notions of the past that depicted us as ignorant, lazy [people] who do not care about where we came from, much less where we're going.”

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