

Dear OS28,

There is something that has been on my chest for a few weeks now. I've been quiet when I should have spoken up. I haven't said anything because I didn't know how to address it. I would really appreciate it if you didn't use the word, "*nigga*." I am still figuring out what I think this word, but I know that I do not feel too comfortable with it being used around me. Is it ok to use at all? Is it ok for me to say it? And why is it okay for some people to use it but not others? As a member of the African American community, I have been awarded the opportunity to use the word, "*nigga*." But I realize that I do not want to claim my award anymore. I use this word because it has become a part of my daily life and vocabulary, but I am still trying to figure out things for myself. I am willing to go through this journey with you. Change has to start within yourself, if you want others to follow, lead by example.

Thank You,
Raven

Remember the past. Choose to not recreate it.

“What’s up, my *nigga*?” Did you like that or did you feel uncomfortable? A lot of emotions and opinions are stirred by the use of the word *nigga*. Some claim it’s racist, while others believe that the word is acceptable. I am digging into the ideas of racial identity, and language. I am concentrating on the word “*nigga*” and the stereotypes associated with these ideas.

Freedom of speech is a right. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution guarantees “*Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech...*” A word could never be banned, because who’s going to condemn somebody’s right to free speech? People have different takes on how language creates negative nuances.

“Should the *n-word* be banned all together?”

In this day and age, the intention with which the word, *nigga* is used isn’t malicious, at least not towards me. *Nigga* is a symbol of the effort of the black community to reclaim and take over the word by changing and stripping it of its hateful connotation and replacing it with a positive one.

There is a generation gap between *nigger* and *nigga*. Older generations feel as though the younger generations don’t know the historical background of oppression and hatred of the word. When I talked to my grandmothers about the word *nigga*, an inner fire was set off in them. They wanted to spit back cutting, derogatory words to hurt the white man’s feelings. Ultimately, I know that it brings back hard feelings. But as I understand the historical background, growing up in the 21st century where the word has evolved into a more positive phrase, I can not quite grasp this idea of it being an oppressive word. I was not raised in a time when African Americans had to internalize it. Honestly, I use it because it has become a habit but I use it towards all races. I do not discriminate about who I use with it and who I don’t. Does that make it okay? Probably not, but it is something that I do and I have become aware of.

Some black people feel that it’s justified because they’re from the same struggle, others believe that this word should be banned, but what is that going to do? Not only is banning a word not going to excuse the issue of racism, but *as Editrix Latoya Peterson said, “You can’t scrub away the taint bigotry associated with the word nigga”* A word doesn’t have a negative connotation unless you give it one. So is it racist? Some do claim that it’s racist; others believe that through code switching the word is reasonable to use. Code switching is: “...*is a verbal skill requiring a large degree of linguistic competence in more than one language, rather than a defect arising from insufficient knowledge of one or the other... [R]ather than presenting deviant behavior, [it] is actually a suggestive indicator of degree of bilingual competence” (Soto).*

Many blacks claim that it’s a term of endearment regardless of its root meaning. Black people, in some sense, are ignorant because you can’t claim a word that at one point was used to torment an entire culture? I do think that it’s hard to reclaim a word that has so much cruel history behind it.

“Is there a distinct difference between *nigger* and *nigga*?”

Yes, there is. *Nigger* has one meaning and *nigga* has two. *Nigger* is a word only of oppression, where as *nigga* is bastardization of the word *nigger* and is used as a term of endearment through. Neither is it justifiable for “society” to dictate that minorities can use the word but white people can’t. I don’t know why a white person would want to use the word anyway? Is it to feel a closer connection to the black community? I can honestly say that in certain instances I do get uncomfortable when white people use the *n-word*.

Digging deep into the idea of racial identity and the stereotypes that the media supports, humankind create stereotypes of other races making one story the only story; which ultimately robs us of our individuality, dignity and authenticity. Race is a concept that divides people into groups based on various sets of physical characteristics. My idea of racism is this idea of power and prejudice in each of the major divisions of humankind.

In Malcolm X's speech "who taught you to hate yourself" (May 5, 1962 in Los Angeles) He talks about the institutionalized racist education making black people feel as though they aren't as beautiful as white people. In response to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. over thirty years ago, Jane Elliot devised the controversial and startling, "Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes" exercise. This now famous exercise labels participants as inferior or superior based solely upon the color of their eyes and exposes them to the experience of being a minority. She executes experiments that allow white people to endure a glimpse of the anguish African Americans have had to endure. I noticed that in her videos, white people are ignorant to the fact that micro aggressions are still relevant today. Micro aggressions are "*...brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards people of color. Those who inflict racial micro aggressions are often unaware that they have done anything to harm another person*" (*Racial Micro aggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice*).

Some of the white participants get frustrated and infuriated throughout the experiment and storm out and fail to realize that African Americans could not get up and leave the situation. Everyone exposed to Jane Elliot's work, be it through a lecture, workshop or video, is dramatically affected by it. Along with Malcolm X's speech and the doll experiment, there have been other studies that been conducted in order to prove their theories to be accurate. Since the 1940's an experiment has been held to show the progression of beauty through a racial lens. This experiment is interesting to me because all the black children chose the lighter skinned dolls. Many children said that the darker shades of brown were symbolic of dirt and grime. There are many different ideas of what it means meant to be beautiful but it all relates back to racism. I learn about my culture about once a month and that information that I learn is the same white washed version.

Now that I am older, I am realizing different things about myself and mis-education of my culture. More than anything, it's a struggle for me to live in this world that has created stereotypes for me to live up to; Chimanda Adiche says "we define people by their stereotypes" which is totally accurate because how can we truly know something without experiencing it first hand? At the end of the day, my grandparents and ancestors fought throughout history to allow me to be equal among my peers and to never hold back on things that I believe in most because that's what gives me drive. Since doing research I have a more clear understanding of the word "nigga" but I still am not too sure how I feel about it. I believe the more attention a person gives a word, the more power it has to control one's emotions. Ultimately, this all relates back to the perspective of a prism. In a prism, you can see all the colors of the rainbow through different perspectives though this one object and I thought this was in direct correlation with the ideas of the word *nigga* because different people have different ideas about the word but it all relates back to this one idea, which is racism.