

WHAT IS BLACK?

With Jay-Z and Kanye living it up as ‘Niggas in Paris’ and the forever infamous but established phrase ‘nigga please’ precedent in our humour lineage, **Deborah Williams** asks, can the N-Word be used to define being black?

“How were you raised on Public Enemy and still became your own worst enemy?” some thought-provoking words from Dean Atta’s poem, *I Am Nobody’s Nigger*. A word that has been used to persecute, derogate and literally blacken the spirit of black people has now become a word of reclamation for some... but not for me.

A word rooted from the Spanish and Portuguese noun *Negro*, descending from the Latin adjective *Niger*, which both mean black. The word was known to denote a black or dark-skinned person but then later became a racial slur of segregation. The ‘Niggers’ portrayal over the years has not been clean at all. With the underline intention to inhabit characteristics of being, “economically, politically and socially disenfranchised” and now “this misinterpretation of our heritage has been perpetuated among our own race,” says Jonathan McCoy, who started a petition in 2010 to remove the demeaning word from the English language.

“The N-word is like an abyss, a black hole. Many are very ignorant to the past. It’s being used by non-black people and tried to be seen as a term of endearment, however some words cannot be returned,” explains a young black male from a Birmingham youth group. We have rappers like French Montana, who is Moroccan, with his song ‘Aint worried ‘bout nothin’ which uses the word ‘nigga’ 44 times throughout, with it precedent in the chorus. 2012 blockbuster hit, *Django Unchained* by Quentin Tarantino, came under attack about the amount of times the word was used. Now, we may all get a bit fired up when we hear a non-black person using this word, however, if black people have ‘taken’ this word and abused it, why is it a surprise when we hear someone from another race using it? Are we not in a sense allowing them to abuse it as well? Which makes me ask the question, are black people adding to this suppression of unconscious racism when using this word? “The hypocrisy of some black people who call each other nigga or use it as part of a joke makes no sense. They need to wake up! Sometimes out of ignorance we reinforce our own oppression,” states a black social worker from London. “Society used to be black and white, right or wrong. Now, it is grey. The n-word being used to define black people makes the two ideologies synonymous. The word is a symbol of how blurred the moral standard of society has become. Nowadays it’s okay to say it if you’re repeating a joke or singing a song lyric but it’s not okay if it’s just said in a conversation,” adds another youth.

Film director, Spike Lee spoke some contradicting words when he said, “I think black people have to be in control of their own image because film is a powerful medium. We can’t just sit back and let other people define our existence.” However, with never-ending films being released featuring all-black casts, are we subsequently stunting our own growth as a people? Are we framing our level of success in the small minority box? Ultimately producing a mindset of because “I am black I cannot reach the same heights as my white counterpart.” I understand where Lee is coming from but I also see how black people have become “elitists.” Wanting to be accepted by everyone but then excluding ourselves. We say no one can depict black people whether it is in film or another medium but then complain when the race isn’t included in mainstream society. Is this an illustration of our own self-loathing? After 180 years, we are still in a slavery mindset. Instead of focusing on reaching great heights, the focus is on the negative and ultimately breaks down our own ongoing legacies. “We cannot think of being acceptable to others until we have first proven acceptable to ourselves.” – Malcolm X

Over the years many have tried the art of reclamation. Women have done it with the B-Word, Pakistani’s have done it with the shortening of their countries name and even white people have tried it. However, the difference is the “N-word stems way back from a deep era of oppression.” Hip Hop has played a major part in the retrieval of the n-word with artists like the N.W.A (*Niggas With Attitude*), Tupac, Jay-Z, YG and films

like ‘Boyz n the Hood,’ officiating the word in popular culture. The worlds most opinionated rapper, Kanye West or what he likes to affiliate himself as, Yeezus (God help us all!) has recently tried to reclaim another indecent connotation by stamping the confederate flag all over his tour merchandise and was even snapped wearing a jacket with the symbol on it outside retail chain, Barneys stating that, “I made it my flag. It’s my flag now. Now what you going to do?” Well, the way I see it is, you cannot reclaim something that was not originally yours.

Black cannot be defined as just a colour or even a shade. It is for some, including me a way of life. It is how I was born. Black cannot be defined by bass bumping beats on a hip hop track or the crispy succulent sensation of fried chicken (cause you know every black person loves chicken) or go through life running on BMT – black man time and it especially cannot be defined by the word, ‘Nigga.’ By using the word ‘nigga’ you are just reapplying the heavy iron shackles that bound our ancestors and resurrecting many buried years of persecution. Instead, of removing “the kinks from your hair, remove them from your brain, and take some wise words from Compton’s very own answer to Shakespeare, Tupac. “Out of controversy comes conversation, out of conversation comes action.” It’s only through this we may be able to make a change.