# The 'N' Word: It Just Slips Out

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“What’s up, niggaz?”

“You crazy nigga, you buggin’!”

 “See you later, niggaz!”

That’s the way my older brother and his friends used to talk to each other.

I think I was around 7 when my older brother became the center of my attention. He and his friends sounded so cool, and that strange, interesting word “nigger” would come up in their conversations so much.

So to be like my older brother and his friends, the word I made “nigger” (or today’s preferred spelling “nigga”) a part of my vocabulary. It was how my family and friends addressed each other—seriously, humorously, and otherwise. My brothers, sisters, and I used it freely, and I never thought twice about it.

Even though I used it all the time, the word had no real meaning for me. I just substituted it for phrases such as “What’s up?” and “Hey, you.”

It wasn’t until fourth grade that I learned the racist meaning of the word. A chubby, naive kid named Al asked his teacher, “Is there still prejudice in the South?”

My teacher looked at me, perplexed, and said, “Prejudice is everywhere.” That’s when I started to take Black History Month seriously and learned about the struggles of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and all those other prominent figures in the civil rights movement. I saw all those movies and documentaries that showed Blacks being whipped, beaten, attacked by dogs and having fire hoses opened on them during sit-ins and demonstrations.

It shocked me so, so much that it would take me too long to go into how. And then, in the midst of all the racist violence, I heard that word uttered. It was a White racist speaking down to a Black, or talking about Blacks, I don’t even remember exactly.

But I remember how it sounded. “You nigger” or “those niggers.” Even though it was on TV and not directed at me personally, it sounded horrible. I could hear the evil in the word. That’s when I understood what it meant. It was a word used to make Blacks feel inhuman and worthless.

Still, it wasn’t until I was in my mid-teens that I tried to make myself stop saying it. I decided it was wrong for me to use it when it meant such a terrible thing. I didn’t try to stop others, I just stopped myself. No one even noticed.

Once, when I was a freshman in high school, we discussed the word in class. The only conclusion we came to was that it was OK for Blacks to call other Blacks “niggas” but if a White person was unfortunate enough to utter this word to a Black person, that White person would be very sorry.

By this point I was very confused about the whole matter. I talked to family and some friends about the situation, but it always came back to the same thing. Black on Black was OK, but White on Black was a no-no. Gradually, I started using it again.

Maybe peer pressure or everyone else using the word is what brought me back, but I feel that is just an excuse. On some level, I had accepted the word. It was part of me. For better or for worse, using the word “nigga” has become a part of black culture, or at least some segments of it. Now that I don’t actively try to stop using the word, it just comes out naturally.

I do still watch who I use it around. I think everyone has a set of rules on when to use the word and when not to, the way many people do with curse words. I use it in my neighborhood and around people I know. I don’t use it around people I don’t know or who I think might take offense at it, and I try not to use it in professional places. Like I wouldn’t come up to my editor at New Youth Connections and say, “You know, a funny thing happened to me on the train over here, me and my niggas...”

At least that’s what I thought. But then one day at the NYC office, I was talking to my friend Frank. Frank is heavily into hip-hop music like me, and wears the latest hip-hop clothing. He also happens to be white. I was talking to him about my neighborhood and I let the N-word slip out. Right away, I looked around to see if anyone had heard because I did not want to offend anyone.

What really shocked me was the fact that I had used that Blacks-only term in conversation with a White person. I don’t know if Frank noticed; if he did, he didn’t say so. But I sure felt funny about it.

I had gotten so relaxed talking with a friend about our favorite music that I didn’t see his color. Maybe because I didn’t want to or maybe because it just wasn’t important to me at the time. I was talking with my friend, not my White friend. Did that make me a sellout to the race? What the hell was wrong with me?

After that, I was more confused than ever.

It’s funny to me that a White calling a Black “nigga” is a crime, but sometimes the reverse is accepted. On the single “Award Tour” by A Tribe Called Quest, there is a bonus track called “The Chase, Part II” featuring a rapper named Consequence who says in a verse that he’s “been through more growing pains than that nigga Michael Seaver.”

I’ve also heard some Puerto Ricans at my school use the term—I remember distinctly a Puerto Rican girl referring to her man as “my nigga.” And at least some Puerto Ricans I know don’t seem to get offended when they are called niggas. Still, part of me continues to think it isn’t proper for someone outside the race to use the word. But then I think I may be a hypocrite since I used it so casually when talking to a White person.

And there’s still the question of why Black people use it to begin with. I wish I knew. Maybe we have decided to take control of this otherwise bad word to use for our own purposes. Maybe we want to give it a new meaning. Or maybe we cling to the word so as to never forget what the Black race went through. Maybe it makes us feel good to have become the users of the word and not the victims of it.

As for me I still go on, monitoring my mouth, hoping for an end to my mixed feelings towards the word, wishing I could either feel completely comfortable using it or banish it totally from my vocabulary. I feel like the rapper Q-tip in the song “Sucka Nigga”: “Yo, I start to flinch as I try not to say it, but my lips is like the ooh-wap as I start to spray it.”

# Instructions

When you are finished with reading “The ‘N’ Word: It Just Slips Out,” answer the following questions on your own piece of paper.

1. In general, who can or can't say the word? When, if ever, can it be said?
2. How do you feel about the use of the word?
3. Is the use of the word in the classroom different from its use outside the classroom?
4. Is it different to read a text by an African American who uses it than it is to read it in a text by a non-African American? Why or why not?
5. Does the use of the word in a "classic" literary work give it validity outside of the classroom? If so, how?