

# **African Americans' Role in the Persistence of the Derogatory Word Nigger**

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## **Résumé**

*Sujette à des formes multiples de racisme depuis plus de quatre siècles, la communauté Africaine-Américaine aux Etats-Unis ne manque presque jamais l'occasion de faire entendre sa voix pour exiger la reconnaissance de son humanité. Pourtant, une frange non négligeable de cette communauté s'attache à faire usage du mot nigger et de ses variantes pour s'auto-identifier alors que ceux-ci ont très souvent été utilisés pour chosifier ses membres. Ecrit sur la base de faits personnellement vécus mais aussi et surtout de sources musicales et médiatiques, cet article contribue au débat sur la longévité du mot nigger dans l'univers linguistique américain. Il déconstruit, au moyen de la théorie critique de la déconstruction qui permet de faire ressortir les contradictions inhérentes à un texte, les raisonnements à l'origine du choix de nigger. Pour ce faire, les termes clés sont d'abord définis. La deuxième partie de l'article traite ensuite de la transformation du mot commun nigger en injure raciale et sociale. La troisième expose les raisons objectives ayant poussé les populations noires américaines à s'en approprier. Enfin, l'irrationalité de la persistance à utiliser nigger comme identifiant communautaire réunificateur et valorisant est démontrée. Cette dernière partie de l'article établit la responsabilité des Africains Américains dans la perpétuation de ce mot insultant dans la société américaine malgré la vulgarisation de nigga dont une partie de cette communauté se fait le chantre et qui est supposé représenter une alternative plus acceptable à nigger.*

*Mots clés : Nigger, nigga, insulte, perpétuation, noirs*

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## **Abstract**

*Subject to multiple forms of racism for more than four centuries, the African American community in the United States almost never misses the opportunity to raise its voice to demand recognition of its humanity. However, a significant section of this community is committed to using the word nigger and its variants to self-identify, whereas these terms have very often been used in the objectification of its members. Written on the basis of personally-experienced facts but also and above all musical and media sources, this article contributes to the debate on the longevity of the word nigger in the American linguistic universe. It deconstructs, by means of the critical theory of deconstruction which makes it possible to bring out the contradictions*

*inherent in a text, the reasoning at the origin of the choice of nigger. To do this, the key terms are first defined. The second part of the article then deals with the transformation of the ordinary word nigger into a racial and social slur. The third sets out the objective reasons that led the black American populations to reclaim it. Finally, the irrationality of the persistence in using nigger as a unifying and empowering community identifier is demonstrated. This last part of the article establishes the responsibility of African Americans in the perpetuation of this derogative word in the American society despite the popularization of nigga which part of this community champions and which is supposed to represent a more acceptable alternative to nigger.*

*Keywords:* Nigger, nigga, insult, perpetuation, blacks

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## **Introduction**

When in the U.S. from 2009 to 2011 and then again in 2012, I was appalled to hear some African Americans calling themselves with a real sense of pride *niggers*, a word stemming from the Latin word *niger* meaning *black color* but which had become a slur over time and been at the origin of so many interracial brawls. At first I did not understand the anachronism of the different situations in which these words were uttered and somehow took them for a kind of bad joke these individuals had engaged in. But being the eyewitness of such scenes in different towns and States and also hearing it in many songs performed by African Americans finally convinced me that I was being introduced to other meanings of the word I had not yet envisaged, let alone fully grasped. This “anomaly” slowly emerging as an acceptable and even trendy noun for some African Americans, when one considers the negative connotation associated with this name over centuries, is indicative of the rise of a new state of mind among the people who glamorize it.

With such a high level of trivialization, one could have logically expected to see *nigger*, also known as the N-Word, slowly die from the American sociocultural landscape or at least lose its negative charge. Recent events in the country rather indicate the contrary as the number of racial conflicts its use is creating year after year evidences the negativity still attached to it. The innumerable number of scenes caught on tape almost every day and all the lawsuits filed on account of it all across the country demonstrate that this racial

epithet is solidly engrained in the psyche of the members of non-African American communities who often use it with the intent to hurt African Americans during tense interactions. This type of racially-motivated altercations is exemplified by a video posted on YouTube by the television channel WKYC Channel 3 under the title *Video shows a white man using the N-word then striking a woman of color in Akron*. This disturbing video edifies on the damaging effects the use of the word *nigger* can generate. The video also shows that young white Americans are fully aware of the derogative meaning the word encapsulates.

The present study aims to demonstrate the responsibility of many African Americans for the survival of the “N-Word.” It answers the following questions: How responsible are African Americans for the rooting of the slur *nigger* in the American linguistic landscape? Has the shift from *nigger* to *nigga* participated in making *nigger* lose its derogative weight? Is *nigga* used consistently by the members of the African American community who support it? Isn’t the inconsistent use of *nigga* creating more confusion than expected? Is this form of slur reclamation effective for emptying *nigger* of its negative attributes? Is *nigger* or *nigga* appropriate as a community identifier? These are some questions the present article addresses. To do this, particular instances in which the word *nigger* or *nigga* was, and is still used, are presented and analyzed. They are primarily originating from personal experiences lived in the U.S. Further instances are drawn from song lyrics produced by some prominent American singers and from some Internet videos. All these situations are examined through the lens of deconstructive criticism. The reasons for such a choice are twofold. This theory first permits to demonstrate the richness embedded in the word *nigger* but also shows the contradictory and unexpected effects this single word is generating during interracial social interactions in the United States of America. The study thus defines, in its first part, the key terms *slurs* and *derogatory words* in general, as *nigger* and its variants belong to that category of words. It then says what is meant by *slur reclamation*. The second gives the reasons behind the evolution of the ordinary word *nigger* into a virulent racial and social slur over time. The study then explains in its third part the motives behind the reclamation of the word *nigger* by

the black populations and ends by showing how the appropriation of *nigger* in our modern times does a disservice to the African American community.

### **1. A working definition of *slur* and *slur reclamation***

Many definitions are offered for the word *slur* in dictionaries. In the online version of *The American Heritage Dictionary*, it is defined as “a disparaging remark; an aspersion.” It is worth noting that “aspersion” itself is known as “a damaging or derogatory remark or criticism; slander” in *Dictionary.com* whose own definition of the slur echoes the one given by *The American Heritage Dictionary*. Indeed, it reiterates that a slur is “a disparaging remark” but completes its definition with the word “slight” which it defines, among other meanings listed, as “to treat (someone) with indifference; ignore, especially pointedly or contemptuously.” In sum, a slur is an offensive or derogatory term aimed at an individual or a group of people with the intent to explicitly belittle, degrade or affect him or her or the members of that specific group emotionally. This explains why slurs are often seen as essential elements of hate speeches specifically used to oppress the members of a given community on the basis of such features as race, sexual orientation, regional dwelling place, social status or more.

This destructive nature of slurs is underscored by the scholars who have worked on it. Studies from different scholarships have indeed evidenced the disparaging attributes of slurs as indicated by all the dictionaries in which these words are defined. The present study fully espouses their conclusions regarding the pejorative and disrespecting meanings they carry. Here, slurs are understood as words charged with a very negative weight as philosophers of languages, linguists, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists and many more have demonstrated to this day. Among them is Chang Liu who engages the reader of his doctoral dissertation in an unequivocal statement indicating that “slurs are terrible words” (2019: 1). Some examples of these terrible words are “bitch,” a word designating a female dog but often used to derogate women, “punk,” defined by *Dictionary.com* as “a passive or submissive male inmate, especially one who is used for

sex by another male inmate,” “chink,” which is often associated with Chinese as a degrading racial appellation, just like “nigger” targets people with a black complexion. In this last category are African Americans often called “people of color” but also all individuals who have any lineage with black Africa.

Slurs are not the apanage of the Anglo-Saxon civilization. They are everywhere and their very existence is generally tied to a plethora of physiological, racial, ethnic, sociocultural, religious, sexual and gender-related traits that differentiate some individuals from others in human communities. Roback evidences in *A dictionary of International slurs* published in 1944 the existence of a huge amount of slurs in English with regard to the people with non-English citizenship but also thousands of these derogatory words and expressions in other languages towards other people who do not share the same nationalities or racial features.

With the passing of time and the incredible interconnection of peoples in our modern times, these findings offered by Roback are now a tiny portion of the words and expressions that have been generated to this day as nowhere in history have the diverse populations of our planet mingled as we all observe today. With the modern means of transportation and communication, indeed, the global village is more than a reality today. As a consequence, a huge amount of words and expressions are exchanged on a daily basis between people from diverse continents and not always in the friendliest ways. In actuality, no one is exempt from being targeted by a derogatory word of some sort at some point in life.

Still, slurs have often been turned around, in a move by the populations they target, to ridicule and even valorize them. Some communities have indeed decided to use them to call themselves in what is termed “slur reclamation” also known as “pride reclamation.” Pride reclamation is “the reclamation of a pejorative representation through processes in which the representation is accompanied by expressions of pride for being in the group or the targeted object, and the representation is presented publicly as an apt way to reference the group” (Jeshion, 2020 :106). In other words, slur or pride reclamation is disarming the bomb the slur represents and making it appear as an ordinary, inoffensive, and even trendy word.

## **2. The birth of the racial slur *nigger***

The action of disarming a racial slur and turning it into a socially-acceptable word or making an ordinary word bear a derogative meaning is of interest for deconstructive criticism. This theory is indeed crucial for analyzing the changes the word *nigger* and its variants have gone through over centuries as this word alone encapsulates an important part of the history of black populations in the United States of America. It states for example that “because it is through language that a culture’s ideologies are passed on, it is not unreasonable to say that it is through language that we come to conceive and perceive our world and ourselves” (Tyson, 2006: 255). Language is thus a strong tool that participates in the formation of our understanding of what surrounds us. In addition, deconstruction as a theory makes it clear that language is not static. Sure, “language is the ground of being, but that ground is not out of play: it is itself a dynamic, evolving, problematical, and ideologically saturated as the worldviews it produces” (Tyson, 2006: 256). The power of language is even greater than the experience it makes us all live. It is in fact source of creation as it is seen as “the conceptual framework that creates our experience” (Tyson, 2006: 257). In addition, “texts ‘enact’ hegemonic meanings first, but leftover meanings still remain, a sort of residue of the dominant meaning” (Oh, 2017: 367). In sum, the virtue of language for producing multiple meanings out of a single word is not to be denied. It is this very characteristic it bears that accounts for the slow transition experienced by the word *nigger* that moved over time from a common and almost trivial word to the racial slur it is today.

For decades now, a number of articles and other research papers have been produced to account for the birth of the word *nigger* in the American social landscape. It is established for example that “prior to the 1770s, the labels nigger and slave were interchangeable, each describing an actual social category of involuntary black laborers” (Pryor, 2016: 205). At this point, the word was not derogatory as it simply indicated a state, a social condition. First references to the word *nigger* date back in the seventeenth century, when Jamestown was settled. It is reported that,

from at least 1619, when British settlers described the first twenty involuntary black laborers in Jamestown as ‘Negars,’ the term emerged as a common colonial descriptor.

In British North America, it flattened all African-descended workers into one racialized identity. A nigger was the property of whites, she was black, her bondage was hereditary, and it lasted in perpetuity. A nigger was a slave, a real social category that described an actual class of laborers. When whites used it, it was neither a compliment nor an epithet. It identified a recognizable, albeit degraded, group of workers.” (Pryor, 2016: 212)

The North, known for not being officially a slave-owning region of the United States was nevertheless instrumental in the spread of the word *nigger* and its negative connotation as it was systematically used to identify any member of the black community, be them slaves or free. Pryor illustrates this fact as follows:

In 1837, Hosea Easton, a black minister from Hartford, Connecticut, was one of the earliest black intellectuals to write about the word ‘nigger.’ In several pages, he documented how it was an omnipresent refrain in the streets of the antebellum North, used by whites to terrorize ‘colored travelers,’ a term that elite African Americans with the financial ability and personal inclination to travel used to describe themselves. [...] He said that parents [...] disciplined white children with stories of nigger boogymen and promised a child would ‘have no more credit than a nigger’ if she misbehaved” (2016: 203-204).

Through this word, Northerners and the whole white population were also expressing their political views regarding a possible emergence of a free black middle class that could ultimately compete with them on the labor market. The threat for them was that a rising black population could even shake and reshuffle the established white political powers and privileges. “To prevent such freedom of mobility, nigger emerged as a weapon of racial containment, a barometer against which to measure the increasingly rigid boundaries of whiteness and a mechanism used to police and cleanse public space

[...]. Most significantly, the word nigger became a slur in conversation with black social aspiration” (Pryor, 2016: 205). A slur being in our specific context another word for a racial epithet, it draws us to Christopher Hom’s definition. For him “racial epithets are derogatory expressions, understood to convey contempt and hatred towards their targets” (2008: 416). In the specific case of African Americans who were targeted by these epithets, “the term [nigger] has been in use as a racist insult since the mid-1800s” (Rahman, 2011: 137). It then became obvious for the black population that they would almost everywhere in the country be called *niggers*, no matter their status. As both the South and the North had teamed up in this name calling effort, the Blacks found themselves harassed on all sides whenever they travelled outside their boundaries, that is, the houses and neighborhoods they lived in. Not only was the word *nigger* vocalized everywhere but it was also omnipresent in scores of artistic productions, newspapers and scientific papers.

### **3. The Early reclamation of *nigger***

In this hatred-saturated environment, it is safe to say that the black populations deconstructed the word *nigger* and appropriated the meanings they saw fit for their condition. This is evidenced by the fact that they neither rejected nor embraced it in full but rather derived from it values and significations its initiators had not anticipated. In this regard, their approach fuses with the tenets of deconstructive criticism, as initiated by Jacques Derrida. It is important indeed to indicate that deconstruction “is not to be mistaken for a nihilism, nor for a metaphysics of absence, nor for a negative theology. It is *not* a demolition and a dismantling to be opposed by or calling for a rebuilding and a reconstruction. It is *not* to be taken for what Heidegger calls *destruction*.” (McQuillan, 2001: 129). Here, no destruction was observed as the word *nigger* itself was not profoundly changed. It was not replaced by any other word either. In fact, the Africans who had been enslaved did not see any problem in adopting it for it did not initially bear any negative connotation, except the one expressing their condition. It was just a descriptive word that was solely meant to identify them as a group, wherever they found

themselves. The regularity of the use of this word in any part of colonial America and later the United States of America could not let them think otherwise. This widespread use demonstrated the fact that this word was simply used to designate the particular population they belonged to. And though it materialized the separation existing between them and their white masters, it was not used in a derogatory way towards them. Thus, their acceptance and even usage of *nigger* was not viewed as degrading, let alone dehumanizing.

Moreover, it should be noted that these black laborers did not have an extended vocabulary that could allow them to find new terms to designate themselves owing to the fact that they were generally forbidden to get any type of school instruction. To make matters worse, they could not gather in big numbers as this was specifically banned by the laws regulating their actions and lives. What is more, communication among the slaves on a same plantation or compound was rendered difficult as slave-owners often managed to keep families and people originating from the same regions of Africa separated so as to reduce the risk of having uprisings and other forms of revolt the sharing of the same language could facilitate.

It is also important to point out that mental emancipation for these Africans who had been taught for so long that they were *niggers* could not happen overnight for the simple reason that they had been formatted to believe everything the white society wanted them to believe. The long years of bondage and all the pain and mistreatments they lived generation after generation had taken their toll on their capacity to think for themselves about what they should call themselves. This is what Toby Jenkins stresses when he states that “rather than creating its own sense of self, African American community identity has largely been established in relation to the definitions given to it by the larger society” (2006: 138).

As they had grown with *nigger* meaning nothing else but them as a group, in opposition to the Whites, they could not understand why this word was suddenly meaning something else. Semantically and pragmatically, *nigger* represented who they were. The signifier, that is to say the word *nigger* here, and the signified which represented the concept and mental image behind this word, were in synchronization. *Nigger* meant black enslaved laborer on a property owned by a white

man and was used both by Whites and Blacks themselves in their everyday interactions. It was understood as such by both groups and bore no other meaning that derogated the members of the black community. Continuing to call themselves *niggers*, even after this word had been turned into a slur, was then a natural appropriation or reclamation of that word.

The appropriation of *nigger* actually translated more than the identifier white owners had coined for their black labor force. For the latter, it signaled more than a shared condition. It also translated a form of brotherhood and social bond all these blacks had managed to establish all across the country. There was indeed a whole culture built around the word *nigger* most whites could not fathom. So accusing the Blacks of playing the game of the oppressor was a very simplistic way of considering their unique situation. For Pryor, “instead of thinking of nigger purely as a word that African Americans borrowed and mimicked from white English, it is more accurate to conceptualize it as a word and a social identity that black laborers ultimately shaped for themselves” (2016: 212).

They did indeed enrich *nigger* with multiple meanings, without discarding its original sense. As underscored by deconstructive criticism, peripheral meanings emerged from this word the white community had now turned into a racial slur. It now meant “friend,” underscored black people’s “wit,” but above all, served as a tool for heralding defiance towards the white power and “announcing their social differences from U.S. whites” (Pryor, 2016: 222-223). In that respect, the appropriation of *nigger* came as a powerful political instrument to counter the growing hatred most whites had for the slowly emerging black elite. As they were depicted in white popular culture as a violent, untamed, dirty, stupid, irresponsible, highly sexual and promiscuous through blackfaced characters called *niggers* using the word *nigger* itself and perpetrating ignominious actions, blacks and their white allies fought back using the word *nigger* as well. Being now identified as “‘nigger lovers’ and Republicans [seen as] members of the ‘nigger party’” (Pryor, 2016: 234), the whites who had espoused the cause of the blacks in the country sided with them identifying themselves as *niggers*. Among them, “one white abolitionist proposed a radical strategy of resistance to such attacks. In the spring of 1839,

the editor of New Hampshire's *Herald of Freedom*, Nathaniel Peabody Rogers, defiantly exclaimed, 'Nigger!' 'Nigger!' The hideous epithet is glorious to us. We wear it as a plumage in our crest. We glory in the badge" (Pryor, 2016: 236).

But this white use of the word *nigger* did not appease the situation. It rather made matters worse as it did not stop all the attacks the black population was experiencing. The majority of the whites rather radicalized in their efforts to get blacks out of the streets of most towns in the country. This white reclamation of *nigger* did not dilute nor emptied the word of its derogative content either. But more importantly it made blacks feel uneasy. In fact, being called *niggers* by both friends and foes represented a challenge they were not ready to take. The mockery they were subjected to at the hands of most whites whenever *nigger* was uttered was already a bit too hard to bear for them to condone such usage. As a consequence, this strategy was abandoned and *nigger* continued to be part of the African American lexicon, embodying positive attributes when used in intra-racial interactions. Even the objections of free blacks at the beginning of the nineteenth century who put forth all the pain African Americans were undergoing so as to stop them from using a word that encapsulated their inhumane past and troubled present did not stop the majority of these populations of African descent to continue using it.

#### **4. A confusing slur reclamation disserving the African American community**

With the twentieth century came the liberation of the black American population from the officially established systems of oppression. The Civil Rights movement and a series of changes in the country had finally hushed the voices of all the segregationists who had worked so hard to keep blacks and whites physically and geographically separated. Such posters as "No Negroes Allowed," "Negroes and Dogs Not Allowed," "Whites Only," "Colored Only," that had shamed the African American populations for so long as carefully documented and commented by Elizabeth Abel in her book *Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow* were now considered illegal and banned from both public and private venues.

The dynamic at the origin of this formidable movement prompted many African Americans to demand a redefinition of who a black person was in the United States and what he or she should call himself or herself. Denouncing the exclusion black people experienced in the American society, Ture and Hamilton wrote:

We must first redefine ourselves. Our basic need is to reclaim our history and our identity from what must be called cultural terrorism, from the depredation of self-justifying white guilt. We shall have to struggle for the right to create our own terms through which to define ourselves and our relationship to the society, and to have these terms recognized. This is the first necessity of a free people, and the first right that any oppressor must suspend (1992: 36).

They reiterated this call saying a few lines later that,

black people must redefine themselves, and only they can do that. Throughout this country, vast segments of the black communities are beginning to recognize the need to assert their own definitions, to reclaim their history, their culture; to create their own sense of community and togetherness. There is a growing resentment of the word “Negro,” for example, because this term is the invention of our oppressor; it is his image of us that he describes (1967: 37).

Yet, more than fifty years after these words were written, the very word *negro* and its most known derivative *nigger* the oppressor had used for denigrating Blacks is the one African Americans themselves are adopting as an identifier. It is even the unifying word most African Americans are hoisting and advocating for to mark their Americanness even though its derogative power has not been lessening over the years.

It is true that the contexts in which the word is uttered do not always expose its disparaging side. Croom, along with many other scholars, demonstrates the importance of context with regard to the use of slurs in what he termed “non-derogatory use of slurs” (2013: 10). He illustrates this fact as follows:

Consider for example a recent report on CBS Sports, where Wilson (2013) discussed how Louis Delmas and Tony Scheffler, close friends and fellow Lions teammates,

casually exchange slurs with one another and mutually understand that in these contexts their use of ‘racial slurs are considered a term of endearment’ rather than a term of derogation” (Croom, 2013: 10).

This mark of affection the word *nigger* bears in some contexts cannot be denied. The lyrics of a rap song entitled “My Nigga” produced by the rap artist YG featuring Jeezy, Rich Homie Quan and released in 2013 exemplify this sentiment. I was also personally called that way in multiple situations where I met African American friends. Researchers similarly emphasize the importance of context when using *nigger* and its variants. One of them, “Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a professor and director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African American Research at Harvard University, also claims that he is not at all offended by the use of the slur in an in-group context among African Americans (Croom, 2013: 10).

Though famous and ordinary African Americans have reclaimed *nigger* as an ordinary word and a strong positive community identifier, it is still so negatively racially charged that the online dictionary *Dictionary.com*, consulted on Saturday, July 23, 2022, posts a caveat before defining the word itself as follows:

Usage alert about nigger: The term nigger is now probably the most offensive word in English. Its degree of offensiveness has increased markedly in recent years, although it has been used in a derogatory manner since at least the Revolution War. The senses labeled *Extremely Disparaging and Offensive* represent meanings that are deeply insulting and are used when the speaker deliberately wishes to cause great offense. It is so profoundly offensive that a euphemism has developed for those occasions when the word itself must be discussed, as in court or in a newspaper editorial: ‘the N-Word.’

No other slur receives such a special treatment in any dictionary. In comparison, *chink* in the same online dictionary is simply defined as a “noun (sometimes lowercase) Slang: *Extremely Disparaging and Offensive*. A contemptuous term used to refer to a Chinese person.” The dictionary then goes on to give the origin of *chink* which it says

is closely related to a stereotype developed by Westerners over a particular physical feature of this population descending from Asia: their eyes. *Nigger*, on the other hand, is not just the expression of a physical feature, as Carmen Cervone, Martha Augoustinos and Anne Maass demonstrate in their article *The Language of Derogation and Hate: Functions, Consequences, and Reappropriation* published in 2021. Beyond the skin color that seems most apparent to describe African Americans, *nigger* has always been considered by many non-African Americans as the epitome of negativity and failure. As history has sketched it, a *nigger* was said to be lazy, stupid, ignorant, dirty, and a sexual predator. This was the case when *nigger* started to be used offensively in the nineteenth century as highlighted by Elizabeth Pryor when she said that “White Americans of all classes and ages hissed-out the word, branding free black people as foul smelling, unproductive, licentious, and unfit for self-rule” (2016: 205). Such a view has not fundamentally changed over the years. Presented as such and still believed to be so by many non-African Americans, the black American populations derive no gain in perpetuating this word.

It is true that African Americans are not the only minority who has engaged in the reclamation of a slur at some point in time. Actually, “research on slur appropriation has shown that minority groups often ‘take back’ slurs that have been historically used to degrade their social group. This slur usage may then allow group members to affiliate with each other [...], and may function to dissociate the slur from its potential to offend” (Saucier et al, 2014: 2). Croom also reports the view of some scholars on the power slur reclamation can have on diminishing the “stigmatizing force” (2013: 12) of a slur.

This is unfortunately not the case for *nigger*. Scores of interracial conflicts arise daily over the use of this slur so many African Americans have now adopted. But conflicts do not stop there. Björn Technau underscores in his article *Going Beyond the Hate Speech: The pragmatics of ethnic slur terms* the full rejection of *nigger* by some members of the African American community itself, “regardless of whether it is a pejorative or non-pejorative use” (2018: 33). A court case published in the online version of the magazine *The Guardian* on September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013 and entitled *Black woman wins civil*

*case against black manager who used the N-Word* illustrates this point. Suing her manager Rob Carmona, “who is also black, [for] repeatedly [using] the word ‘nigger’ to refer to her during a conversation about unprofessional behaviour,” (Gabbatt, 2013) Brandi Johnson’s lawyers stated that “when you use the word nigger to an African American, no matter how many alternative definitions that you may try to substitute with the word nigger, that is no different than calling a Hispanic by the worst possible word you can call a Hispanic, calling a homosexual male the worst possible word that you can call a homosexual male” (Gabbatt, 2013). The federal jury in charge of the case ruled in favor of Johnson and awarded her \$280,000 in reparation. If, in this specific case, *nigger* had solely meant “woman” or “sister” or “pal,” as many claim it represents, then this condemnation would not have ensued.

The refusal of some members of the black community to use or be applied the word *nigger* has some solid ground. Analysis of the use of *nigger* and its variants shows indeed a confusion most African American do not pay attention to. Seen by many as an alternative to *nigger*, the adoption of *nigga* to counter the negative weight of *nigger* is inconclusive for two main reasons. First, the two words have the same root and are too similar to be differentiated. The reason backing this claim lies in their spellings which do not permit the reader to systematically think about two different words with different connotative and denotative meanings. Thus, both of them continue to keep the negativity history has conferred *nigger* when it started to be used as a racial slur. The second reason is the form of confusion emanating from the mismatch between what most African Americans pronounce and what they write out. Allan Keith underscores this discrepancy in his article entitled *When is a Slur not a Slur? The Use of Nigger in ‘Pulp Fiction’*. Very often, listeners clearly hear the phonetic sound /ər/ ending *nigger* rather than the schwa sound /ə/ but are almost always presented with *nigga* when it is written down.

This slight change in orthography is indicative of a discomfort and even the polarization of the African American community over the meaning but also the use of *nigger* both orally and in writing. Believed to be a much less offensive word than *nigger*, as reported by Björn Technau in his article entitled *Going beyond the hate Speech*:

*The pragmatics of ethnic slur terms* (2018: 39), *nigga* is gaining more recognition in the African American community. It is actually the most used word among all the derivatives of *nigger* that exist. Historically, it is said to be “a southern pronunciation of *nigger*, whose variant forms are *niggah*, *nigguh*, and *niggur*” (Judy, 1994: 213). The use of *nigga* all across the United States of America evidences an intra-racial appropriation whose aim is to present it as a new concept emerging from an old one. In other words, it acknowledges African Americans’ difficult past while signaling at the same time a new beginning and the creation of a new African American identity. Indeed, *nigga* is now the term preferred for the transcription of most rap songs’ lyrics on the Internet and other media productions. In KRS-One’s song *MCs Act like they don’t know*, the line “now we got white kids callin’ themselves niggas” can be read. Jay-Z and Kanye West produced a song entitled *Niggas in Paris* in which they use the word *nigga* in the line “but first niggas gotta find me,” for example. Scores of other lyrics and writings favor *nigga* over *nigger*.

Despite all the efforts to make it sound ordinary and stylish, *nigger* remains one of, if not, the oldest slur still in activity. And even though it is proven that “one of the most effective ways to fight hate is to disarm the derogatory terms employed by haters, embracing them and giving them positive connotations” (Croom, 2013: 11), the numerous interracial conflicts over the use of the word *nigger* show that there is a long way to go to make it lose its disparaging charge. *Nigger*, *nigga*, *niggah*, or *nigguh* creates an impenetrable barrier that keeps all the members of the other racial groups away from the black community and, in an ironic twist, teaches them the history of the word and the derogative content attached to it.

## Conclusion

Using the derogatory word *nigger* or its most used variant *nigga* in an attempt to dilute and ultimately empty it of its negative racial charge has not yielded the results its advocates had planned. It is rather the contrary that is being observed as the word is still around and is the object of innumerable conflictual situations between the African American community it has always targeted and the members

of the other communities on the American soil. As a matter of fact, the increasing number of complaints filed against non-African Americans and the multitude of videos evidencing these intercommunity brawls is not only indicative of the sensitivity associated with this word but also demonstrates its strong anchoring in the American linguistic landscape. Worse still, there seems to be no intention on the part of African Americans in general to help change this situation. When insisting on using it in their own intercommunity interactions, songs and all sorts of media, they are participating in educating generations of Americans on the existence of the derogative meaning of *nigger* rather than letting it fade away and disappearing from the American linguistic repertoire.

This exclusive appropriation or reclamation of the members of the African American community who continue to use these originally insulting epithets in their intra-community interactions while forbidding members of the other communities to address them with the same words is also damaging for the internal cohesion of the African American population as a whole. It is true that the deconstruction of this derogatory word has permitted to put forth values and meanings that participate in the formation of the unique culture African Americans have crafted for themselves over centuries of presence in the United States. But with the opposition of many to the use of *nigger* or *nigga* they believe is instrumental in its survival and persistence, the battle for a unique identifier for the black community is still not won.

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