

Name _____
Ms. Wu
American Literature
14 January 2013

The N-Word PRESS Essay (Timed Write)

The n-word has a distinct place in American culture and history. It is a word that slave masters used to degrade African Americans. It is a word the KKK used when lynching African Americans. It is a word that African Americans used in reference to each other during slavery and post-slavery times. It is a word that hip hop artists use in contemporary music. And it is a word that some African Americans use in reference to each other today.

No word has generated as much controversy and distinct perspectives as the n-word. It bears much history, a history laden with pain, racism, suffering, and, some might even argue, affection. One cannot really use this word lightly or loosely. How can one word's meaning be so complex and change depending on who uses it, when, and with whom?

Additional Essential Questions (Other EQ's at end of each article)

1. What are the distinct perspectives people have today on the n-word? In other words, what is "PRESS" for each article?
2. Naylor claims that African Americans have taken "a word that whites used to signify worthlessness or degradation and rendered it impotent...Meeting the word head-on, they proved it had absolutely nothing to do with the way they were determined to live their lives" (4). This perspective, shared by actor Don Cheadle and hip hop artists like Ludacris Bridges, suggests that African Americans *can* take all the history and pain the n-word bears and transform it. Context matters. Leonard Pitts, Jr. and Oprah Winfrey argue the opposite. They say that *any* use of the word conjures the painful history the n-word bears. It is "grotesque and dehumanizing" no matter the context which is why it should *never* be used. What are the strengths and weaknesses of both sides of this issue? And which side do you ultimately agree with the most and why?
3. If Pitts, Jr., Naylor, and Turner appeared on Oprah, what would each person say in response to each other's arguments?
4. Finally, where do YOU stand on the use of the n-word in history, literature, and contemporary culture? Why?

N-Word Work Checklist

- ☐ Leonard Pitts, Jr. Article and Questions,
- ☐ PRESS for Pitts, Jr
- ☐ Miki Turner Article and Questions
- ☐ PRESS for Turner
- ☐ Gloria Naylor Article and Questions
- ☐ PRESS for Naylor
- ☐ Oprah Video Cornell Notes
- ☐ Socratic Seminar Questions
- ☐ Socratic Seminar Listening Eval (completed in class)
- ☐ PRESS Outline
- ☐ PRESS Essay (in class)

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N-word has no place in society

By Leonard Pitts, Jr. (lpitts@miamiherald.com)
Published in the Miami Herald on October 8, 2008



Dear Chris Rock:

I apologize in advance for the language that will shortly follow. And yes, there is a certain irony there, given that you are one of the most profane men on the planet.

Also one of the funniest. That's why I eagerly anticipated your new HBO special, *Kill The Messenger*, which premiered a few days ago, even though I knew there would inevitably come a moment that made me embarrassed for you.

And sure enough, it came. During your routine, you noted how, last year, the NAACP held a symbolic "burial" of the N-word. "Well," you said, through that evil Cheshire cat grin of yours, "tonight is Easter." There followed a long and sometimes labored deconstruction of when, according to you, the word is permissible, all in illustration of your thesis that it is "context" that determines whether or not a word is offensive.

I was reminded of a quote that appears in the afterward of *The Slaves' War* by Andrew Ward, about the Civil War as seen through the eyes of black women and men. The speaker is an old woman, an escaped slave who had been reprimanded by a missionary for calling her fellow slaves "niggers."

She replied, "We are niggers. We always was niggers and we always shall be. Nigger here, and nigger there. Nigger do this and nigger do that. We've got no souls. We's animals. We's black and so is the Evil One."

The Bible doesn't say the devil is black, protested the missionary.

"Well," the old woman said, "white folks say so and we's bound to believe them, 'cause we's nothing but animals and niggers. Yes, we's niggers! Niggers! Niggers!"

Chris, this column runs in upwards of 200 papers, and I won't be surprised if some editors regard the above as too raw for print, if they seek to soften it by replacing the offending letters with dashes. But if I had my druthers, it would run dash free in large red type and be required reading for every black person in America. You will seldom read more vivid evidence of the psychological maiming to which white people subjected black ones in this country and of the profound self-loathing that infected us as a result.

Dehumanizing language

You find that loathing in the preference some of us still profess for light skin and lank -- or so-called "good" -- hair, in the belief some of us still hold that to be intellectually excellent and speak standard English is to "act white," in the conviction some of us still harbor that only a white professional truly knows what he or she is doing. And you see it, too, in the addiction some of us still suffer to the soul-killing language of our oppressors.

White people -- the majority of them at least -- understand how grotesque and dehumanizing that language is. Meanwhile, black folks run around making lame excuses and lamer justifications. I mean really, Chris, "context"? Negro, please.

I was, as I'm sure you were, a big fan of Richard Pryor. But I never admired him more than when he renounced his use of that word. Pryor understood, I think, that his art was a social construct and as such, carried social responsibilities. He acknowledged, in other words, a need to be intentional in, and accountable for, the things he said.

Compare that to Kanye West, who told Time magazine three years ago that he doesn't like the N-word and has tried substitutes but can't find anything with the same "impact." Or, compare it to you, smart, canny observer of human foibles, universally recognized as one of the most talented men in show business, yet still addicted to the same self-delimiting language a slave woman once used.

I'm not mad at her. She was just days removed from a system that had spent a lifetime teaching her, in every interaction of every day of every year, that she was a soulless thing little different from hogs and dogs. But Chris, that was 150 years ago.

What's your excuse?

Post-Reading Questions

1. Why is Leonard Pitts', Jr. angry with Chris Rock's use of the n-word? What "excuse" does Chris Rock give for using the n-word? Is his disagreement with Chris Rock's use of the word generational? In other words, is the divide in the African American community one of the younger generation not understanding the older generation and vice versa? Or is the divide something that goes deeper beyond age?
2. Can the n-word be redefined? Can African Americans like Chris Rock *successfully* redefine the n-word to mean something different even cool or will it always be too controversial? Why or why not?
3. To what extent would Pitts, Jr. support or reject the censorship of the n-word in *Huck Finn*? Explain your answer with support from the text.

A WORD'S MEANING CAN OFTEN DEPEND ON WHO SAYS IT

Gloria Naylor

*Gloria Naylor was born in 1950 in New York City. When Martin Luther King was assassinated, Naylor became determined to make the world a better place, and she worked as a missionary for Jehovah's Witnesses for seven years before deciding to pursue her writing interests. She graduated from Brooklyn College of the City University of New York in 1981 and then earned her M.A. in Afro-American Studies at Yale University in 1983. She has written four novels about black experience, especially the black female experience: *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), *Linden Hills* (1985), *Mama Day* (1988), and *Bailey's Cafe* (1992). She calls them her "novel quartet," and they explore the emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and sexual aspects of human experience, respectively.*

*In an interview Naylor once commented on her experiences as a child in the 1960s: "They [her parents] were trying to protect us from pain. . . . They never talked much about the racial problems that were going on in America. . . . I would hear it at school and see it on television, but we never got that sort of talk in our home." Unfortunately, the protection can only work so long: "Eventually you are going to get hurt. So it is a matter of trying to ward off the moment when that would happen." "A Word's Meaning Can Often Depend on Who Says It," first published in the "Hers" column in *The New York Times*, recounts the moment that the hurt first occurred for Naylor.*

BEFORE READING

Connecting: Have you ever been called a "name," a derogatory label that signaled someone's prejudice toward you? How did that act make you feel?

Anticipating: Why do people call others "names"? What are the implications of labeling people in such ways?

- 1 Language is the subject. It is the written form with which I've managed to keep the wolf away from the door and, in diaries, to keep my

sanity. In spite of this, I consider the written word inferior to the spoken, and much of the frustration experienced by novelists is the awareness that whatever we manage to capture in even the most transcendent passages falls far short of the richness of life. Dialogue achieves its power in the dynamics of a fleeting moment of sight, sound, smell, and touch.

I'm not going to enter the debate here about whether it is language that shapes reality or vice versa. That battle is doomed to be waged whenever we seek intermittent reprieve from the chicken and egg dispute. I will simply take the position that the spoken word, like the written word, amounts to a nonsensical arrangement of sounds or letters without a consensus that assigns "meaning." And building from the meanings of what we hear, we order reality. Words themselves are innocuous; it is the consensus that gives them true power.

I remember the first time I heard the word *nigger*. In my third-grade class, our math tests were being passed down the rows, and as I handed the papers to a little boy in back of me, I remarked that once again he had received a much lower mark than I did. He snatched his test from me and spit out that word. Had he called me a nymphomaniac or a necrophiliac, I couldn't have been more puzzled. I didn't know what a nigger was, but I knew whatever it meant, it was something he shouldn't have called me. This was verified when I raised my hand, and in a loud voice repeated what he had said and watched the teacher scold him for using a "bad" word. I was later to go home and ask the inevitable question that every black parent must face—"Mommy, what does *nigger* mean?"

And what exactly did it mean? Thinking back, I realize that this could not have been the first time the word was used in my presence. I was part of a large extended family that had migrated from the rural South after World War II and formed a close-knit network that gravitated around my maternal grandparents. Their ground-floor apartment in one of the buildings they owned in Harlem was a weekend mecca for my immediate family, along with countless aunts, uncles, and cousins who brought along assorted friends. It was a bustling and open house with assorted neighbors and tenants popping in and out to exchange bits of gossip, pick up an old quarrel, or referee the on-going checkers game in which my grandmother cheated shamelessly. They were all there to let down their hair and put up their feet after a week of labor in the factories, laundries, and shipyards of New York.

Amid the clamor, which could reach deafening proportions—two or three conversations going on simultaneously, punctuated by the sound of a baby's crying somewhere in the back rooms or out on

the street—there was still a rigid set of rules about what was said and how. Older children were sent out of the living room when it was time to get into the juicy details about “you-know-who” up on the third floor who had gone and gotten herself “p-r-e-g-n-a-n-t!” But my parents, knowing that I could spell well beyond my years, always demanded that I follow the others out to play. Beyond sexual misconduct and death, everything else was considered harmless for our young ears. And so among the anecdotes of the triumphs and disappointments in the various workings of their lives, the word *nigger* was used in my presence, but it was set within contexts and inflections that caused it to register in my mind as something else.

6 In the singular, the word was always applied to a man who had distinguished himself in some situation that brought their approval for his strength, intelligence, or drive:

7 “Did Johnny *really* do that?”

8 “I’m telling you, that nigger pulled in \$6,000 of overtime last year. Said he got enough for a down payment on a house.”

9 When used with a possessive adjective by a woman—“my nigger”—it became a term of endearment for her husband or boyfriend. But it could be more than just a term applied to a man. In their mouths it became the pure essence of manhood—a disembodied force that channeled their past history of struggle and present survival against the odds into a victorious statement of being: “Yeah, that old foreman found out quick enough—you don’t mess with a nigger.”

10 In the plural, it became a description of some group within the community that had overstepped the bounds of decency as my family defined it. Parents who neglected their children, a drunken couple who fought in public, people who simply refused to look for work, those with excessively dirty mouths or unkempt households were all “trifling niggers.” This particular circle could forgive hard times, unemployment, the occasional bout of depression—they had gone through all of that themselves—but the unforgivable sin was a lack of self-respect.

11 A woman could never be a “nigger” in the singular, with its connotation of confirming worth. The noun *girl* was its closest equivalent in that sense, but only when used in direct address and regardless of the gender doing the addressing. *Girl* was a token of respect for a woman. The one-syllable word was drawn out to sound like three in recognition of the extra ounce of wit, nerve, or daring that the woman had shown in the situation under discussion.

12 “G-i-r-l, stop. You mean you said that to his face?”

13 But if the word was used in a third-person reference or shortened so that it almost snapped out of the mouth, it always involved some element of communal disapproval. And age became an impor-

tant factor in these exchanges. It was only between individuals of the same generation, or from any older person to a younger (but never the other way around), that *girl* would be considered a compliment.

I don’t agree with the argument that use of the word *nigger* at this social stratum of the black community was an internalization of racism. The dynamics were the exact opposite: the people in my grandmother’s living room took a word that whites used to signify worthlessness or degradation and rendered it impotent. Gathering there together, they transformed *nigger* to signify the varied and complex human beings they knew themselves to be. If the word was to disappear totally from the mouths of even the most liberal of white society, no one in that room was naive enough to believe it would disappear from white minds. Meeting the word head-on, they proved it had absolutely nothing to do with the way they were determined to live their lives.

So there must have been dozens of times that *nigger* was spoken in front of me before I reached the third grade. But I didn’t “hear” it until it was said by a small pair of lips that had already learned it could be a way to humiliate me. That was the word I went home and asked my mother about. And since she knew that I had to grow up in America, she took me in her lap and explained.

Post-Reading Questions

Please answer these questions on binder paper.

1. How does Naylor’s family use of the n-word differ from the way in which the third grader uses the word towards Naylor? Why are these uses different?
2. To what extent do you agree with Naylor’s argument that the black community can transform the n-word “to signify the varied and complex human beings they knew themselves to be”? Why? Explain your reasoning.
3. To what extent would Naylor support or reject the censorship of the n-word in *Huck Finn*? Support your response with evidence from the text.

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David Banner, Hip
Hop Artist

“David Banner joins the fight over the N-word”

By Miki Turner

Published on MSNBC.com on 27 August 2007



Miki Turner, Writer

Before Mississippi-born rapper and budding actor David Banner was labeled the angriest black man in America, I had no idea who he was. And you probably didn't either. What you should know, however, is that this dude equates his manhood with speaking out instead of speaking up.

For the past few weeks Banner — whose real name is Levell Crump — has been engaged in a verbal beat down with the good reverends Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, because they are leading the charge in the war against rap and hip hop. He's also been critical of Oprah Winfrey, because she has steadfastly refused to invite anyone on her show whose lyrics contain the N-word, bitch or ho.

I was about halfway through my 30-minute telephone interview with Banner, a 33-year-old college-educated man who renamed himself after a comic book character, when I concluded that his motives in this war weren't exactly pure. Although he made some very valid points about the plight of young black males in America and the problems we have in this country in general, his credibility as the newly self-appointed spokesman for the rap/hip-hop community took a sharp blow when he tried to defend his continual use of profanity and the N-word in his lyrics; and as he went on ranting about the evil being spewed by Sharpton and Jackson.

He's living somewhere beyond the left wing.

Perhaps that is why Banner appears to be fighting this never-ending battle without the public support of his peers. Maybe Snoop, Ludacris, Nelly and 50 Cent also realize that he's mouthing off now to stir up publicity for his new CD — “The Greatest Story Ever Told” — which is dropping in October, or that he just likes the sound of his own misguided rhetoric.

It's one thing, however, to fight the good fight for creative expression, but it's quite another thing to wage war when your pistol is packed with greed.

What is even more disturbing, however, is that Banner has been publicly disrespecting his elders, which is a serious no-no in African and black American cultures. Harriett Tubman, W.E.B. DuBois, Martin Luther King Jr. and James Brown must surely be rolling over in their respective graves.

‘I’m really not angry’

He's talking loud, but saying nothing that would enable people to take him seriously. So, I had to ask: “Brother, what's your beef?”

“I'm really not angry,” Banner said in a voice that bore just a slight trace of his Mississippi roots.

"I'm making so much money now that I'm really happy! They always try to paint young black man angry. I'm not angry. That's why I smile. I'm telling the truth."

The truth is that the Sharpton-Jackson crusade against rap and hip hop is affecting Banner's bottom line and he's extremely ticked off about it. He's quick to mention how much money he lost by not promoting his last CD, "Certified" because he was too busy organizing a Katrina relief concert in 2005.

"I was out there doing their job for them," said Banner, a former student government president in college.

"Why does it take a gangsta rapper to talk about these issues? It's not my job and it's at my career's detriment. Al Sharpton said I didn't have a 'Banner' year last year. I didn't because I was doing his damn job. I didn't promote my album; I promoted the pain that was going on with Katrina."

Although Jackson hasn't publicly acknowledged Banner's criticisms, Sharpton's office recently issued a less-than-classy statement after Banner had told reporters that Sharpton could (perform oral sex on him). After initially questioning the rapper's sexuality, Sharpton then took the high road, saying that he would "just pray for him."

Guys, cock fighting is both illegal and immoral.

'Young black males don't have anybody'

But there were some things that Banner — who is best known for his hit "Like a Pimp" — said that resonated with me. Young black males are inarguably the most maligned species on the planet. It seems as though whenever they take two steps forward, someone or something is pushing them three steps backwards. Consequently, hope is a word they can neither spell nor comprehend.

Many of rap's brightest stars come from impoverished environments where this is the case. That reality makes them angry and their emotions are manifested in their lyrics. That doesn't always make it right, but it does make it real. And that's why these caged birds don't always sing the songs we want to hear.

"It's nothing but music," Banner said emphatically. "Everybody points the finger at rap because it's young black males. Young black males don't have anybody to come to their rescue — not even themselves. We'll beef with 50 Cent, we'll beef with T.I., we'll beef with Nelly, but we won't come to Akon's rescue when he's blamed for the 14-year-old being in the club when it wasn't his responsibility to check everyone's I.D."

"It's like Snoop said, 'Maybe I was raised by a mama on crack or gang bangers. Maybe I don't know no better. Teach me. Love me. Hold me.' The reflection of black people is with their black parents and what they did or did not do. What they did or did not teach us."

That's why Banner wants Sharpton, Jackson and Winfrey to let it be.

"I'm really disappointed that there are so many bad things that are going on," Banner said.

"From the Jenna 6, to the young kids that got killed in Jersey to the young man in New York who got killed coming out of his bachelor party. There are so many things that they could attack and that they can concentrate on."

He could rap about that without using offensive language.

“As for Oprah, at least Bill O’Reilly will put the rappers on his show and go to head-to-head with them,” he added. “I have more respect for Bill O’Reilly than I do for Oprah. They’re always trying to paint us as militant. No, we’re not militant. Oprah Winfrey, Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, if you stop attacking the way I live, then we won’t have any problem. I will admit there’s a problem in hip hop but that is only a reflection of the bigger picture. It’s about America’s sickness and America’s problem.”

Banner, of course, doesn’t think there’s a problem with lyrics that glorify violence, perpetuate negative stereotypes, disrespect women and contain a word that has been historically used to demean and oppress an entire culture for centuries. As he sees it, the N-word has made him a young, rich black male and that’s the only reason people of all hues are upset and want it banned.

“The problem is (rap) has lasted a lot longer and made a whole lot more money and made a whole lot more noise than they would have expected us to. The thing is — and I really need you to print this — America’s new word for (N-word) is hip hop.”

Now that I can get with.

‘Kids want to hear it’

But even though there have been movements to permanently retire the word from the lexicon, Banner said that he’s going to continue to use it as long as “kids want to hear it. I’m a Bible with a Playboy cover on it. It don’t matter how they get the information.

“The problem is not young black men, it’s the old white folks who put the word out there in the first place.”

What he fails to understand is that those of us like Sharpton, Jackson and Winfrey who are old enough to know what it feels like to be called that word, are still recovering from the knife wounds we received back in the day. They hurt then, but in many ways the pain is even more intense now that the word is often used as a term of endearment among the seemingly lost generations.

Banner really needs to ask somebody.

What’s even more twisted is the fact that Banner said if one of his young white fans called him the N-word he would “beat them bloody.”

We need to join the Rev. Al in prayer.

The prudent thing for Banner to do at this point would be to schedule a meeting with the men and the woman he’s been attacking. I don’t think Oprah would be down for it — she’s got an empire to run and souls to save — but I’m assuming that the men of the cloth would be willing to forgive and forget and use their collective wisdom to try and increase the peace in what seems to be an unwinnable, generational war of words.

But Banner says he isn’t willing to do so. He thinks Sharpton and Jackson have “lost their way.”

Funny, they probably think he’s driving with a faulty GPS system, too. I know I do.

Let’s just hope Banner finds his way back before he loses any more money and has no one to blame but himself.

Post-Reading Questions

1. There are many hidden, spoken, and unspoken rules that govern who can say the n-word, to whom, when, where. First, what are the rules and why do they exist? Second, and perhaps more importantly, to what extent do these rules promote and/or stop further racism? Why?
2. Related to #1, more specifically, is there a difference between when a black person says the n-word and when a white person does? Why or why not?
3. Should the n-word be banned completely? Would this limit personal expression? Why or why not?
4. To what extent would Turner support or reject the censorship of the n-word in *Huck Finn*? Explain your answer with support from the text.