

by
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Face Off

It's become a given in the black community, especially amongst the youth. Some might disapprove of its use. Others will uphold its use as a part of black life. The question is: just how harmless is the use of the word "nigga" in the black community?

I'm not entirely sure of how long black people have used the word "nigga" as a term of endearment. As a kid I can remember Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy using the term as if it were the actual racial classification of black people. I remember being amazed that these men would use such a term, considering its historical connotation (of which I, even at the age of 5, was aware.) Perhaps I grew up sheltered, but I clearly remember how my parents outlawed the use of the word in the house.

To this day I am confused as to why black Americans are the only minority group in this country who often address themselves with a term long used to define their supposed inferiority. I've never heard other minority groups such as Asians, Hispanics or Jews refer to themselves using derogatory language. Granted, I don't know any Jewish, Asian or Hispanic people well enough to have any considerable knowledge of how such minorities might refer to each other when in their own exclusive circles. Nonetheless, of all the products of minority media that I have ever heard or seen, barring black American media (largely aimed at youth), I have never heard terms synonymous with oppression and degradation used in an everyday and innocuous manner.

While I don't personally condemn its usage, I still fail to under-

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stand how a people long oppressed and denied respectful representation can freely use a term to describe themselves that only forty years ago went hand-in-hand with a system expressly designed to remove any traces of articulate pride in that people. Wasn't one of the foremost purposes of the Civil Rights Movement to ensure that black people (as well as all other minority groups in America) have the right to be addressed as human beings: Sir or Ma'am, instead of "nigger"?

At this point, I assume that many would cite the "black" usage of the term as being proof of the reversal of an unjust, oppressive system. As Q-Tip said on Tribe's "Midnight Marauders" album, *"See, nigga first was used down in the Deep South/Fallin' out between the dome of the white man's mouth/It means that we will never grow, you know the word dummy/Other niggas in the community think it's crummy/But I don't, neither does the youth cause we embrace adversity/It goes right with the race."*

As previously stated, perhaps in an unforeseen sense, to use the word "nigga" is a celebration of the fact that Black Americans live in an age when they are no longer forced to tolerate negation, verbal or otherwise. But even Richard Pryor, whose use of the term in his stand-up routines has been called "poetic", ultimately came to the conclusion in his "Live on Sunset Strip" performance that he would never use the term "nigga"

loosely and "harmlessly" again because it had been historically used to describe what he called "our own wretchedness." While the use of the word "nigga" may not have the severe and immediate repercussions that other issues in the black community such as lack of educational success or teen pregnancy may have, is it possible that in some way the use of term promotes a kind of self-degradation, a backward celebration of "our own wretchedness?"

I have no quarrel with those who use the term freely and "harmlessly", but I ask you this: if our ancestors, whom we as a people zealously uphold in a kind of modern hero-worship, were called "niggas" to the tune of cracking whips, only to have their descendants called the same a hundred years later by policemen unleashing attack dogs and fire hoses, is it right for us as their descendants to use the term that has meant so much hate and oppression in a manner betokening affection? My father was called "nigger" in school often and I can't imagine that he would wish to relive those days. Thus I find it hard, in good conscience, to license the use of a term that was used to negate my father less than fifty years ago, adversity or not.

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