

# The N-Word. Friend or Foe?

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Do you ever find yourself saying any of these things?

"My niggas, get money."

"Hey nigga, wassup?"

"Nigga please!"

"Oh, who, that nigga?"

"Nigga what?!"

"That's my nigga!"

What once was a word used to degrade and dehumanize black people has become some what of a battle cry.

"Nigga" can be heard in songs, said on television, and read in books. It can even be heard, on a daily basis, here at the University out of the mouths of and directed toward black folks all across campus.

The word "nigga" was derived from the derogatory word nigger, which was used frequently and freely by whites to instill in blacks a sense of inferiority. "Nigger" was used along with words like "spook," "coon," "monkey," and "smoke". Each of these words and many others like these were rooted in the white man's disapproval of the black man's skin and vocalized to express disrespect, hatred, and disgust. Respectable black men and women loathed the word and fought hard to be called otherwise.

Chuck Stone, Walter Spearman Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication said, "It is not the word ["nigga"] itself, it is what it symbolizes... historical baggage. It says you are less than human, inferior, it's demeaning."

Today, the word "nigga" is not as frequently used by white people nor is it often used with the original negative intent. It is now being used more in the black community and has derived a new, and endearing meaning.

Has the word "nigga" taken a change for the better? In a survey of a small sample of the UNC-Chapel Hill black community it was found that 44 percent of those polled consider "nigga" a bad word.

Sophomore Fred Battle said he considers "nigga" a bad word because "...it was a word used to put us down, so when we use it we are putting ourselves down."

Though there are many people who feel like Fred, 39 percent of those polled felt that the nature of the word depended on the circumstance under which it was used.

When asked what circumstances could make the use of the word acceptable, senior Kurt Dubois said "[It depends] if you're white or black."

Others felt it depended on the context and connotation of the word. For example, Kenya Anthony said "If an unknown person called me a nigga I'd be upset." But she said she does not mind using the word when "...talking to a friend about dumb niggas." Only 17 percent of those surveyed did not consider the word bad at all.

Though many felt the word "nigga" was bad everyone surveyed admitted to having used the word. Of those who use it 39 percent said they did so in everyday speech; while 61 percent said they used it only every once in a while.

When questioned about when they used the word, many people responded that they say "nigga" in the company of their friends and even in reference to their friends. Sophomore Tori Davis said she usually uses it jokingly when "chillin' with her girls."

Even though the word has a negative, derogatory and demean-

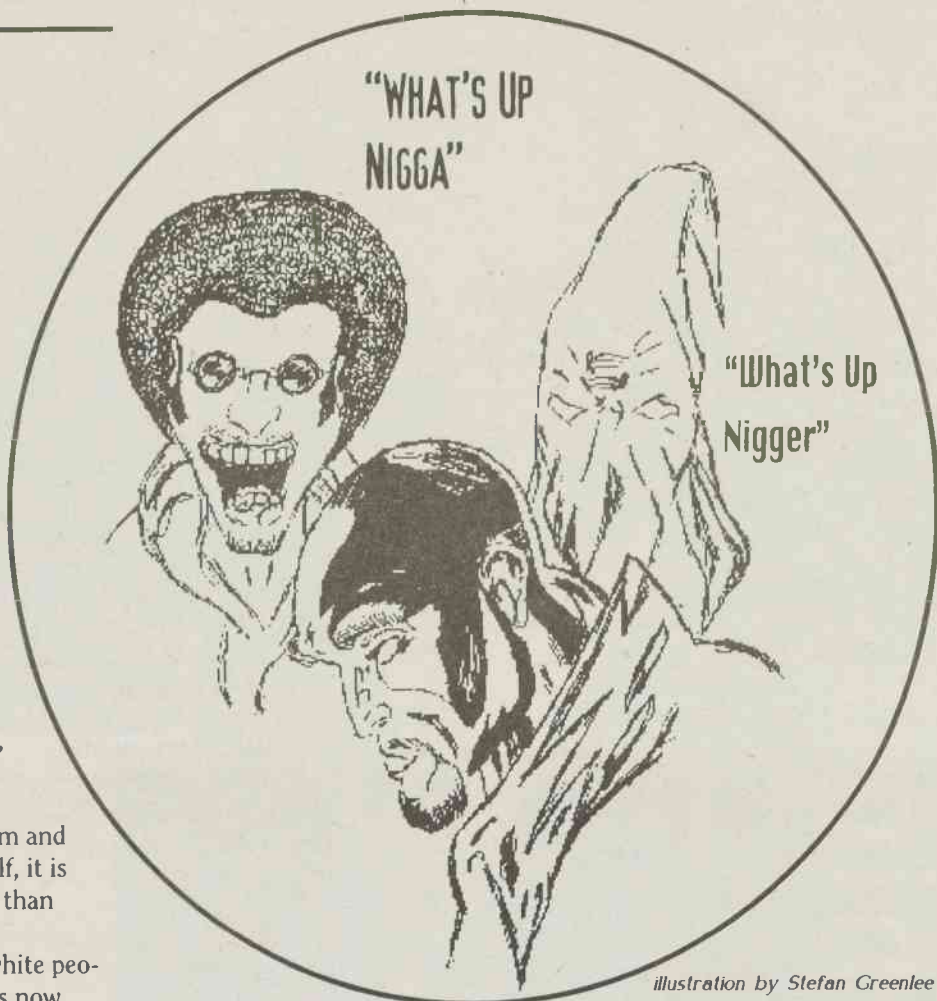


illustration by Stefan Greenlee

## "Difference"

ing history, in today's black communities the word has evolved into a term of endearment. Stone commented on this phenomena, "Young blacks use it as an act of defiance, to say 'up yours society', you don't determine my worth." Its use has become the African-American way of nullifying the negative meaning and giving "nigga" a new definition, Stone said.

Though the word "nigga" has become a term of endearment in the black community, 67 percent of those polled said they felt that the black community uses the word too freely. UNC sophomore Tamesha Keel said that it is too freely used "in addressing people as a symbol of friendship. Blacks are ignorant to what it means and taking lightly what it symbolizes."

The other 33 percent of those petitioned responded that they did not think it was used freely. Travis Cooper commented that "people read too much into it, it's a name and a name is only what you let it be."

There is room for much debate over the word "nigga" in the black community. Some feel it is okay to say, others think it depends on the circumstances, others still don't think it should ever be used. Repetitive use of the word in our community raises many questions. Is it okay if you are black, but not if you're white? Is it a term of endearment or is it demeaning? The questions are out there, think about them, discuss them and do something about the way you feel. Chuck Stone remarked that "when we cease to believe in witches they cease to exist." Will we ever stop believing?

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