

Nigger and Caricatures ¹

MORE PICTURES

There is a direct and strong link between the word nigger and anti-black caricatures. Although nigger has been used to refer to any person of known African ancestry,² it is usually directed against blacks who supposedly have certain negative characteristics. The Coon caricature, for example, portrays black men as lazy, ignorant, and obsessively self-indulgent; these are also traits historically represented by the word nigger. The Brute caricature depicts black men as angry, physically strong, animalistic, and prone to wanton violence. This depiction is also implied in the word nigger. The Tom and Mammy caricatures are often portrayed as kind, loving "friends" of whites. They are also presented as intellectually childlike, physically unattractive, and neglectful of their biological families. These later traits have been associated with blacks, generally, and are implied in the word nigger. The word nigger was a shorthand way of saying that blacks possessed the moral, intellectual, social, and physical characteristics of the Coon, Brute, Tom, Mammy, and other racial caricatures.

The etymology of nigger is often traced to the Latin niger, meaning black. The Latin niger became the noun negro (black person) in English, and simply the color black in Spanish and Portuguese. In Early Modern French niger became negre and, later, negress (black woman) was clearly a part of lexical history. One can compare to negre the derogatory nigger – and earlier English variants such as **negar**, **neegar**, **neger**, and **nigger** – which developed into a parallel lexico-semantic reality in English. It is likely that nigger is a phonetic spelling of the white Southern mispronunciation of Negro. Whatever its origins, by the early 1800s it was firmly established as a denigrative epithet. Almost two centuries later, it remains a chief symbol of white racism.

Social scientists refer to words like nigger, kike, spic, and wetback as ethnophaulisms. Such terms are the language of prejudice – verbal pictures of negative stereotypes. Howard J. Ehrlich, a social scientist, argued that ethnophaulisms are of three types: disparaging nicknames (chink, dago, nigger, and so forth); explicit group devaluations ("Jew him down," or "niggering the land"); and irrelevant ethnic names used as a mild disparagement ("jewishbird" for cuckoos having prominent beaks or "Irish confetti" for bricks thrown in a fight).³ All racial and ethnic groups have been victimized by racial slurs; however, no American group has suffered as many racial epithets as have blacks: coon, tom, savage, picanniny, mammy, buck, sambo, jigaboo, and buckwheat are typical.⁴ Many of these slurs became fully developed pseudo-scientific, literary, cinematic, and everyday caricatures of African Americans. These caricatures, whether spoken, written, or reproduced in material objects, reflect the extent, the vast network, of anti-black prejudice.

The word nigger carries with it much of the hatred and repulsion directed toward Africans and African Americans. Historically, nigger defined, limited, and mocked African Americans. It was a term of exclusion, a verbal justification for discrimination. Whether used as a noun, verb, or adjective, it reinforced the stereotype of the lazy, stupid, dirty, worthless parasite. No other American ethnophaulism carried so much purposeful venom, as the following representative list suggests:

- * Nigger, v. To wear out, spoil or destroy.
- * Niggerish, adj. Acting in an indolent and irresponsible manner.
- * Niggerlipping, v. Wetting the end of a cigarette while smoking it.
- * Niggerlover, n. Derogatory term aimed at whites lacking in the necessary loathing of blacks.
- * Nigger luck, n. Exceptionally good luck, emphasis on undeserved.
- * Nigger-flicker, n. A small knife or razor with one side heavily taped to preserve the user's fingers.
- * Nigger heaven, n. a designated place, usually the balcony, where blacks were forced to sit, for example, in an integrated movie theater or church.
- * Nigger knocker, n. axe handle or weapon made from an axe handle.
- * Nigger rich, adj. Deeply in debt but ostentatious.
- * Nigger shooter, n. A slingshot.
- * Nigger steak, n. a slice of liver or a cheap piece of meat.
- * Nigger stick, n. police officer's baton.
- * Nigger tip, n. leaving a small tip or no tip in a restaurant.
- * Nigger in the woodpile, n. a concealed motive or unknown factor affecting a situation in an adverse way.
- * Nigger work, n. Demeaning, menial tasks.⁵

Nigger has been used to describe a dark shade of color (nigger-brown, nigger-black), the status of whites who interacted with blacks (nigger-breaker, -dealer, -driver, -killer, -stealer, -worshipper, and -looking), and anything belonging to or associated with African Americans (nigger-baby, -boy, -girl, -mouth, -feet, -preacher, -job, -love, -culture, -college, -music, and so forth).⁶ Nigger is the ultimate American insult; it is used to offend other ethnic groups, as when Jews are called white-niggers; Arabs, sandniggers; or Japanese, yellow-niggers.

Americans created a racial hierarchy with whites at the top and blacks at the bottom. The hierarchy was undergirded by an ideology which justified the use of deceit, manipulation, and coercion to keep blacks "in their place." Every major societal institution offered legitimacy to the racial hierarchy. Ministers preached that God had condemned blacks to be servants. Scientists measured black heads, brains, faces, and genitalia, seeking to prove that whites were genetically superior to blacks. White teachers, teaching only white students, taught that blacks were less evolved cognitively, psychologically, and socially. The entertainment media, from vaudeville to television, portrayed blacks as docile servants, happy-go-lucky idiots, and dangerous thugs. The criminal justice system sanctioned a double standard of justice, including its tacit approval of mob violence against blacks.

Both American slavery and the Jim Crow caste system which followed were undergirded by anti-black images. The negative portrayals of blacks were both reflected in and shaped by everyday material objects: toys, postcards, ashtrays, detergent boxes, fishing lures, children's books. These items, and countless others, portrayed blacks with bulging, darting eyes, fire-red and oversized lips, jet black skin, and either naked or poorly clothed. The majority of these objects did not use the word nigger; however, many did. In 1874, the McLoughlin Brothers of New York manufactured a puzzle game called "Chopped Up Niggers." Beginning in 1878, the B. Leidersdory Company of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, produced NiggerHair Smoking Tobacco – several decades later the name was changed to BiggerHair Smoking Tobacco. In 1917, the American Tobacco Company had a NiggerHair redemption promotion. NiggerHair coupons were redeemable for "cash, tobacco, S. & H. Green stamps, or presents."

A 1916 magazine advertisement, copyrighted by Morris & Bendien, showed a black child drinking ink. The caption read, "Nigger Milk."

The J. Millhoff Company of England produced a series of cards (circa 1930s), which were widely distributed in the United States. One of the cards shows ten small black dogs with the caption: "Ten Little Nigger Boys Went Out To Dine." This is the first line from a popular children's story called, "The Ten Little Niggers."

Ten Little Nigger Boys went out to dine;
One choked his little self, and then there were Nine.
Nine Little Nigger Boys sat up very late;
One overslept himself, and then there were Eight.
Eight Little Nigger Boys traveling in Devon;
One said he'd stay there, and then there were Seven.
Seven Little Nigger Boys chopping up sticks;
One chopped himself in halves, and then there were Six.
Six Little Nigger Boys playing with a hive;
A Bumble-Bee stung one, and then there were Five.
Five Little Nigger Boys going in for Law;
One got in Chancery, and then there were Four.
Four Little Nigger Boys going out to Sea;
A Red Herring swallowed one, and then there were Three.
Three Little Nigger Boys walking in the Zoo;
The big Bear hugged one, and then there were Two;
Two Little Nigger Boys sitting in the Sun;
One got frizzled up, and then there was One.
One Little Nigger Boy living all alone;
He got married, and then there were None.⁷

In 1939, Agatha Christie, the popular fiction writer, published a novel called *Ten Little Niggers*. Later editions sometimes changed the name to *Ten Little Indians*, or *And Then There Were None*, but as late as 1978, copies of the book with the original title were being produced.⁸ It was not rare for sheet music produced in the first half of the 20th century to use the word nigger on the cover. The Howley, Haviland Company of New York, produced sheet music for the songs "Hesitate Mr. Nigger, Hesitate," and "You'se Just A Little Nigger, Still You'se Mine, All Mine." The latter was billed as a children's lullaby.

Some small towns used nigger in their names, for example, Nigger Run Fork, Virginia. Nigger was a common name for darkly colored pets, especially dogs, cats, and horses. So-called "Jolly Nigger Banks," first made in the 1800s, were widely distributed as late as the 1960s. Another common item – with many variants, produced on posters, postcards, and prints – is a picture of a dozen black children rushing for a swimming hole. The captions reads, "Last One In's A Nigger."

The racial hierarchy, which began during slavery and extended into the Jim Crow period, has been severely eroded by a civil rights movement, landmark Supreme Court decisions, a black empowerment movement, comprehensive civil rights legislation, and a general embracing of democratic principles by many American citizens. Yet, the word nigger has not died. The relationship between the word nigger and anti-black prejudice is symbiotic: that is, they are interrelated and interconnected, yet, ironically, not automatically interdependent. In other words, a racist society created nigger and continues to feed and sustain it; however, the word no longer needs racism, at least brutal and obvious forms, to exist. Nigger now has a life of its own.

One of the most interesting and perplexing phenomena in American speech is the use of nigger by African Americans. When used by blacks, nigger refers to the following: all blacks ("A nigger can't even get a break."); black men ("Sisters want niggers to work all day long."); blacks who behave in a stereotypical, and sometimes mythical, manner ("He's a lazy, good-for-nothing nigger."); things ("This piece-of-shit car is such a nigger."); foes ("I'm sick and tired of those niggers bothering me!"); and friends ("Me and my niggers are tight.").

This final usage, as a term of endearment, is especially problematic. "Zup Niggah," has become an almost universal greeting among young urban blacks. When pressed, blacks who use nigger or its variants claim the following: it has to be understood contextually; continual use of the word by blacks will make it less offensive; it is not really the same word because whites are saying nigger (and niggers) but blacks are saying niggah (and niggaz); and, it is just a word and blacks should not be prisoners of the past or the ugly words which originated in the past. These arguments are not convincing. Brother (Brotha) and Sister (Sistha or Sista) are terms of endearment. Nigger was and remains a term of derision. Moreover, the false dichotomy between blacks or African Americans (respectable and middle-class) and niggers (disrespectable and lower class) should be opposed. No blacks are niggers, irrespective of behavior, income, ambition, clothing, ability, morals, or skin color. Finally, if continued use of the word lessened its sting then nigger would by now have no sting. Blacks, beginning in slavery, have internalized the negative images that white society cultivated and propagated about black skin and black people. This is reflected in periods of self- and same-race loathing. The use of the word nigger by blacks reflects this loathing, even when the user is unaware of the psychological forces at play. Nigger is the ultimate expression of white racism and white superiority, irrespective of the way it is pronounced. It is a linguistic corruption, a corruption of civility. Nigger is the most infamous word in American culture. Some words carry more weight than others. At the risk of hyperbole, is genocide just another word? Pedophilia? Obviously, no: neither is nigger.

After a period of relative dormancy, the word nigger has been reborn in popular culture. It is hard-edged, streetwise, and it has crossed over into movies like *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Jackie Brown* (1997), where it became a symbol of "street authenticity" and hipness. Denzel Washington's character in *Training Day* (2001) uses nigger frequently and harshly.

Richard Pryor long ago disavowed the use of the word in his comedy act, but Chris Rock and Chris Tucker, the new black male comedy kings, use nigger regularly – and not affectionately. Justin Driver, a social critic, argued persuasively that both Rock and Tucker are modern minstrels – shucking, jiving, and grinning, in the tradition of Stepin Fetchit.⁹

Poetry by African Americans is also instructive, as one finds nigger used in black poetry over and over again. Major and minor poets alike have used it, often with startling results: Imamu Amiri Baraka, one of the most gifted of our contemporary poets, uses nigger in one of his angriest poems, "I Don't Love You."

...and what was the world to the words of slick nigger fathers too depressed to explain why they could not appear to be men.¹⁰

One wonders: how are readers supposed to understand "nigger fathers"? Baraka's use of this imagery, regardless of his intention, reinforces the stereotype of the worthless, hedonistic Coon caricature. Ted Joans's use of nigger in "The Nice Colored Man" makes Baraka's comparatively harmless and innocent. Joans tells the story about how he came to write this unusual piece. He was, he says, asked to give a reading in London because he was a "nice colored man." Infuriated by the labels "nice" and "colored", Joans set down the quintessential truculent poem. While the poem should be read in its entirety, a few lines will suffice:

...Smart Black Nigger Smart Black Nigger Smart Black Nigger Smart Black Nigger Knife Carrying Nigger Gun
Toting Nigger Military Nigger Clock Watching Nigger Poisoning Nigger Disgusting Nigger Black Ass Nigger. .
.11

This is the poem, with adjective upon adjective attached to the word nigger. The shocking reality is that many of these uses can be heard in contemporary American society. Herein lies part of the problem: the word nigger persists because it is used over and over again, even by the people it defames. Devorah Major, a poet and novelist, said, "It's hard for me to say what someone can or can't say, because I work with language all the time, and I don't want to be limited."¹² Opal Palmer Adisa, a poet and professor, claims that the use of nigger or nigga is "the same as young people's obsession with cursing. A lot of their use of such language is an internalization of negativity about themselves."¹³

Rap musicians, themselves poets, rap about niggers before mostly white audiences, some of whom see themselves as wiggers (white niggers) and refer to one another as "my niggah." Snoop Doggy Dogg, in his single, "You Thought," raps, "Wanna grab a skinny nigga like Snoop Dogg/Cause you like it tall/and work it baby doll." Tupac Shakur, one of the most talented and popular rap musicians, had a song called "Crooked Ass Nigga." The song's lyrics included, "Now I could be a crooked nigga too/When I'm rollin' with my crew/Watch what crooked niggers do/I got a nine millimeter Glock pistol/I'm ready to get with you at the tip of a whistle/So make your move and act like you wanna flip/I fired thirteen shots and popped another clip."¹⁴ Rap lyrics which debase women and glamorize violence reinforce the historical Brute Caricature.

Erdman Palmore researched ethnophaulisms and made the following observations: the number of ethnophaulisms used correlates positively with the amount of out-group prejudice; and ethnophaulisms express and support negative stereotypes about the most visible racial and cultural differences.¹⁵

White supremacists have found the Internet an indispensable tool for spreading their message of hate. An Internet search of nigger using Netscape or Alta Vista locates many anti-black web pages: Niggers Must Die, Hang A Nigger For America, Nigger Joke Central, and literally thousands of others. Visitors to these sites know, like most blacks know experientially, that nigger is an expression of anti-black antipathy. Is it surprising that nigger is the most commonly used racist slur during hate crimes?

No American minority group has been caricatured as often, in as many ways, as have blacks. These caricatures combined distorted physical descriptions and negative cultural and behavior stereotypes. The Coon caricature, for example, was a tall, skinny, loose-jointed, dark-skinned male, often bald, with oversized, ruby-red lips. His clothing was either ragged and dirty or outlandishly gaudy. His slow, exaggerated gait suggested laziness. He was a pauper, lacking ambition and the skills necessary for upward social mobility. He was a buffoon. When frightened, the Coon's eyes bulged and darted. His speech was slurred, halted, and replete with malapropisms. His shrill, high-pitched voice made whites laugh. The Coon caricature dehumanized blacks, and served as a justification for social, economic, and political discrimination.

Nigger may be viewed as an umbrella term – a way of saying that blacks have the negative characteristics of the Coon, Buck, Tom, Mammy, Sambo, Picaninny, and other anti-black caricatures. Nigger, like the caricatures it encompasses and implies, belittles blacks, and rationalizes their mistreatment. The use of the word or its variants by blacks has not significantly lessened its sting. This is not surprising. The historical relationship between European Americans and African Americans was shaped by a racial hierarchy which spanned three centuries. Anti-black attitudes, values, and behavior were normative. Historically, Nigger more than any word captured the personal antipathy and institutionalized racism directed toward blacks. It still does.

© Dr. David Pilgrim, Professor of Sociology, and Dr. Phillip Middleton, Professor of Languages and Literature, Ferris State University.

Sept., 2001

1 An earlier version of this paper, entitled "Purposeful Venom Revisited," was published in Gerald E. Matthews (editor), 1999 Journey Towards Nationalism: The Implications of Race and Racism. New York: Farber, pp. 91-93. David Pilgrim is a sociologist; Phillip Middleton is a linguist.

2 Dictionaries typically defined nigger as a synonym for Negro, Black, or dark-skinned people. See, for example, Wentworth, Harold (editor) 1944. American Dialect Dictionary. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, p. 412. Recent dictionaries are more likely to mention that nigger is a term of contempt. Please read, Charlie M. Williams, "Nigger," [<http://kpearson.faculty.tacj.edu/Dictionary/nigger.htm>], September 10, 2001.

3 Ehrlich, Howard J. 1973. The Social Psychology of Prejudice. New York: Wiley, p. 22. See also, Schaefer, Richard T. 2000. Racial and Ethnic Groups, 8th edition. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, p. 44.

4 Even innocent words – boy, girl, and uncle – took on racist meanings when applied to blacks.

5 See, Green, Jonathan. 1985. The Dictionary of Contemporary Slang. New York: Stein and Day, p. 190.

6 For a brief analysis of these terms see, Simpson, J.A. (editor). 1989. The Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 401-405.

7 "The Ten Little Niggers," in Jolly Jingles (No author or publication date given). Chicago: M.A. Donohue & Company.

8 Christie, Agatha. 1939/1978. Ten Little Niggers. Great Britain: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd. Glasgow.