

Am I Not My Brother's Keeper?

Genesis 4:9 says, “Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” And he said, ‘I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Have you ever sat and thought about the word *nigger*? Now, if that question just slid you off of your seat or seems insultingly irreverent, I understand; I had never thought about what a “*nigger*” was or what it meant to be called “*nigger*” until I was confronted with excuses for the word from white people in a predominantly white setting. Those things just didn’t exist to me. And they don’t.

Have you ever been in a setting where someone uses the word and you have to decide how to confront the situation? When it happens to me, I feel stuck within a chokingly catastrophic dilemma. I am presented with two options, the first being to vehemently raise concern over “*nigger*” rolling out of the mouth of someone who looks more akin to the oppressor than the oppressed, and the second being to quietly swallow the sounds of the words and blink as if a history of violence has not just exploded in the atmosphere. As my mind races, I weigh the two options by realizing that the first would result in me perhaps displaying possibly problematic qualities and that the second would result in me downplaying the sanctity of my identity. I choose to respond vocally by saying that I prefer non-black people to not say the word “*nigger*” because of the excruciating history behind it. But, to most surrounding me, this statement seems like the hardest multiple choice question of their lives; Are they to choose A, “Continue to be silent,” B, “Offer a counter-argument to my statement,” or C, “Applaud me.” Most choose A, continuing to be silent, making me wonder if I have overreacted.

But it is often too late, as I am then the angry black that has complained irresponsibly over something that was just a word being used within its clearly defined parameters, like someone being upset over seeing a car parked perfectly in a parking space. It feels as if those attempting to cushion the stab of the word “*nigger*” have made the world a utopia in which people would never say *nigger* with cruel intentions, but instead only say it when it was deemed necessary to a cause like history or literature, and, therefore, with good intentions.



When the doors of inflammatory intentions are opened up for some situations, but not for others, who is to stop those who want to be “nigger”-sayers from comparing historical context to their want to be offensive? The use of the word “nigga” in the songs of black rap artists already makes this argument enough of a problematic proposition. This is not to say that literature and documents that are slathered with “nigger” should be censored or snatched from the shelves and curricula of schools, but instead that, perhaps, non-black people should not be presented with an opportunity to say the word “nigger” under any justification. This is not because black people want to ban the word from peoples’ mouths, but instead that I detect a distinct layer of giddiness and eagerness that comes along with non-black people’s want to say the word. Within that eagerness, there is an astounding intellectual, emotional, and historical dishonesty which places non-black people in a position where they want to say the word, but do not fully understand the word. And, despite them not understanding the word, it feels as if there have been no attempts by them to educate themselves on the import and impact of the word. Instead, the opposite is true, as there have only been backflips taken in their quest to say the word, instead, and a non-existent quest to dissect it. How is it fair to invalidate the significance of this slur if its chainlike weight does not drag down anyone else in whatever setting it is uttered when the only person experiencing the impact of the sheer brute force of the word’s historical baggage is the person who just so happens to share the physical characteristics of American? The word has caused so much pain that it requires a somewhat unquantifiable amount of respect. There is an unwillingness to accept, observe, and respect the solemnity of the word, particularly when it is thrown out in the presence of a person who is a direct descendant of slavery.

The history of “nigger” begins with black people being transported to Virginia from Africa in 1619, labeled as “negars.” Since then, the word has development into its current spelling and meaning as a result of various European phonetic differences, and, perhaps, even Southern mispronunciation of the word “negro.” The African-American registry maintains that, regardless of the word’s transformation syntactically, it was solidified as a derogatory misnomer by the 1800s and used on an international level solely for racist purposes. The registry works to support this claim by providing different examples of “nigger” being added on to neutral words such as “work” in order to identify something that is demeaning, of low importance, highly-detested, or repulsive:

Niggerlover: Derogatory term aimed at white people lacking in the necessary loathing of Blacks.

Nigger luck: Exceptionally, but undeserved, good luck.

Nigger rich: Deeply in debt, but flamboyant.

Nigger work: Demeaning, menial tasks.

- The African-American Registry



Such slanderous meanings were only attached to the word because it was connected to black people; But, why? The answer comes in the reality of whiteness being an artificial social construct used to mobilize an “us” versus “them” mindset in the entirety of the world, which would place Europeans and white people at the top of the societal pyramid and place black people at the bottom. In “Between the World and Me” by Ta-Nehisi Coates, this idea is elegantly extrapolated upon: “But race is the child of racism, not the father. And the process of naming ‘the people’ has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy. Difference in hue and hair is old. But the belief in the preeminence of hue and hair, the notion that these factors can correctly organize a society and that they signify deeper attributes, which are indelible - this is the new idea at the heart of these new people, who have been brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe that they are white.”

When someone is called a nigger, it is representative of a purposeful dichotomization of people as either “bad” or “good” based upon their whiteness, or lack, thereof. Therefore, to allow white people to dictate how and why this word can and cannot be used is as illogical as putting the fox in charge of the henhouse. When someone is called a nigger, it is representative of a purposeful dichotomization of people as either “bad” or “good” based upon their whiteness, or lack, thereof. Therefore, to allow white people to dictate how and why this word can and cannot be used is as illogical as putting the fox in charge of the henhouse.



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“Nigger,” in its most basic essence, truly is a word comprised of six letters. For black people, six letters have become more than a word due to the long history of descriptions of black people as inferior. And, because this history still impacts descriptions of black people in the present day, “nigger” has forced itself into a representation of black death, black suffering, and the current black struggle. In Richard Rothstein’s book, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, he explains the significance of the diction used to describe black people: “Because our majority culture has tended to think of African-Americans as inferior, the words we’ve used to describe them, no matter how dignified they seem when first employed, eventually sound like terms of contempt...This shifting of terminology should not distract us from the underlying truth: We have created a caste system in this country,” and, within the caste system that Rothstein illuminates, are the hauntings of the specter of slavery and centuries of the relationship between black people and white people still having a chokehold on the progression of black lives, never having had a negative impact on white lives, however.

If the history of white people is accurately assessed, then saying “nigger” as a white person can be interpreted as an example of white privilege and an extension of systemic oppression. Even if a person saying “nigger” does not intend to be an offensive orator, he or she has now normalized the word for the rest of his or her clan and other non-black people as well. How are we to decide when someone is using it in its supposedly correct connotations if there is still an increasing number of people who want to say it for obviously incorrect instigation? When the lines are blurred, “nigger” becomes the bullet that no one sees coming, and the bullet wound is too large to be patched with the band-aid of context or America’s evolution into a post-racial society because of the election of Barack Obama.

Evolution should have no connection to the word “nigger” if the American judicial system completely understands and enforces all of its conditions. The 1866 Civil Rights Act, which was written to reinforce the thirteenth amendment after the white Southerners’ failure to fully comply, provides room for the argument that the use of the word “nigger” was, perhaps, supposed to have already been legally abolished. The act states that black people are entitled to “full and equal benefit of all laws and proceedings for the security of person and property, as is enjoyed by white citizens, and shall be subject to like punishment, pains, and penalties, and to none other, any law, statute, ordinance, regulation, or custom, to the contrary notwithstanding.”

So, in simpler terms, all actions that reduce black people to second-class citizens or “perpetuate the characteristics of slavery,” as Rothstein asserts in *The Color of Law*, are illegal, and it seems, to me, that the virulent history of the word “nigger” should be enough to offer proof that the word is a prerequisite to slavery and thus must result in the prolonging of the characteristics of slavery upon black people. However, because “nigger” is still being said by people without a true understanding of how it leaves a shotgun hole in the souls of black folks at the same time as it is uttered by people who do understand its acidity, the word has retained every bit of its impact. With every second that “nigger” goes misunderstood, manipulated, or spewed, purposefully, as a slur, its longevity increases.

The climate of the nation where the word “nigger” seems to have the most substance and longest history of use is, also, an important part of critiquing the word. In a world where people feel free to refer to African countries as “shithole countries”, the weight of words is an undeniable part of breaking down social interactions. It cannot be assumed that the word “nigger” can be used because of a nation-wide evolution if a nation-wide regression is evident. In *Yet A Stranger: Why Black Americans Still Don’t Feel at Home*, syndicated columnist Deborah Mathis crafted a statement that points a finger directly at the crux of “nigger’s” substance in the 21st century as she argued that America is not home if you have to “explain yourself as if you are some mystery created for intrigue or dissection — ‘a chronic patient for the sociological clinic.’”

The issue lies within acting like the impact of the word “nigger” is an antique. If “nigger’s” impact is extinct, then racism must have also become an ideology of antiquity, and when racism becomes viewed as a non-threat to the rotation of the world, then, perhaps, that idea will have substance; But, until then, have you ever sat and thought about what it feels like to be called a “nigger?”

