

The N word; A Slur Reclaimed

Pass Over, Program Notes

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What does it mean to change the meaning of a word that once provoked violence to a word of brotherhood? A word that is equated to inferiority and property is now found in almost every hip-hop and rap song. Even on the T, you'll hear it exchanged by young people of color and many times white people, saying it as if that word never held a history of disadvantages and death. In *Pass Over*, Antoinette Nwandu explores the complicated relationship of this word for black people and white people.

For over 200 years this word was used by white men and women to remind people of color their place in this world; the bottom. This word was weaponized from slavery to the civil rights movement and still today as a mind game so successful that people of color began to believe this inferiority to be true. Social scientists call this "internalized oppression" which is the psychological trauma that ensues when a person from a stigmatized group believes those negative stigmas. This internalized oppression not only affected the psyche of the black man and women but also impacted the way the world treated them. This weaponizing of the n word created the institutionalized racism we see today, the inaccessibility to; affordable housing, quality education, jobs, the ability to vote, and representation in the media. This word not only changed the meaning of being of color but established the need to justify the violence against black and brown bodies.

Today that meaning has changed, for some. The popularity of hip-hop and rap in the late 1980s to the early 1990s introduced a new use of the N Word. It no longer was a word of inferiority but a word of brotherhood and commonality, an opportunity to connect on a struggle only a select group could understand. There is a distinct difference in the way it is said today; "Nigga" and "Nigger", though basically the same word carry vastly different meanings. Some people claim that using the term with the ending "er" implies its long history of racism and discrimination established during slavery. Others say that "nigga" reclaims the word from its sordid history and turns it into a term of endearment but only to be used by black people. Through out the play we see Kitch and Moses use "Nigga" like many people use the word dude. Implying multiple meanings to one word by changing the inflection and tone making it have a completely different meaning from its original definition. Nwandu's constant word play creates a poetic and rhythmic feel that becomes not only the soundtrack to these two men but defines the moment they are in right now and so many men of color find themselves in today. To some they could be two boys waiting for the world to let them be men or two niggas just vibin on the corner waitin for their shot off the block.

But what happens when that word becomes so mainstream that people who are not black use it? Maybe it's in a song or a comedy sketch they love. Does that mean anyone can say it?

It's been a large controversy in the last decade, with celebrities and scholars discussing who can and cannot use the word. Celebrities have been called out for using the word as they are not of color and their image has been tarnished for doing so. Take for example, Gina Rodriguez, star of "Jane The Virgin". She was recently under fire on social media for posting a video of herself singing along to the Fugee's song "Ready Or Not" and saying the N word. After an immediate backlash from social media she deleted the video and posted an apology on instagram. Many people thought the apology was not enough as some say it implied she did not truly understand what she did wrong and why she shouldn't say the N word. What made this issue complex was its resurfaced the constant question; who can and can't say it? This debate is not the first of its kind, Jennifer Lopez said the N word in her 2001 hit song "I'm Real" with Ja Rule and faced a similar backlash. Things become even more complicated when we take into consideration artists who may present as white but are Afro Latinx, creating a complex issue of policing the use of this word.

As we watch Moses and Kitch showcase the variety of meanings and usages the n word carries, it reinforces the sacred relationship between them and the word Nigga. Nwandu later challenges this relationship by reminding us the complicated history that birthed the word into existence. Making us all wonder if reclaiming a word with such volatile history can truly be accomplished. The constant debate around reclaiming the N word suggests that we will always have complicated relationships with slurs no matter if they are reclaimed or not.