

Toward Racial Equality: *Harper's Weekly* Reports on Black America, 1857-1874

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A Note On The Word "Nigger"

By [Randall Kennedy](#), Professor of Law, Harvard University

The word "nigger" is a key term in American culture. It is a profoundly hurtful racial slur meant to stigmatize African Americans; on occasion, it also has been used against members of other racial or ethnic groups, including Chinese, other Asians, East Indians, Arabs and darker-skinned people. It has been an important feature of many of the worst episodes of bigotry in American history. It has accompanied innumerable lynchings, beatings, acts of arson, and other racially motivated attacks upon blacks. It has also been featured in countless jokes and cartoons that both reflect and encourage the disparagement of blacks. It is the signature phrase of racial prejudice.

To understand fully, however, the depths and intensities, quirks and complexities of American race relations, it is necessary to know in detail the many ways in which racist bigotry has manifested itself, been appealed to, and been resisted. The term "nigger" is in most contexts, a cultural obscenity. But, so, too are the opinions of the United States Supreme Court in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, which ruled that African Americans were permanently ineligible for federal citizenship, and *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which ruled that state-mandated, "equal but separate" racial segregation entailed no violation of the federal constitution. These decisions embodied racial insult and oppression as national policy and are, for many, painful to read. But teachers rightly assign these opinions to hundreds of thousands of students, from elementary grades to professional schools, because, tragically, they are part of the American cultural inheritance. Cultural literacy requires detailed knowledge about the oppression of racial minorities. A clear understanding of "nigger" is part of this knowledge. To paper over that term or to constantly obscure it by euphemism is to flinch from coming to grips with racial prejudice that continues to haunt the American social landscape.

Leading etymologists believe that "nigger" was derived from an English word "neger" that was itself derived from "Negro", the Spanish word for black. Precisely when the term became a slur is unknown. We do know, however, that by early in the 19th century "nigger" had already become a familiar insult. In 1837, in *The Condition of the Colored People of the United States; and the Prejudice Exercised Towards Them*, Hosea Easton observed that "nigger" "is an opprobrious term, employed to impose contempt upon [blacks] as an inferior race...The term itself would be perfectly harmless were it used only to distinguish one class from another; but it is not used with that intent...it flows from the fountain of purpose to injure."

The term has been put to other uses. Some blacks, for instance, use "nigger" among themselves as a term of endearment. But that is typically done with a sense of irony that is predicated upon an understanding of the term's racist origins and a close relationship with the person to whom the term is uttered. As Clarence Major observed in his *Dictionary of Afro-American Slang* (1970), "used by black people among themselves, [nigger] is a racial term with undertones of warmth and goodwill – reflecting...a tragicomic sensibility that is aware of black history." Many blacks object, however, to using the term even in that context for fear that such usage will be misunderstood and imitated by persons insufficiently attuned

to the volatility of this singularly complex and dangerous word.

Some observers object even to reproducing historical artifacts, such as books or cartoons, that contain the term "nigger." This total, unbending objection to printing the word under any circumstance is by no means new. Writing in 1940 in his memoir *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes remarked that "[t]he word nigger to colored people is like a red rag to a bull. Used rightly or wrongly, ironically or seriously, of necessity for the sake of realism, or impishly for the sake of comedy, it doesn't matter. Negroes do not like it in any book or play whatsoever, be the book or play ever so sympathetic in its treatment of the basic problems of the race. Even though the book or play is written by a Negro, they still do not like it. The word nigger, you see, sums up for us who are colored all the bitter years of insult and struggle in America."

Given the power of "nigger" to wound, it is important to provide a context within which presentation of that term can be properly understood. It is also imperative, however, to permit present and future readers to see for themselves directly the full gamut of American cultural productions, the ugly as well as the beautiful, those that mirror the majestic features of American democracy and those that mirror America's most depressing failings.

For these reasons, I have advised the management of HarpWeek to present the offensive text, cartoons, caricatures and illustrations from the pages of Harper's Weekly, as well as other politically sensitive nineteenth-century material, as they appeared in their historical context. This same advice holds for slurs relating to Irish, Chinese, Germans, Native Americans, Catholics, Jews, Mormons and other ethnic and religious groups.

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