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"Nigger"—As Bad As it Sounds?

Michael Ayoob

It Is an Issue . . .

I was watching the six o'clock news this very week, and guess what I saw—a black high school football player punched a white referee in the face. The referee fell to the ground and a nightmarish chaos swept the field. Players swarmed to the scene, other referees restrained the teen who threw the punch. Why? The football player claimed he was called "the N-word" by the referee.

By the time I sat down to do my second big interview for this paper, I was beginning to have doubts about my topic. Was it really worth writing a ten-page paper on a single word? But just as the interview was about to start, I paused. This is no lie. The eleven o'clock newscaster gravely announced that a teacher in a local school district was accused of—you guessed it—calling students "the N-word." As an American writer, I have to be fascinated by the word "nigger." It's a word that can trigger a violent outburst one minute and be used as a term of endearment the next. It's a word that blacks and whites often approach with different perceptions and feelings. The purpose of this paper is to explore those assumptions, to address the different contexts of the word in order to narrow this language gap between blacks and whites.

How I Tried To Get to the Bottom of the Problem

During the third week of mentoring at the Community LiteracCenter (CLC), I had to complete a "rival reading" assignment with Tennelle Thurman, a sophomore at Perry High School. The point of the assignment was to compare our viewpoints on a text. The text, an excerpt from Alice Childress' book A Hero Ain't Nuthin' But a Sandwich, represented the statements of a black history teacher and a somewhat bigoted white teacher. It was during this discussion that I noticed one of the strengths of the CLC: it encouraged the writers and the mentors to talk race if they're not from the same one (Tennelle is black and I am white). Tennelle and I discussed our differences in a friendly, humorous tone, and it didn't take me long to realize that that
conversation would not have taken place without the CLC and the Inform Project I was participating in.

I decided to push this opportunity further. As I was in a rare social situation where it was encouraged for blacks and whites to talk race, I wanted to address a problem that blacks and whites hardly ever talk about in any situation. Essentially, the CLC was central to this paper, but I didn’t want to write a paper that wouldn’t mean anything to anyone who hadn’t been to the CLC.

My strategy was to get a few of the teens together for an interview session, an idea I coped from Tricia Davis’ inquiry on the discourse of the *Jet* magazine advertisements. I wanted to present the teens with at least one text involving the word “nigger” in order to generate discussion. I was wary of using bookish, academic texts that might repel the teens, (or myself). So I settled on two texts—a scene from the film *Lenny* and three letters to the editor of *Source* magazine, (included in Appendix II).

Tennelle Thurman, Noelle Taylor, Keith Smith and Deon Plater agreed to do the interview. All are Perry students who routinely arrived at the CLC about twenty minutes before everyone else. I took a day to go to the CLC on my own, so I could meet them for the interview session. I showed them the clip from the film and later distributed copies of the letters to the editor.

This description of how I went about collecting my data for this paper may seem meticulous and extraneous. It is here, though, that I’d like to give a warning to those who take up their inquiries after me: don’t over-rely on group discussions. Although the discussion was fairly productive and revealing, group dynamics were at play. I noticed that the more vocal teens took control of the interview. Deon, a quiet teen, had no input at all. I was also only getting one teen’s viewpoint on a few of the questions. Since that opinion was strongly stated, the other teens seemed to shy away from giving their own, out of the natural desire to avoid conflict. These factors, (along with my own inept taping job that left spots of the discussion very difficult to transcribe), led me to do another interview. Chris Goodnight, a 26-year old black man, is my sister’s boyfriend and a friend of mine. An interview with him gave me the chance to get more in-depth on the issue as well as to play his statements against the teens’.

**Context is Crucial**

“I don’t understand why it’s a big insult if a white person says ‘nigger’, but it’s okay when blacks say it to each other.”—That’s a fairly common statement (or sentiment) you may have encountered somewhere in your life, or have even said yourself. And this is an aspect of the language gap that I wanted to focus on because as a white male I know how easy it is to get lost in this puzzle.
The first thing that needs to be understood is what I call the Reversal Strategy. The Reversal Strategy is an oppressed group's taking of an insult from their oppressors in order to defend themselves. This is basically what has happened to the term "nigger." After years and years of being called that name in a derogatory way, black people took the term and fashioned it with their own meanings in order to blunt its hurtful edge.

This was the first point Chris addressed when I interviewed him, and it resurfaced a few times in our conversation:

Chris: ... And [my friend] says that white people had taken the terminology and put it on black people, and the reason most black people, the reason he uses it and it doesn't offend him is because if we use it amongst ourselves, then white people can't use it against us.

Me: Yeah ...

Chris: Kinda like what Lenny Bruce was saying. And I agree with that. If you use it—like if you're hanging out with your buddies and you call them an "asshole." You don't mean he's an asshole, but you still call him one.

Me: Yeah (laughs)

Chris: I'll call my friend like, "Yo, my nigguh," and I don't mean he's an ignorant person, 'cause I know he's not. More likely he's more educated than I am. But I call him that as a friend.

Me: I kinda see what you're saying, 'cause if you use that with your friends, it takes the sting off of it, kinda—

Chris: Yeah, exactly.

Me: 'Cause you hear it so much when you guys use it—

Chris:—that if someone calls us it, it doesn't really bother me . . .

But black people have done more than simply used the word enough to become immune to its racist sting. They've given it a whole different set of meanings. Geneva Smitherman explains in her book Talkin' and Testifyin':

Whereas to whites [the word "nigger"] is simply a way of callin a black person outa they name, to blacks it has at least four different meanings as well as a different pronunciation: nigguh. It may be a term of personal affection or endearment, as in He my main nigguh (He's my best friend) . . . Sometimes it means culturally black, identifying with and sharing the values and experiences of black people . . . Nigguh may also be a way of expressing disapproval of a person's actions. In this sense, even white folk, when they are acting inappropriately, are called nigguhs. Finally, the term may simply identify black folks—period. In this sense, the word has neutral value. (p.62)
Chris elaborated on the pronunciation issue:

Me: That you can tell from the context how to take the word.
Chris: There’s actually a way—the pronunciation of it, too. ‘Cause when most black people say it, they say nigga, like [rap group] N.W.A. It wasn’t ‘Niggers with Attitude’ it was ‘niggaz’—n.i.g.g.a., that’s how they spelled it. If you say ‘niggaz’ or ‘nigga’, you can tell. But if someone walks up to you and says ‘nigger’, you can tell the difference.

[I recount my interview at the CLC, and how unconvincing I was when I tried the black pronunciation]

Me: Do you think most whites, if they’re trying to be friendly, would have trouble trying to pronounce it that way?
Chris: Probably. Someone would probably have to sit down and talk to them about it, y’know. But if you think about it, and if you talk to most people, they don’t know the difference between ‘niggaz’ and ‘nigger’—that ‘nigga’ is this and ‘nigger’ is that. You’d have to explain it to them.

Me: If someone asked you to define the word, what would you say?
Chris: Well, the word ‘nigger’ means ‘ignorant person.’ But the word ‘nigga’, that’s one of my boys, one of my friends, that’s the way I look at it.

Me: And that kinda goes back to using it your way, which is a good strategy.
Chris: Yeah.

A question well-meaning whites may now have might sound something like this: “Okay, if that word can be a term of endearment, is it ever okay for me to use it to be friendly towards black people?” I have a simple answer to that: it depends on context. This is all pretty commonsensical, really. When you were in grade school, and you didn’t know the meaning of a word, what did your teacher tell you? Try to figure out the word through the context of the sentence.

For Dick and Jane Clueless, Webster’s defines context as “circumstances determining meaning.” In the case of the spoken word, these circumstances can be your tone of voice, the look on your face, who you’re talking to, your pronunciation (as we’ve seen), or more generally, what’s going on around you. Check out this lively exchange, but most importantly, Noell’s response:

Me: Being a white person, growing up ‘white’, being around a lot of white people, the thing I hear is a lot of white people saying is ‘blacks can say [nigger] to each other, but when whites say it it’s bad.’ What do you guys think about that?
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Noell: It’s not the same.
Me: Why?
Keith: It is the same.
Noell: No . . .

[Keith and Noelle talk over each other]

Tennelle: It’s how you say it.
Noell: Y’know, the context of the word . . .
Keith: No . . .
Noell: Yeah, it is how you say it.

[Keith and Noelle talk over each other again]
Noell: If like a black person walks up to someone he knows and says,
‘What’s up, nigguh,’ and whatever . . . but if a white person just says ‘hey, nigger,’ it’s different. It is different.
Keith: It’s part of black slang.
Noell: Exactly.
Me: So if I just walked up to you guys and said, ‘Hey what’s up, nigguh?’ you wouldn’t mind?

[Giggles—my pronunciation is very unconvincing]
Noell: No.

Me: Do you think it depends on how the person’s saying it?
Noell: Where it comes from. How it sounds. Y’know if you’re in an argument or whatever and you call someone a ‘nigger’—or if you just say ‘what’s up, nigguh?’ y’know, it’s different.

There’s more to context than how the word sounds, though. Behind how the word rolls off your tongue is who you are, and who you are is largely shaped by how and where you were raised. A recurring theme in my interview with Chris was the white person who uses the word “nigger” to try to fit into “black” discourse versus the white person who really is a part of “black” discourse:

Me: What do you think about white people using it the way you and your friends use it?
Chris: If it’s a friend of mine or someone I know, it doesn’t bother me. I have a white friend named Blip and he actually acts more ‘black’ than I do. He uses the term a lot with me and my friends. But he grew up with us, y’know. So it doesn’t bother me when he says it to me. But if you don’t know me—’cause I wouldn’t know how to take it, what kind of context you would say it to me with. So if you know me, you can say it to me, no problem. But if you don’t know me, I don’t know how you’re saying it to me. I don’t know how to take it.
Me: What if you and your friends were standing around, and
somebody you could tell was trying to fit in with your friends came up and said that, would it bother you? Or would it just be pitiful? Would you laugh?

Chris: That’s the way I would take it. I’d think, ‘Oh, he’s just an idiot.’ But a lot of my friends—and it has happened before—like we’ll be hanging around Blip and he’ll say it, and they’ll look at him like ‘Hold up, hold—wait a minute.’ And then we’ll have to explain, we’ll have to tell them that he’s cool with us, he doesn’t mean anything derogatory. Some people, some of my friends will take offense to [a stranger using the word to try to be friendly]. But me personally, no. I just think of it as some idiot trying to fit in.

Note how Blip grew up with Chris, allowing them to share the same discourse of Black English (or “ghettoish” as Chris calls the dialect.) It probably wasn’t apparent to Blip that he was using a discourse he “wasn’t supposed to” until other people Chris knew objected. Even then, the objectors accepted Blip once Chris explained who Blip was (someone from the Chris’ neighborhood), and thus the context Blip was using the word in.

The White Dilemma

Now if you think I’m just trying to teach the whiteys of the world a lesson by letting them know that the black usage of “nigger” is over their heads, then think again. I believe that if this paper is to have any real value, blacks as well as whites should learn something about the issue. It is here that I want to talk about what I call the White Dilemma.

The White Dilemma was alluded to back on page 2—the idea of “Why is it okay for blacks to say ‘nigger’ but a slur when I say it?” The thing I’d like to say is that while that sentiment may ring of self-pity, it can also come from a genuine desire to be able to relate to black people. When confronted with this apparent contradiction, many well-meaning whites get stumped.

So now we go back to another thing I mentioned earlier in the paper—the assumptions people bring to the word. The dominant assumption white people bring to the word “nigger” is that it’s a racial slur, nothing else. That’s what I was raised to think, and I’m confident that most white children were taught somewhere along the way that “nigger” is an insult to blacks, a “bad word.” The stigma the media has placed on the word (the newscasts on that high school football game and teacher both ominously referred to it as the “N-word”) also contributes to this perception. Therefore, even the most “liberal” whites will feel uncomfortable saying or hearing the word, regardless of its context.
I'm not going to attack the white parents who raised their children to think that the word "nigger" is a slur and discouraged their children from using it. These parents are doing a noble thing in trying to prevent their children from acquiring racist attitudes. The problem seems to come in later, when those children grow to confused adults.

Instead of digging a little deeper on why blacks are casually tossing the word "nigger" around, many whites simply have an understandable reaction—they get offended (see the middle letter in Appendix II).

Chris and I touched on this letter in our conversation:

Me: Do you think that's a good, or stupid way to be?
Chris: Well, I think that that person just doesn't really know anybody that uses the term as a friendly gesture or like a term of endearment, that person probably just knows the term as derogatory. I think if they knew somebody that actually used the term endearingly or actually talked to them about how to use the term they might not think that.

Me: I was raised thinking that word's bad. I don't think I could—I mean you and me know each other and we're friends with each other, but I don't think I could call you 'nigger'—'nigga'—the pronunciation thing's still not coming... see, it even sounds funny when I try to say it. It probably has a lot to do with how I was raised. It's just not in me, y'know, to walk into a room and say that. Maybe if I hung out with you and your friends it'd rub off.

Chris: Or maybe if you were raised in a neighborhood with a lot of black kids that talked that way, it'd probably be different. You might talk like that. We call it "ghettoish" like somebody from the ghetto talkin' a lot of slang and lingo, y'know people just talk like that all the time. If you were raised around somebody who talked like that, or a lot of people that talked like that, you might talk like that. Being that you're not, you don't feel comfortable saying it and you sound funny saying it.

Notice how context (where I was raised, who I grew up with) reenters the picture. An important phrase in the above excerpt, though, is when I say "It's not in me, y'know, to walk into a room and say that." Those words were pretty much straight out of Tennelle's mouth during the following exchange:

Me: So [a 'friendly' white use of the word] doesn't offend you at all? Like when [white] people try to use it to sound hardcore?
Tennelle: I don't think they can use it. It's not in them to use that word.
So here we can look at the other side of the coin—the assumptions black people bring to “nigger.” We’ve already explored how it’s been taken and shaped into a term of endearment, but it would be bizarrely inept to think that’s the only way blacks view “nigger.” Tennelle seems to be assuming that when the word comes out of a white mouth, even in an attempt to sound friendly, something’s just not right. In other words, there’s a common black perception that regardless of context, that particular word is off limits to white people. Centuries of racist usage will do that to a word. At the same time, it should also be understood that this perception contributes to the White Dilemma. Along with their own trepidation, whites will sense a popular black resistance to a white usage of the word, and become more withdrawn.

... and the Black Dilemma

None of this is meant to suggest that “nigger” is okay with all black people as long as it’s coming out of a black mouth. Again, there are hundreds of years of racist history behind this word, and it would be absurd to think that every victim of its cutting edge will accept it simply because of a contextual shift. The bottom letter in Appendix II illustrates this sentiment clearly enough.

It would also be a terrible mistake to write Tennelle off as a reverseracist based on her not thinking whites can say “nigger.” She seemed to be assuming that the word in itself was harmful during other spots in the interview:

Me: ... Do you think that would work—if Kennedy went on TV, and people would just use that word freely—
Tennelle: Mm-mm. People don’t need to use that word freely.

Me: You’d avoid saying it at all costs. But [Bruce]’s saying—tell me if you disagree—that [the word ‘nigger’] should just be said, it should just be thrown out there, because when it’s thrown out there—
Tennelle: It doesn’t change. It doesn’t change. It shouldn’t be thrown out there.

So as I’ve addressed the trouble whites meet when they encounter this word, I hope I’ve also dispelled the notion that the black community is entirely comfortable with the word “nigger” as long as it’s uttered within the black community. In that sense, it’s pretty easy to see how the word “nigger” is an issue itself, how it has become something neither race seems quite sure how to handle.
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The Lenny Bruce Solution (?)

Appendix I is a transcription of a scene from the movie Lenny, an autobiographical film about the controversial early 1960s comedian Lenny Bruce. A quick read over the excerpt shows that Bruce’s statements are still pretty potent. I showed this clip of the film to both the CLC teens and Chris in order to generate discussion, and you might be able to imagine how awkward the situation was by looking at the transcription.

But both Chris and the teens agreed that Bruce made a decent point as far as removing the sting of the word went. But since I would like to contribute to closing this “language gap” between blacks and whites, the question I had was whether or not Bruce’s idea (saying “nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger ‘til nigger didn’t mean anything anymore”) would work. The responses were pretty clear:

Me: Okay, this is the big question I’m going to ask you guys—do you think it’s possible—do you think it’s possible for whites to use that word like [Bruce] is saying.
Noell: No. The scars are still there. No.
Me: Okay (laughs), that’s a pretty honest, straightforward answer.

Me: Do you think what [Bruce] said would work?
Chris: I don’t think it would work. There’s too many people out there that, that wouldn’t think the right thing, that wouldn’t feel right saying it, because of the way it’s been used for so many years. It would take a real long time to erase that. And a lot of black people wouldn’t be able to forget what the terminology means. I mean, if we could erase all that and start all over again, it could all work. But after four hundred years—
Me: Yeah, that’s definitely what one of the girls I interviewed said. I her, and she flat-out said ‘No’, I asked her if there will come a day when blacks and whites can use that word in the same way.
Chris: No, I don’t think so. Because there’s just too many people that aren’t gonna get the point across. There’s just not a way or enough people to actually educate the public in a way to get them to forget how it used to be used. Because it’s history, and you can’t erase history. If there was some way you could, then you probably could do it. But I don’t think it’ll ever happen.

While Bruce’s commentary is amusing and thought-provoking, it’s obvious that people don’t forget as easily as he would have liked them to. There is, after all, “four hundred years” to contend with. Not only that, but
if we were somehow able to scream “nigger” ‘til our throats went hoarse and until no one second guessed any one else’s intentions, would the real problem be solved? Chris made good points here:

Me: . . . so you don’t think blacks and whites will ever use that word in the same way . . .

Chris: There’s always gonna be a racist person. And while there’s always gonna be a racist person, there’s always gonna be the word ‘nigger’—in the context of a derogatory meaning. So unless we can erase all racism, it’s always gonna be there.

Chris: . . . But then again, the racist white people would probably just find another word, so I don’t know if it would really do any good.

“It’s just a word”

And so my inquiry arrives at its conclusion: as much pain as the word “nigger” has caused through the ages, as many violent incidents as it may have sparked, it is ultimately replaceable. As the word is replaceable, it’s also a mere utterance, standing for an idea. That idea is what’s hurtful and damaging, the idea of the black person as ignorant or somehow inferior to the white. And if “nigger” is no longer the carrier of that idea, and another word takes over, has this paper been a waste of time for you and I?

No, it hasn’t. As I stated early on, this paper was meant to explore the assumptions different people bring to the word and the different contexts it’s used in so that I may help close the communication gap between blacks and whites. And I do think it’s possible for people, both black and white to look at what’s here—the Reversal Strategy, the Dilemmas, the Lenny and Source excerpts, and come away with a new understanding of the issue.

Will what’s in here end racism? Of course not. But if I’ve been able to clear a few things up about the word “nigger”, then maybe it will lose a little more of its sting and stigma. If another word steps up to replace it, then let someone else explore it. And so on and so on until the hate has no more words to hide behind.
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Appendix I:

Excerpt from the film Lenny

[Scene: Lenny Bruce onstage in a small nightclub, doing his routine]:

“Are there any niggers here tonight? Turn on the houselights, please, and could the waiters and waitresses just stop serving for a second—and turn off the [spotlight].

Now what did he say? ‘Are there any niggers here tonight?’ Well there’s one nigger here because I see him back there working. Let’s see, there’s two niggers. And between those two niggers sits a kike. And there’s another kike. That’s two kikes and three niggers. And there’s a spic, right, hmm. There’s another spic—ooh, there’s a wop, there’s a polak, and ohh, a couple of greaseballs, (laughs), and there’s three Irish micks, and [sitting down right in front of a black man near the stage] one hip, thick, hunky, funky boogie. Boogie-boogie. Mm-hmm.

[Bruce assumes the voice and gestures of an auctioneer]:

I got three kikes here, do I hear five kikes? I got five kikes! Do I hear six spies? I got six spies! Do I hear seven niggers? I got seven niggers—sold American. I pass with seven niggers, six spies, five micks, four kikes, three guineas, and one wop.

[Audience is laughing, Bruce turns to black man he called ‘boogie’, who’s also smiling now]—you almost punched me out, didn’t you?

Well I’m just trying to make a point. And that is that it’s the suppression of the word that gives it the power, the violence, the viciousness. Dig: if President Kennedy would just go on television and say ‘I’d like to introduce you to all the niggers in my cabinet,’ and if he’d just say ‘nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger,’ to every nigger he saw, ‘boogie, boogie, boogie, boogie, boogie, boogie, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger,’ ‘til ‘nigger’ didn’t mean anything anymore, then you’d never be able to make some six year old black kid cry because someone called him a nigger in school.”

Appendix II:

Letters to the editor of Source Magazine, July 1994

Names Will Never Hurt Me

1994 and Black people are still talking about the word “nigger” [“What’s My Name?” by Delphine Fawundu and Kristin Clark, May ’94]. Let me clarify the
issue If I can. The Latin word “negro” literally means “black.” In the mouth of a southern cracker, the word transforms into nigger, nigrah, nigga. I think it must have been some kind of joke by the whiteman to start the rumor about how nigger means ignorant person. I have no problem with the Latin word negro, the Greek word Ethiopian, the Kemetic word Kem—which all translate to the English word black—because I don’t have a problem, consciously or subconsciously, with being Black. So if a nother brother or sister calls I a “nigga,” I take it as a term of endearment. If a devil calls I a “nigger,” I will not let him get away with what he thinks the word means—and it’s like that.

I-Ra
San Jose, CA

I am a white male musician and a fan of hip hop music. I can count on one hand the number of times I have used the word “nigger.” While MCs may take that word and flip it up to have positive meanings and Black people everywhere may do the same, I have to say that the “N” word should be off-limits to white people, straight up. It doesn’t matter how “down” you are.

Elias Andrinopoulos
Peabody, MA

Finally, the term “nigger” is researched by your publication. The fabric that holds our people together becomes unglued when we call each other by that ugly word. Achieving our goals as Blacks and Hispanics means disposing of negative factors. In this case, it is the word “nigger.” There are other positive terms we can—and should—address each other with, such as “brother.” Using that inhumane term should invoke in us a sense of injustice—not pride—in embracing the word as our own.

Rico “Barbwire” Vest
New York, NY

Appendix III:
The Interviews

The first interview was taken at the CLC, November 1st, 1995. Participating were Noell Taylor, Keith Smith, Tennelle Thurman, and Deon Plater. The transcription has been edited for clarity.

Me: (stopping the video tape): We’re pretty much past the part that’s important. What do you guys think? About that? About what he said?

Noell: It was funny. He made a point. He made a good point, but . . .
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[Someone pops their head in the door and asks what day it is]—
Me: I mean, did that piss you off, hearing that?
Tennelle: Yeah . . . at first. Yeah, it did at first. He could have said ‘Are there any spics in the house?’ first . . . but he said ‘nigger’ first.
Me: Do you think he did that because he knew—that’s important—do you think he did that because he knew that that word specifically is the one—
Keith: Mmm-hmm.
Tennelle: That’s the main one . . .
Me: . . . so he did it for the shock value.
Tennelle: Mmm-hmm.
Me: Do you think he made a point?
[Keith and Noelle talk over each other]:
Keith: Uh-huh.
Noell: He did make a point, but—
Keith: Eventually he got to the point—
Noell: But he used that example of Kennedy or whatever, but everybody knows if you look up ‘nigger’ in the dictionary it don’t mean a black person, it means ‘one who lacks knowledge’ . . . (Tennelle backs her up with “Exactly”) . . . So I’m sayin’ it would still get feedback even if Kennedy said it, calling everybody ‘nigger’ or whatever (Tennelle: “Yeah, yeah”) so . . . What he said was good, the point he made was good, but the fact still stands that people call you ‘nigger’ that means you lack knowledge. If anybody says it, black, white, whatever.
Me: What would you have done if you were [the black man Bruce addresses directly in front if the audience]? Would you have decked him?
Keith: Yeah.
Tennelle: He should have hit him.
Me: Yeah? (laughs)
Keith: He wouldn’t have got the whole word out, he would have been like—‘ni—’
[laughs]
Me: Do you think that whole thing he said about Kennedy, (obviously this is dated), do you think that would do any good? Do you think that would work—if Kennedy went on TV, and people would just use that word freely—
Tennelle: Mm-mm. People don’t need to use that word freely.
Noell: Some people could look at it as ‘lacking knowledge’ . . .
Me: Being a white person, growing up ‘white’, being around a lot of white people, the thing I hear is a lot of white people saying
is 'blacks can say [nigger] to each other, but when whites say it it's bad.' What do you guys think about that?

Noell: It's not the same.
Me: Why?
Keith: It is the same.
Noell: No . . .

[Keith and Noell talk over each other]

Tennelle: It's how you say it.
Noell: Y'know, the context of the word . . .
Keith: No . . .
Noell: Yeah, it is how you say it.

[Keith and Noell talk over each other again]

Noell: If like a black person walks up to someone he knows and says, 'What's up, nigguh,' and whatever . . . but if a white person just says 'hey, nigger,' it's different. It is different.
Keith: It's part of black slang.
Noell: Exactly.

Me: So if I just walked up to you guys and said, 'Hey what's up, nigguh?' you wouldn't mind?

[Giggles]
Noell: No.
Me: Really?

[Noell and Tennelle talk over each other]

Tennelle: There is—I look at it as—I think white people look funny saying that. Like they're trying to sound black. They don't need to say it.

[Keith and Tennelle talk over each other]

Noell: I remember when I went to Monroeville for a weekend or whatever, I saw a white guy go up to another and say 'What's up, white trash?' and I was like Okay . . .

[Giggles].

Me: Do you think it depends on how the person's saying it?
Noell: Where it comes from. How it sounds. Y'know if you're in an argument or whatever and you call someone a 'nigger'—or if you just say 'what's up, nigguh?' y'know, it's different.

Me: That's funny, I wouldn't have guessed that. I grew up with my parents telling me never to use that word. According to my parents it was just a bad word—

Keith: A word that causes trouble . . .
Me: Yeah, but I think most white kids growing up were told that somewhere or another . . .

[It was around this time that the mentors and Oliver students began filing in, and I pretty much began to lose
control over the session]. So it doesn’t offend you at all? Like when [white] people try to use it to sound hardcore?

Tennelle: I don’t think they can use it. It’s not in them to use that word.

Me: Yeah . . .

Noell: Yeah it is, just not . . .


[Now more people file into the room, talking loudly].

Noell: Are you taping this?

Me: Oh, yeah.

[Noelle and I try to politely kick the newcomers out] . . .

Me: Deon, you’ve been pretty quiet, is there anything you want to say about this?

Deon: (about to speak, drowned out by more incoming voices. Keith kindly kicks these people out . . .) Everyone already said it . . .

Me: What do you guys think of political correctness?

Keith: It’s fake, that’s what I think. They try too hard, you know what I’m sayin’? It’s fake.

[Tennelle and Noell exchange a smiling glance while Keith’s talking.]

Me: Yeah?

Keith: Yeah.

Me: Okay, my understanding of political correctness is that you watch what you say, because people are sensitive to how you talk about them, but what I think that means is that words matter—you wouldn’t say nigger—

Tennell: Yeah . . .

Me: You’d avoid saying it at all costs. But [Bruce]’s saying—that [the word ‘nigger’] should just be said, it should just be thrown out there, because when it’s thrown out there—

Tennelle: It doesn’t change. It doesn’t change. It shouldn’t be thrown out there.

Noell: No. No. What’s the reason? Why you gonna tell us, it’s in the dictionary, why are you saying ‘lack of knowledge?’ Why you gonna talk like that? . . .

Keith: My dad says it.

Tennelle: It doesn’t need to be thrown around like that.

Noell: Unless you really know that person, unless you really know who that person is. It’s stupid, it’s stupid. The background of that word . . . it doesn’t need to be thrown around.
[Here I distributed the copies of the Letters to the Editor page of Source, briefly introducing them. The teens took some time to read the letters.]

Noell: (referring to first letter), This is what we’re saying. She’s not gonna be offended when other ‘brothers or sisters’ call her that. Is this a girl?
Me: I don’t know. I don’t...
[Noell and Tennelle talk over each other]
Well, what do you think of I-Ra?

Tennelle: Who’s the devil?
Me: huh?
Tennelle: The devil here—is that a white person?
Me: I don’t know, that’s what I’m guessing.
Tennelle: That’s what I think.
Me: So you think I-Ra is saying—
Noell: Contradicting [herself]. Because if she don’t like being called a ‘nigger’, which means ignorant or whatever, what makes her think white people want to be called ‘devils’, evil persons?
Tennelle: I don’t think she’s saying that—
Noell: ‘If the devil calls’—if a ‘devil.’ Meaning who? Like Satan himself is gonna call her a ‘nigger’

Me: (on the second letter): he’s saying that white people should never use that word any time at all.
Noell: That’s right.
Me: But you were just saying before that it’s okay—
Noell: They’re the ones saying it about us. So why would they start using it now to be friendly?
Me: Well, what if white people want to use it just to be friendly? To try to remove that gap.
Keith: Then they should hurry up and get to the point. If they’re trying to use it like [Bruce] did, then they should get to the point.
[Laughs]
Tennelle: [the black man Bruce addresses directly in front of the crowd] was not playing!
Me: Okay, this is the big question I’m going to ask you guys—do you think it’s possible—do you think it’s possible for whites to use that word like [Bruce] is saying.
Noell: No. The scars are still there. No.
Me: Okay (laughs), that’s a pretty honest, straightforward answer.
The second interview took place at Chris Goodnight’s house on December 5th, 1995. The interview has been edited for clarity.

Me: Well, what did you think of [the movie clip]?
Chris: Well, I thought that he had some good points, ‘cause actually me and a friend of mine were talking about this a couple weeks ago, and we had a discussion. There was two black people, one mixed person, and there was a white person. And the white person said they were offended that he used the word ‘nigger.’ And he said, which I agree with, is that the only reason that she was offended because she didn’t really know the definition of ‘nigger.’ And in the dictionary, ‘nigger’ is an uneducated or ignorant person. And he says that white people had taken the terminology and put it on black people, and the reason most black people, the reason he uses it and it doesn’t offend him is because if we use it amongst ourselves, then white people can’t use it against us.

Me: Yeah . . .
Chris: Kinda like what Lenny Bruce was saying. And I agree with that. If you use it—like if you’re hanging out with your buddies and you call them an ‘asshole.’ You don’t mean he’s an asshole, but you still call him one.

Me: Yeah (laughs)
Chris: I’ll call my friend like, ‘Yo, my nigguh’, and I don’t mean he’s an ignorant person, ‘cause I know he’s not. More likely he’s more educated than I am. But I call him that as a friend.

Me: I kinda see what you’re saying, ‘cause if you use that with your friends, it takes the sting off of it, kinda—
Chris: Yeah, exactly.

Me: ‘Cause you hear it so much when you guys use it—
Chris: —that if someone calls us it, it doesn’t really bother me. Although I haven’t run across many people bold enough to say it to me, to my face demeaningly, but I’m sure people have said it to me behind my back, and I’ve had someone call it to me driving by—it really doesn’t bother me.

Me: What do you think about white people using it the way you and your friends use it?
Chris: If it’s a friend of mine or someone I know, it doesn’t bother me. I have a white friend named Blip and he actually acts more black than I do. He uses the term a lot with me and my friends. But he grew up with us, y’know. So it doesn’t bother me when he says it to me. But if you don’t know me—‘cause I wouldn’t know how to take it, what kind of context you would say it to
me with. So if you know me, you can say it to me, no problem. But if you don’t know me, I don’t know how you’re saying it to me. I don’t know how to take it.

Me: What if you and your friends were standing around, and somebody you could tell was trying to fit in with your friends came up and said that, would it bother you?

Or would it just be pitiful? Would you laugh?

Chris: That’s the way I would take it. I’d think, ‘Oh, he’s just an idiot.’ But a lot of my friends—and it has happened before—like we’ll be hanging around Blip and he’ll say it, and they’ll look at him like ‘Hold up, hold—wait a minute.’ And then we’ll have to explain, we’ll have to tell them that he’s cool with us, he doesn’t mean anything derogatory. Some people, some of my friends will take offense to [a stranger using the word to try to be friendly]. But me personally, no. I just think of it as some idiot trying to fit in.

Me: So really, when it comes down to it, color doesn’t matter with that word?

Chris: No—for me personally.

Me: Yeah?

Chris: Yeah. I can’t speak for everybody else. Most of my friends know the true meaning of it, and if someone says it to them, derogatory or not, they don’t pay any attention. It’s not worth fighting over, it’s just a word.

Me: When I did the interview at the CLC, it was funny, one of the comments I got from one of the girls was that ‘it’s not in [whites] to use that word.’ That it’s something white people shouldn’t touch. Even if they’re trying to be—trying to fit in. Do you disagree with that?

Chris: Well, it goes back again to whether you know the person. Like her, I can’t speak for her personally ‘cause she might take offense at how anybody says it. If someone says it just trying to fit in, they’re an idiot. If I know them, then fine.

Me: Do you think how Lenny Bruce was saying it—do you think that contradicts political correctness?

Chris: Political correctness as far as society sees it, yeah. I see the point he’s trying to make, but the way society would look at it, I think they’d say that he wasn’t politically correct.

Me: But do you personally think he was contradicting PC?

Chris: No, I don’t think so.

Me: Because my understanding of it was that it was. So, how do you understand political correctness?

Chris: But see, the point I think he was trying to make was that if everybody used ['nigger'] that it would take the harshness out
of it. So I don't think people could use it against anybody. So I don't think that would be ... Actually, when you look at it, in the way he was trying to make it, he was trying to make the term politically correct.

Me: Do you think what he said would work?

Chris: I don't think it would work. There's too many people out there that, that wouldn't think the right thing, that wouldn't feel right saying it, because of the way it's been used for so many years. It would take a real long time to erase that. And a lot of black people wouldn't be able to forget what the terminology means. I mean, if we could erase all that and start all over again, it could all work. But after four hundred years—

Me: Yeah, that's definitely what one of the girls I interviewed said. I her, and she flat-out said 'No,' I asked her if there will come a day when blacks and whites can use that word in the same way.

Chris: No, I don't think so. Because there's just too many people that aren't gonna get the point across. There's just not a way or enough people to actually educate the public in a way to get them to forget how it used to be used. Because it's history, and you can't erase history. If there was some way you could, then you probably could do it. But I don't think it'll ever happen.

Me: Do you think it's an issue? I know racism's an issue, but do you think the differences blacks and whites have over this word is something worth writing a paper about?

Chris: Yeah. Yeah I think it is a good topic. It could be—by you writing this paper it might end up—I could be wrong—it might end turning into something that could change the word. You never know.

Me: Going back to something this girl Noell was saying when I interviewed the kids, [the use of the word 'nigger'] is really not a big deal. It kinda comes down to the context.

Chris: Yeah.

Me: That you can tell from the context how to take the word.

Chris: There's actually a way—the pronunciation of it, too. 'Cause when most black people say it, they say nigga, like [rap group] N.W.A. It wasn't 'Niggers with Attitude' it was 'niggaz'—n.i.g.g.a., that's how they spelled it. If you say 'niggaz' or 'nigga', you can tell. But if someone walks up to you and says 'nigger', you can tell the difference.

[I recount my interview at the CLC, and how unconvincing I was when I tried the black pronunciation]

Me: Do you think most whites, if they're trying to be friendly, would have trouble trying to pronounce it that way?
Chris: Probably. Someone would probably have to sit down and talk to them about it, y'know. But if you think about it, and if you talk to most people, they don't know the difference between 'niggaz' and 'nigger'—that 'nigga' is this and 'nigger' is that. You'd have to explain it to them.

Me: If someone asked you to define the what, what would you say?

Chris: Well, the word 'nigger' means ignorant person. But the word 'nigga', that's one of my boys, one of my friends, that's the way I look at it.

Me: And that kinda goes back to using it your way, which is a good strategy.

Chris: Yeah.

Me: Okay, let's see, I'm running out of questions here . . . so you don't think blacks and whites will ever use that word in the same way . . .

Chris: There's always gonna be a racist person. And while there's always gonna be a racist person, there's always gonna be the word 'nigger'—in the context of a derogatory meaning. So unless we can erase all racism, it's always gonna be there.

[Referring to the middle letter to the editor of Source magazine, see Appendix II]:

Me: Do you think that's a good, or stupid way to be?

Chris: Well, I think that that person just doesn't really know anybody that uses the term as a friendly gesture or like a term of endearment, that person probably just knows the term as derogatory. I think if they knew somebody that actually used the term endearingly or actually talked to them about how to use the term they might not think that.

Me: I was raised thinking that word's bad. I don't think I could—I mean you and me know each other and we're friends with each other, but I don't think I could call you 'nigger'—'nigga'—the pronunciation thing's still not coming . . . see, it even sounds funny when I try to say it. It probably has a lot to do with how I was raised. It's just not in me, y'know, to walk into a room and say that. Maybe if I hung out with you and your friends it'd rub off.

Chris: Or maybe if you were raised in a neighborhood with a lot of black kids that talked that way, it'd probably be different. You might talk like that. We call it 'ghettoish' like somebody from the ghetto talkin' a lot of slang and lingo, y'know people just talk like that all the time. If you were raised around somebody who talked like that, or a lot of people that talked like that, you might talk like that. Being that you're not, you
don’t feel comfortable saying it and you sound funny saying it.

Me: As we’ve seen. [Laughs] See, I’m in a weird situation, because on one hand I think I’m doing the right thing by thinking that’s a bad word I should never say, and yet at the same time it’s a term of endearment, y’know . . . it could be a term of endearment, but I’m divided, because I don’t think I have it in me to say, y’know . . .

Chris: It’s not part of your, um . . . vocabulary. See, the area I was raised in was basically a white area with a little black area in the middle, so amongst ourselves we talked that way, we used the word ‘nigga’, but when we’re up the street, or when we were around other people, or the white people didn’t really hang with us, we didn’t use it. But now it’s at a point where we really don’t care, we just use it everywhere because it’s part of our vocabulary. And if somebody’s standing around and wants to get into the conversation and ask us, we’ll tell ‘em. But if they just want to sit around and say ‘That’s stupid, they shouldn’t say that to each other’ they can go on with that opinion.

Me: I never did have the opinion that it was wrong for black guys to call each other that, ‘cause I did know that it came from that strategy we were talking about, that—

Chris: Taking the power away from the word.

[Conversation again shifts to my story of having trouble using the word] . . .

Chris: That’d be like if you took the word ‘fuck’ for instance. Everybody says, y’know, that ‘fuck’ means ‘sex’, and you just changed the meaning of it to mean something else, and you try to start using it. It still wouldn’t work because people will still think ‘fuck’ is a bad word and that it means ‘sex’. It just wouldn’t work. People will always think of it as a bad word.

[Conversation takes a humorous turn on the origin of profanity] . . .

Me: Do you think the word ‘nigger’ is different from other racial slurs?

Chris: Yeah, well I don’t know. There’s probably a couple of other words you could put in the same category. Like ‘hunky’, blacks used to use the word on white people, but Hungarian people call themselves that. That’s a word that could probably fit into the same category, but I don’t know if I could think of any other ones . . . Although I’ve heard Italian people call themselves ‘wops’ or ‘guineas’ or ‘dagos’—

Me: A lot of Italians proudly refer to themselves as ‘dagos’ . . .

Chris: But I don’t think there’s too many words you can fit in that
category. Like I don’t think you’ll ever hear a Jewish person call themselves ‘kike’, I don’t think that’ll ever happen, y’know.

Me: Or do you think that one word can be the source of trouble between blacks and whites, just from how differently they see it?

Chris: Yeah, probably on both ends. Because of the fact that a lot of white people think of it as a derogatory towards a black person, and some black people think of it as a derogatory word towards black people.

And racism’s in the media now, more than it’s ever been, it’s always been there, but now it’s on the news a lot. People are talking about it, and right now it’s a big issue. It’s good that people are talking about it, but I don’t know if they’re doing anything about the problem. But I think that if you can take the word, and take the context, and change the word around to its actual meaning, or like the way black people use it endearingly, it would probably take a lot of the power out of white people using it derogatorily. But then again, the racist white people would probably just find another word, so I don’t know if it would really do any good.

Me: So when it comes down to it, it’s not really the word ‘nigger’, it’s what’s behind it.

Chris: Exactly.

Me: Do you think any one word should have that much power?

Chris: I don’t think it should. I don’t think any one word should have that much effect on a person to make them want to fight somebody or make them want to cry, or feel hurt. It’s just a word, and words can’t really hurt you.

Bibliography

The following books and magazine(s), if not quoted in the paper, guided it in some way, shape or form:


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