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Why I'm Good with the "N" Word

By John Ridley

Nigger.

Take a real good gander at it. Two syllables. Six letters. And give it a goodbye. 'Cause right now nigger's on a linguistic hit list. If the verbal totalitarians have their way, they will take a blowtorch to the word, light it up and not stop burning until even the embers and ash aren't fit to be returned to the earth.

But what would we really be destroying? There is no other word in our culture that incites, infuriates, confounds and informs as does the word nigger. Who uses it, how it's used, which washed-up actor turned comic (think Michael Richards) shoulda stayed the hell clear of the word--they all help mark the ascension of black America through the cultural landscape. In art and letters and theater and comedy, this one word, this mangle of Latin and French and Spanish, has been description and slur and salutation, and in each incarnation a curio of our society.

No matter the classic book *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is set in an antebellum age; the plight of runaway slave Nigger Jim is given equal consideration as that of his young white friend. Through Nigger Jim, the concept of racial parity, the examination of the system of slavery were forced upon Southern segregationists.

Should we also toss on the fire Dick Gregory's autobiography, written for cross-consumption as a harsh accounting of the racial indignities heaped upon a young black as he travels from boy to man? The book's ultimate satirical trick was to flip the slur into a sales tool. Its title: *Nigger!* "Whenever you hear the word 'nigger,'" Gregory wrote in the introduction, "you'll know they're advertising my book." Call a man a nigger, earn a brother a dollar.

Jump to Hollywood's blaxploitation era in the 1960s, when blacks suddenly were allowed to make movies told from our point of view. Melvin Van Peebles' 1971 *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*--an ode to a

wronged black man on the run from the cops--introduced the lead character as a "baadasssss nigger coming back to collect some dues!" And that "nigger" in the film, as Van Peebles tells it, snapped the streak of "liberal, sort of nice movies where we always ended up dead at the end."

In 1984's *A Soldier's Story*, a black military officer is investigating the murder of an unpopular black soldier near an Army base in Louisiana. Sergeant Waters, the victim, brutally compels a young black private to give up his country ways and "quit thinking like a nigger." It was a rarely seen public representation of our private interactions: the impatience some blacks have with a victim mentality. Shocking. Powerful. A message to a white populace that we are not lemmings. And that even among ourselves, we're not a single tribe.

Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy and Chris Rock have all traded on demystifying nigger. And in doing so, they have advanced the racial debate further than a thousand roundtable discussions populated with the best Ivy League minds. Pryor and Chevy Chase's *Saturday Night Live* "word association" sketch was a prime example of comedy's power to explore racial interplay in the workplace, the constant questioning of blacks as to when a comment is harmless and when is it racist. Chase is the white human-resources executive. Pryor, the black job applicant. What begins with Chase: "White," Pryor: "Black," devolves through Chase: "Negro," Pryor: "Whitey," Chase: "Colored," Pryor: "Redneck," Chase: "Jungle bunny," Pryor: "Honky!" Chase: "Nigger," Pryor: "Dead honky!"

1976. *Silver Streak*, Pryor and Gene Wilder's comedic take on *The Defiant Ones*. In the penultimate moment, Pryor's character, camouflaged as a lowly train porter, flips a gat on the uppity white villain, demanding to know, in a brilliant combination of anger and comic timing, "Who you callin' nigger?" Yeah. That was all of us. That was all of black America wanting to know from any race baiter as we moved through the Establishment: Excuse me, who exactly are you calling nigger?

And a couple of mollicoddles out there want to put the kibosh on that? Line 'em up, man. Line up pop culture from *The Nigger of the Narcissus* to *The Birth of a Nation* to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, right on through N.W.A. and "Niggas vs. Black People," and on to comedian Dave Chappelle playing a blind Ku Klux Klan member who ends up yelling "nigger" at himself.

In an era of enlightenment and free communication, do we really want to wipe out the work of the satirists who shove and cajole, who take language and thought by the throat and force us to confront with wit and guile what most refuse to face? We need this word. Relax. Take a deep breath. It's gonna be cool. Two syllables. Six letters. It's not the word, only the fear that needs to be put aside.

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