# Straight Talk about the N-Word

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The n-word is unique in the English language. On one hand, it is the ultimate insult- a word that has tormented generations of African Americans. Yet over time, it has become a popular term of endearment by the descendants of the very people who once had to endure it. Among many young people today—black and white—the n-word can mean friend.

Neal A. Lester, dean of humanities and former chair of the English department at Arizona State University, recognized that the complexity of the n-word’s evolution demanded greater critical attention. In 2008, he taught the first ever college-level class designed to explore the word “nigger” (which will be referred to as the n-word). Lester said the subject fascinated him precisely because he didn’t understand its layered complexities.

“When I first started talking about the idea of the course,” Lester recalled, “I had people saying, ‘This is really exciting, but what would you do in the course? How can you have a course about a word?’ It was clear to me that the course, both in its conception and in how it unfolded, was much bigger than a word. It starts with a word, but it becomes about other ideas and realities that go beyond words.”

## HOW DID THE N-WORD BECOME SUCH A SCATHING INSULT?

We know, at least in the history I’ve looked at, that the word started off as just a descriptor, “negro,” with no value attached to it. … We know that as early as the 17th century, “negro” evolved to “nigger” as intentionally derogatory, and it has never been able to shed that baggage since then—even when black people talk about appropriating and reappropriating it. The poison is still there. The word is inextricably linked with violence and brutality on black psyches and derogatory aspersions cast on black bodies. No degree of appropriating can rid it of that bloodsoaked history.

## WHY IS THE N-WORD SO POPULAR WITH MANY YOUNG BLACK KIDS TODAY?

If you could keep the word within the context of the intimate environment [among friends], then I can see that you could potentially own the word and control it. But you can’t because the word takes on a life of its own if it’s not in that environment. People like to talk about it in terms of public and private uses. Jesse Jackson was one of those who called for a moratorium on using the word, but then was caught using the word with a live mic during a “private” whispered conversation.

There’s no way to know all of its nuances because it’s such a complicated word, a word with a particular racialized American history. But one way of getting at it is to have some critical and historical discussions about it and not pretend that it doesn’t exist. We also cannot pretend that there is not a double standard—that blacks can say it without much social consequence but whites cannot. There’s a double standard about a lot of stuff. There are certain things that I would never say. In my relationship with my wife, who is not African American, I would never imagine her using that word, no matter how angry she was with me. …

That’s what I’m asking people to do—to self-reflect critically on how we all use language and the extent to which language is a reflection of our innermost thoughts. Most people don’t bother to go to that level of self-reflection and self-critique. Ultimately, that’s what the class is about. It’s about self-education and self-critique, not trying to control others by telling them what to say or how to think, but rather trying to figure out how we think and how the words we use mirror our thinking.

The class sessions often become confessionals because white students often admit details about their intimate social circles I would never be privy to otherwise.

## WHAT TYPES OF THINGS DO THEY CONFESS?

In their circles of white friends, some are so comfortable with the n-word because they’ve grown up on and been nourished by hip-hop. Much of the commercial hip-hop culture by black males uses the n-word as a staple. White youths, statistically the largest consumers of hip-hop, then feel that they can use the word among themselves with black and white peers. … But then I hear in that same discussion that many of the black youths are indeed offended by [whites using the n-word]. And if blacks and whites are together and a white person uses the word, many blacks are ready to fight. So this word comes laden with these complicated and contradictory emotional responses to it. It’s very confusing to folks on the “outside,” particularly when nobody has really talked about the history of the word in terms of American history, language, performance and identity.