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A Philosophical Analysis of the Word 'Nigga' Through Language and Identity

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1. Introduction

*"I be the Abstract Poetic representing from Queens
Socially I'm not inane, black and white got game
If you came to the jam, well I'm glad you came
See, nigga first was used back in the Deep South
Falling out between the dome of the white man's mouth
It means that we will never grow, you know the word dummy
Upper niggas in the community think it's crummy
But I don't, neither does the youth cause we em-
Brace adversity it goes right with the race
And being that we use it as a term of endearment
Niggas start to bug, to the dome is where the fear went
Now the little shorties say it all of the time
And a whole bunch of niggas throw the word in they rhyme
Yo I start to flinch, as I try not to say it
But my lips is like the oowop as I start to spray it
My lips is like a oowop as I start to spray it"*

- Q-Tip on A Tribe Called Quest's song *Sucka Nigga*

There are few words in the English language as controversial and notorious, but on the other hand widely used and differing in meaning as the word 'nigga'. While this word in the original form of 'nigger' has a gruesome past, it has evolved through time and found its way into the English language as a reappropriated term. This reappropriation is mostly a phenomenon found among African-American youth and in Hip-Hop culture.² While in some context's 'nigga' is a commonly and lightly used word, there is still much controversy surrounding this word. This controversy however does not mean we do not have a 'common contemporary use of the word 'nigga'.

¹ A Tribe Called Quest, "Sucka Nigga."

² Rahman, "The N Word: Its History and Use in the African American Community," 159.

By this I mean what is the most commonly socially accepted use of the phrase. Most commonly socially accepted is that black people are allowed to say 'nigga'.³ Whether white people⁴ are allowed to say the word when reading a text that contains the word or quoting is a hot topic at the time of writing⁵, but it is commonly socially accepted that they are not allowed to use this word when voicing own thoughts and opinions. The use of 'nigger', ending in -er and pronounced as such, is never accepted or tolerated because that specific pronunciation has never been reappropriated and we assume that people can only utter this in an intentionally harmful way. I have based this 'most commonly accepted use of the word' on academic papers⁶ but also on opinion pieces⁷, news stories and personal experience from extensive exposure to Hip-Hop music and culture. Within the realm of Hip-Hop music, it is common use for black rappers to use 'nigga' as freely as they like while white rappers are not allowed to use the word.⁸ Other media, like stand-up comedy and movies, where we see the same application of this word, further support this view.⁹

³ Of course, here we can apply nuances as well, like not being allowed to use it in a harmful way or only being allowed to say it around people that are comfortable with it. For simplicity's sake, since these nuances will not play a role in this thesis, we will adhere to the most commonly accepted social view, being that black people are allowed to say it.

⁴ I will be using the term 'white people' throughout the thesis as a synonym for non-black people.

⁵ A recent example of this is a concert by Hip-Hop artist *Kendrick Lamar*, where he invited a fan (a white girl in this case) on stage to rap a song along. The song in question was 'm.A.A.d. City' in which the first four lines all end in 'nigga'. The girl rapped the lyrics along without censoring herself, which caused Lamar to stop her performance and tell her she 'needs to bleep one word'. This became a controversial story, where the public opinion was heavily divided on who was in the wrong. Some people think the girl should have known better, while others think Lamar should not have picked a song containing this word that often if he didn't want her to rap it.

⁶ Rahman, "The N Word: Its History and Use in the African American Community"; Parks and Jones, "Nigger": A Critical Race Realist Analysis of the N-Word within Hate Crimes Law."

⁷ Luckman, "A Guide to (Not) Using the N-Word"; Hutson, "No, You May Not Say The N-Word Just Because It's In Your Favorite Rap Song"; Harriot, "Why It's OK for Black People, but Not White People, to Use the N-Word, Explained (Again)"; Shoneye, "As a Black Woman, I Hate the Term 'People of Colour.'"

⁸ Parks and Jones, "Nigger": A Critical Race Realist Analysis of the N-Word within Hate Crimes Law," 1328–31.

⁹ Parks and Jones, 1322–28.

This use may be coherent from a historical standpoint, but I want to argue that our current use of the word is not in line with theories in philosophy of language. Having the usage of a word be connected to skin color is problematic for multiple reasons, but I believe that at the core of these problems is a linguistic one. That is why this thesis has the following leading research question: On what notions of meaning and 'histo-racial' context do arguments that link the usage of the word 'nigga' to skin color rely, and how convincing are these notions?¹⁰

It is important to note that there are many views on the words 'nigger' and 'nigga' even among different communities and ethnicities. For example, you have the opposing views that everyone is allowed to say it or that nobody is allowed to say it, no matter the context.¹¹ There is also the view that white people are never allowed to even utter the word while black people are always allowed to utter the phrase freely, no matter the context.¹² There has never been a universal agreement (even within social groups, cultural or ethnical) on proper usage of this word. This should not come off as strange since sensitive subjects rarely find universal agreement. I also want to mention that this thesis is primarily focused on the usage of this word in North-American culture.

The first part of this thesis will consist of a quick dive into the history of the word 'nigga'. If we want to understand the current use of the word, we first need to know its origins and how it has evolved through time and society. From this we will be able to deduce the notions of meaning and histo-racial context surrounding this word. In the second part we will be exploring philosophy of language theories that are relevant to our research. Our main focus here will be writings in post-structuralism from Jacques Derrida and work on identity by Judith Butler and Kwame Anthony Appiah. Derrida's deconstruction theory will help us understand identities from a linguistic standpoint. From there we can have a closer look at the complexity of identities and in the third part we will apply our findings to the notions discussed in the first part. In what way does language shape our reality and the identities we have and how does this relate to the word 'nigga'?

¹⁰ The term 'histo-racial' needs a bit more explaining. It's a combination of 'history' and 'racial' and is meant to denote the history of race.

¹¹ Olutoye, "Nobody Should Use the N-Word - Not Even Black People."

¹² Harriot, "Why It's OK for Black People, but Not White People, to Use the N-Word, Explained (Again)."

2. What This Word Means

Since the starting point of this thesis is pinpointing the notions that support the use of ‘nigga’ based on skin color, we first need to have a look at where these notions come from. We will touch briefly on the etymology, but there are plenty other sources that cover the etymology thoroughly.¹³ Here, we are mostly interested in its application and how this has evolved through time. The word ‘nigger’ found its way into the English language from Spanish slave traders. The word ‘negro’ means black in Spanish and was used as a (relatively) neutral term to describe the slaves, based on their dark skin color.¹⁴ When adopted into the English vocabulary however, this term became a derogatory word in the form of ‘nigger’. It was the main slur used to address people of color and meant to be harmful in multiple ways. Its use was not only meant to be contemptuous, but also a way to foist a sense of inferiority on slaves, so that they would feel like lesser humans than their white suppressor and become docile. Alongside being a derogatory term for black people it also became a term to describe negative situations in general with. It became such a widespread word that even black people started using it amongst themselves as a negative expression.¹⁵

In the early 18th century the word ‘nigger’ already had started transforming. It was through the phonological differences in the language of West African slaves (West African words often end in open syllables), who had to adopt English as a second language, that the -er at the end of ‘nigger’ started to disappear. This new pronunciation also meant that it was unique to slave culture and it began gaining social meaning. Jacquelyn Rahman explains in her article *The N Word: Its History and Use in the African American Community* that social meanings developed among the Africans that reflected a view in which they saw themselves as survivors and as humans whose freedom and dignity had been assaulted.¹⁶

It was a sense of ownership of the pronunciation ending in an open vowel that had sparked the possibility of transforming the meaning of this word and making it part of the ‘black experience’. Fast forward to the 20th century and it is mostly through creative outlets like poetry

¹³ Middleton and Pilgrim, “Nigger (the Word), a Brief History.”

¹⁴ Rahman, “The N Word: Its History and Use in the African American Community,” 142.

¹⁵ Examples of this are to be found in literary works like “Their Eyes Were Watching God” by Zora Neale Hurston, where two black female characters refer to certain black men as ‘thrashy niggers’.

¹⁶ Rahman, “The N Word: Its History and Use in the African American Community,” 10–11.

from poets like Imamu Amiri Baraka and stand-up comedy from comedians like Richard Pryor and Paul Mooney that the words ‘nigger’ and ‘nigga’ started to find their way into mainstream media.¹⁷ It is however mostly through Hip-Hop music that the term ‘nigga’ rose in public popularity and was granted its (partial) social acceptance. Important to note here is that throughout the centuries ‘nigga’ remained a term only accessible by the black community. For a white person to use this term publicly is heavily frowned upon and more often than not the person in question will face repercussions. Recent examples of this are Dutch street reporter Dennis Schouten who uttered the word when quoting black artist Ronnie Flex and Tyler “Ninja” Blevins, a popular content creator on Twitch, who said the word while freestyling a rap on one of his livestreams.¹⁸

Now that we are familiar with the background of the words ‘nigger’ and ‘nigga’, we can deduce the notions on which we rely when we let the social license to use these words depend on skin color. First, we have the notion that the word ‘nigga’ has a semantically different meaning from the original word ‘nigger’. ‘Nigga’ is a term reappropriated by the black community, giving it a different meaning. While in Hip-Hop music ‘nigga’ is the most commonly used phrase¹⁹ among black rappers, you will not hear ‘nigger’ with a pronounced -er.²⁰ ‘Nigger’ itself has never been reappropriated, so when uttered, we assume this can only be done with harmful intent. This brings us to the second notion. since this term has been reappropriated by black people, only black people are allowed to use this word freely, because, as is argued, it is *their* word. This is based on the historical fact that before its reappropriation by the black community its original use was exclusively harmful²¹, and its other use is not accessible to a white person. When viewed as a term of endearment, only a black person can participate in this practice, since it is an empowering term for a black person and someone with a different skin color is not capable of using it for their

¹⁷ Middleton and Pilgrim, “Nigger (the Word), a Brief History.”

¹⁸ Beelen, *RONNIE FLEX VS. POWNED DENNIS + TRENDING IN HET BUITENLAND*  Giel's Trending.

¹⁹ Daniels, “The Words Rappers Use (and Don’t Use).” This is a highly elaborate essay on what the most commonly used words and phrases are among rappers, comparing a total of 308 Hip-Hop artists.

²⁰ Tyler, The Creator, “Smuckers.” Exceptions are when an artist explicitly emphasizes the word ‘nigger’ when needed in the context of the song. An example of this is the lyric “but you fucked up as a parent, your child idol’s a nigger” by Tyler, the Creator on his song “Smuckers”. ‘Nigger’ here is used in the sense that the parents think of him as a ‘nigger’.

²¹ Middleton and Pilgrim, “Nigger (the Word), a Brief History.”

empowerment. I, for example, am not a part of the black community, I do not share the black experience and history, therefore I cannot use it with the same intent a black person could, which means my only available use is a harmful one. The third notion is that our current usage of the word is 'correct' and that black people are the authority on who is allowed to say the word. By 'correct' I mean that the most common socially accepted view is to agree with the view that the usage of this word should stay linked to skin color. By authority I mean that black people get to decide who is allowed to say the word. While the social norm is that only black people get to participate in this practice, there is a practice where a white person can get a 'nigga pass'.²² What this means is that a white person will get the permission from black friends to use the word within reason and certain social circles and contexts. While white people can be appalled and disgusted by the use of this word, it is the black community who gets to decide if they themselves and other people are allowed to use it. While this is a practice that only occurs among younger generations and is done partially jokingly, it is still important to note that this phenomenon further supports the notion that black people have ownership and authority over the use of the word 'nigga'.

With these three notions in mind, we continue this thesis by looking at Derrida's theory on deconstruction to give this research its needed context.

3. Language

Now that we have the notions that link the usage of the word 'nigga' to skin color laid out before us, we can start researching how convincing these views are. This research has a linguistic and language philosophical approach, not an ethical one. This means that this is not a thesis that tries to set new ethical borders around the word 'nigga', but serves as a linguistic analysis of the word, how it currently fits into the English language and if this is in line with our use of language in general. Our first step in analyzing this word is looking at Jacques Derrida's work on deconstruction. I believe that his views on the relation between language and the outside world will prove valuable in our understanding of identities, which are closely linked to our usage of the word 'nigga'.

²² RoadToHollywoodTv, *The Nigga Pass*; Parks and Jones, "Nigger": A Critical Race Realist Analysis of the N-Word within Hate Crimes Law," 1321. The video 'The Nigga Pass' is comedy sketch explaining the meaning and use of the phrase.

Derrida discards, what he characterizes as the logocentric tradition of Western philosophy and science. Logocentrism is the idea that spoken language and our external reality are intimately related, meaning truths about the outside world are to be found in our language. In other words, speech is an immediate expression of the outside world.²³ Writing, on the other hand, is considered within this approach to be a derivative of spoken language, supplementary to speech. This places writing below speech in the hierarchy of expressing thoughts and ideas. For Ferdinand de Saussure and Jean-Jacques Rousseau speech is more natural and direct than writing.²⁴ Writing is even seen as parasitic and inferior to speech because it contains traits like distance, absence, misunderstanding, insincerity and ambiguity that are not to be found in speech.²⁵ Derrida disagrees with this notion and tries to deconstruct this hierarchy from within. There is an irony in thinkers who attack writing being themselves dependent on writing to convey their ideas.²⁶

Let us have a closer look at Saussure's work in linguistics and on what aspects of language he and Derrida agree and disagree on. Saussure was one of the founders of semiotics and coined the terms 'signifier' and 'signified'. The signified is the concept of what we refer to and the signifier is the word or phrase we use to refer to the signified with. A classic example of this is 'tree', where the word 'tree' is the signifier for a concept with specific traits (a plant, with a trunk etc.). It does not refer to a specific tree, but rather a general idea or concept of a tree. Signifiers, however, do not have a meaning apart from our total network of marks (signifiers). 'Tree' can have a meaning because it does not have the same meaning as 'tea' or 'three'. Only in relation to other signs, can signs have meaning. Saussure is phonocentric when it comes to signs, meaning he regards spoken words as a more natural and direct connection between signifier and signified than he does writing. On the other hand, Saussure acknowledges that signifiers are arbitrary; the specific signifier for the concept of 'tree' could have easily been something else, like it already is in different languages. Derrida agrees with Saussure that signifiers are indeed arbitrary, but only in a strict sense. While yes, the contents of a signified are absent from the mark, signifiers are also interconnected, making them inseparable according to Derrida. 'New' signifiers are often

²³ Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 92.

²⁴ Then & Now, *Understanding Derrida, Deconstruction & Of Grammatology*.

²⁵ Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 101.

²⁶ Then & Now, *Understanding Derrida, Deconstruction & Of Grammatology*.

contractions of already existing signifiers or are indebted to existing signifiers in one way or another.

What Derrida shows with deconstruction is that the hierarchy between two oppositions can be flipped around. In this case placing writing above speech.²⁷ Derrida does not agree with Saussure that speech is more natural or present than writing. This because we can only form thoughts in the form of signifiers or marks. Since there is no necessary connection between these marks and their meaning, one might argue that the mark comes first. Just think of how we first learn to utter words and our understanding of them comes afterwards. Since the marks comes first from this standpoint, writing cannot be seen as something that is simply supplementary to speech.²⁸ One could argue that speech is still more primary or natural than writing, because it does not require any tools to perform, but even a society that does not make use of written communication whatsoever is still subject to a 'mental writing'.²⁹ A society like that still has a network of marks, whose meaning still needs to be 'written down' mentally (remembered) for successful communication.

By deconstructing the hierarchy of speech and writing Derrida shows us that this hierarchy is not something existing independent of us but is rather a construct of language. In language we create oppositions like speech/ writing, left/ right, body/ soul, high/ low, strong/weak, male/ female etc. which all contain an explicit or implicit hierarch between them. This hierarchy however is not something existing in the external reality, but only in language. By showing that writing can be seen as a more primary expression of language than speech, Derrida shows that speech is not a direct expression of our outside world: 'Meaning is not out there waiting to be worded. Rather, words as they come into being word the world'.³⁰

Let us now have a look how this theory on deconstruction can be applied to language in practice.

²⁷ There is one more missing link in this hierarchy, being thought. Thought comes before speech and writing is a derivative of speech.

²⁸ Munday, "Derrida, Butler and an Education in Otherness," 59–60.

²⁹ Munday, 60.

³⁰ Munday, 59.

4. Identity

Now with a basic understanding of Derrida's philosophy on language and our relation to it, we have taken our first step in the analysis of the word 'nigga'. Deconstruction is applicable to our ideas on identity, which play an important role in this research. The hierarchy in language Derrida remarks, inevitably comes paired with a sense of sameness and otherness. From an Eurocentric standpoint a dark skin color is part of otherness, while a light skin color is part of sameness, placing it on top in the hierarchy. However, what concepts are part of sameness and what are part of otherness is not defined by their content but by our use of language; what we take to be part of sameness is what we assign sameness to.

A way to interpret this subjectivity of language is to view it as a performance. Judith Butler uses the groundwork of philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault on genealogy, J.L. Austin on the performative, Simone de Beauvoir's ideas on gender and Derrida's above-mentioned work on deconstruction, to support her own views on the performativity of gender.³¹ In modern feminism and gender studies in general, it is widely accepted that gender is not something you *are or have* but rather is something you *become or do*. The argument is that there is a difference between biological sex and gender. While the first is something we are born with, the second is something we are taught through societal ideas on gender. As Butler puts it herself 'There is no identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results'³². There is no essence of what a woman *is*, only ideas and ideologies that have developed through time and cultures on what a woman *should be*. Qualities like pretty, fragile, caring and well mannered are attributes that have become so ingrained with our perceived notions of what a woman should be, that lacking in these attributes means lacking in womanhood. The opposite goes for qualities like strong, fearless and protective in regard to manhood. Butler recognizes the performative nature of gender, meaning gender is not something we are, but instead do. There is no specific set of qualities that make you part of a gender, since these are contingent and subject to change. Gender does not have an essence but is rather an identity that is construed through rituals and conventions found in society.

³¹ Claeys, "How to Do Things with Butler," 43.

³² Claeys, 46.

What does this talk of gender have to do with the word ‘nigga’? Before we get to that in chapter six, we first need have a look at what it has to do with identity in general. I want to argue that Butler’s work on the performativity of gender is applicable to any form of identity a person can cling onto. Examples of common forms of identity besides gender are nationality, sexual preference, religion and also skin color. Like gender before the application of performativity, it is common for societies to view other forms of identity as rigid signifieds that exist in the outside world, independent from our language.

Now it has to be said that while Derrida and Butler provide a strong basis for how language and identity are intertwined, they are also limited in their conclusions. They both believe that there is an element of inescapability to meaning and identity respectively. What we say is always subject to interpretation, no matter our intention³³ and there is a disciplinary power in social structures that forms us as subjects, whether we like it or not.³⁴

Through Butler’s teachings in performativity we can see how language and discourses within language form our identity. It is through discourses and identities that stem from language that we categorize ourselves into groups we can or cannot be part of. The ‘us versus them’ mentality that sprouts from clashing identities is one of the main issues that the idea of rigid identities entails, and it is being recognized in multiple philosophical works. In the next chapter we will be going more in depth on this ‘us versus them’ mentality, its relation to language and with that also to the word ‘nigga’.

5. The Pitfalls of Identity

So, it becomes clear how lingual constructs form our thoughts and equip us with concepts we use to categorize the world with. It is through language that it becomes second nature to think in differences and oppositions. While categorization helps us to communicate our thoughts and feelings easier and more efficiently, it also leads to generalizations. It is important to realize that identities like man/ woman, native/ foreigner, theist/ atheist and black/ white are oppositions that are useful tools in everyday communication but are not categories that are physically present

³³ Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 132.

³⁴ Munday, “Derrida, Butler and an Education in Otherness,” 61.

in the world. J. Angelo Corlett correctly remarks the dangers of oversimplifying these identities and treating them as something present in the world:

Social categorization helps bring order to (...) cognitive complexity in information processing.

However, the order and simplicity resulting from such information processing can at times come at too high a price. To the extent that racism is based on stereotype-based ethnic prejudice.³⁵

This social categorization is applicable to any identity you see yourself as having, but also to identities others label you as. Jean Beaman for example notes that it is important to keep in mind that others will impose identities unto you.³⁶ While some might take pride in their ethnicity, for others it is something that gets projected onto them. From identities with which we label ourselves and others with, some of which inevitably oppose each other, an 'us versus them' mentality starts to arise. The way we categorize the world through language influences how we perceive the world.

Just like how in language a word cannot have meaning without a network of other words with their corresponding meaning, identities cannot have meaning without their counterparts. An 'us versus them' mentality can be seen in many aspects of society. A sense of belonging to a group that can be labelled as 'we' is important to people. Think of different internet discussions where people choose sides between things like 'Apple versus Android', 'Coca-Cola versus Pepsi', 'Marvel Comics versus DC Comics' or more classical examples like 'Democrats versus Republicans' or 'sports team x versus sports team y'. Most of these examples are harmful oppositions, but oppositions are also at the heart of discrimination and racism. Identifying as a Democrat and strictly disagreeing with Republican standpoints can lead to a feeling of superiority over Republicans. However in practice a Democrat may find that he has more in common with someone who identifies as Republican than with some fellow Democrats, because of the differences in definition of Republican and Democrat they might hold. Thinking in terms of 'us versus them' segregates people in groups that hide behind a veil of objectivity but in reality, are defined by personal subjectivity. Corlett notes how racism and discrimination exist even within groups. An example of this is African-American experiencing discrimination from other African-Americans. Often this is based on the darkness of skin color, where light skinned African-

³⁵ Corlett, "Analyzing Racism," 34.

³⁶ Beaman, "Boundaries of Difference: Cultural Citizenship and Transnational Blackness," 88.

Americans discriminate those with a darker skin color and the other way around.³⁷ 'Us versus them' can be as broad or narrow of a definition as we ourselves decide. This further goes to show that identities (and with that oppositions) originate from language and our definitions of these identities differ based on personal experience.

A great example of how complicated identities are, is that of philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah. His mixture of Ghanaian and British parentage makes him hard to place for most people, even often getting mistaken for Indian. Appiah now living in the USA, his British accent, makes his appearance even harder to fit in an identity people are familiar with. Not to mention he is married to a Jewish man.³⁸

Appiah himself writes about identity and the misconceptions that come with it. There is an underlying essentialistic assumption in having the social license for utterance of the word 'nigga' be linked to skin color. Essentialism in relation to identities for Appiah means that we assume certain people to have certain essential characteristics. We create a network of different traits in our heads that we ascribe to different skin colors. Some of these traits we see as essential to a particular skin color. It are these traits that bind a particular group:

Once identities exist, people tend to form a picture of a typical member of the group. They may have more or less foundation in reality, but they are almost always critically wrong about something.³⁹

Appiah argues that starting at a young age we already ascribe different essential traits to people and with that separate people into different groups.⁴⁰

This essentialism then bled through into even our scientific approach to people. Our idea about 'peoples', 'groups of human beings defined by shared ancestry, real or imaginary'⁴¹, instead turned into a theory about race. Who we are became less defined by what we do but more by how we look:

Since the late eighteenth century, the conviction has grown and spread that all of us carry within us something derived from the race to which we belong that explains our mental and physical

³⁷ Corlett, "Analyzing Racism," 27.

³⁸ Appiah, 'De les is: jij bent niet die geschiedenis.'

³⁹ Appiah, *The Lies That Bind*, 12.

⁴⁰ Appiah, 26.

⁴¹ Appiah, 111.

potential. That something, that racial essence, was inherited biologically, transmitted through procreation. If your parents were of the same race, you shared their common essence. If people of different races married, their offspring carried something of the racial essence of each parent.⁴²

Nowadays, a scientific basis for different races has been disproven⁴³, but the essentialistic ideas they carry still linger in our language and in the way we think about differences between human beings.

Another aspect of identities that Appiah touches on is that personal experiences with identities differ, which is closely related to Derrida's theory that language shapes how we perceive the outside world. Even if we share some important aspects of identity, our life experiences still can vary widely. Appiah gives the example of two gay, white males, with one being a Protestant from Northern Ireland and the other a Catholic from Southern Ireland. While they share some important aspects of identity, they also differ in aspects that will result in different life experiences.⁴⁴ These different experiences not only apply to our own identities but also to identities we perceive in others. Just like when talking about a tree people think of different trees based on their experience, people also think different things when hearing phrases like 'black people' and 'white people'. We make different linguistic connections and different mental images based on our experience. This experience is always the experience of our whole, complex person. You cannot speak from your experience as purely a 'black person' or 'white person', you always speak from your experience as *you*; a complex person whose different aspects of identity can never be separated from each other.⁴⁵ While we can understand each other when referring to things or concepts like tree, dog, cup, blue or global warming, we never mean or refer to the exact same thing. This is once again because words do not have an immediate connection to the outside world. Words do not describe an outside reality, they only describe our personal experience of reality. It does need to be said that we can have shared experiences. The relation between reality and language is complex, but we are also equipped with the same senses, so while our experiences are personal, the foundation they rest on is similar.

⁴² Appiah, 116.

⁴³ Kolbert, "There's No Scientific Basis for Race—It's a Made-Up Label."

⁴⁴ Appiah, *The Lies That Bind*, 20.

⁴⁵ This idea about inseparable identities is closely related to legal theorist and civil rights activist Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality in critical theories.

6. What This Means for the Word

How does all of this relate to the word 'nigga'? Let us quickly remind ourselves of the research question: On what notions of meaning and 'histo-racial' context do arguments that link the usage of the word 'nigga' to skin color rely, and how convincing are these notions? In this thesis we are trying to find out how the word 'nigga' is being used and how convincing the arguments for it are. Let us go through the three notions we mentioned in chapter two. First, there is the notion that 'nigga' has a semantically different meaning from 'nigger'. Our findings do not contradict this notion, because you can see them as two separate words. While still closely related and people still take offense from hearing 'nigga', its intended use differs from 'nigger'. Since 'nigga' is used as a term of endearment, it is not only a different signifier than 'nigger', it also has a different signified. While the term 'nigga' gets used very loosely, its intended use was for it to be separated from 'nigger'. From this perspective 'nigga' does have a semantically different meaning from 'nigger'.

This brings us to our second notion; the term 'nigga' has been reappropriated by black people, which makes it *their* word, meaning only they can use it. Here is where our findings about identity come into play. When talking about black people or white people in the context of who is allowed to utter a phrase, we silently make the assumption that 'black' and 'white' are categories of identity that exist in the outside world, independent of language. We however argued through Butler and Appiah that identities are complex. These categorizations are not telling us anything of the outside world in a direct way, but only of our personal experience of the outside world. This brings the validity of notion two into question. While most people have the same basic intuitions on what makes someone 'black' or 'white' (because of beforementioned shared senses), we cannot deny that language only allows us to speak of experiences and that there are many caveats that make this an exceptionally complicated matter.

What makes a person 'black'? This may seem like a silly question but allow me to elaborate. For the second notion to be valid we need to have a clear definition of what a black person is and what it is about a black person that gives them authority over the word 'nigga'. I can imagine that simply stating 'we cannot formulate a clear definition of a black person because 'black' is an identity frame constructed in language and it always entails personal experience' will not be a satisfying answer to most, so let us let go of the philosophy of language viewpoint for now. The most obvious trait for a person to be considered black, is their skin having a dark color.

Is there a certain amount of melanin you need to have in your skin for you to be considered black? Common-sense says no, because if a white person gets a tan or even melanin injected, we still would not consider them to be black. By the same token a dark-skinned Bangladeshi man is not considered black either. This means it is not purely based on skin color, but on genetics as well. One might say then, for someone to be considered black they need to have a dark skin and be of a certain decent, have a certain background. Just like with the darkness of skin color however, there is no clear line on how 'pure' this heritage needs to be. What do we consider someone who has $\frac{3}{4}$ European heritage and $\frac{1}{4}$ African heritage to be? Based on heritage we would have to say white, but practice dictates that a mixture of this kind often leads to a person to be perceived as black.⁴⁶

Consider the case of rapper Logic, who has an African-American father and Caucasian mother but is considered white because of his fair skin complexion. While he considers himself to be black, Hip-Hop culture disproves of him using the word 'nigga'.⁴⁷ On the other hand it is accepted of artists like Tekashi69 (Mexican/ Puerto Rican decent), \$tupid Young (Cambodian decent) and Lil' Pump (Cuban/ Mexican decent) to use this word in their lyrics.⁴⁸ These rappers are affiliated with the gangs Bloods and Crips or grew up in the ghetto which gives them authority over the word from a credibility and authenticity standpoint. This shows us that authority over the use of the word 'nigga' is not strictly related to skin color, heritage or even a combination of both. There is also a 'black experience' or 'black community' you need to be part of. What does this experience or community encompass? For some this means growing up in a black neighborhood or partaking in black culture and tradition consisting of music, food and dance. Do

⁴⁶ Think of our universal agreement on that Barack Obama was the first black president of the USA. While this strictly speaking is not incorrect, there is more nuance to it, which we never apply. Obama's mother, Ann Dunham was Caucasian, which makes Obama equal parts black and white, yet no one would ever call Obama a white president. One might argue it is because up until that point every president was strictly white, so a president that is of mixed heritage, is black in comparison. But now consider a country like Nigeria, which has only had fully black presidents up until this point. Would we call the first president of Nigeria that has one white parent, and therefore has a mixed complexion, white? I do not think we would. Terms like 'redbone' or 'mullato' exist to describe a person of mixed heritage with but they are not as widely used as simply calling someone with mixed heritage black.

⁴⁷ Genius, Logic *"Take It Back" Official Lyrics & Meaning* | Verified.

⁴⁸ Anthony Fantano, *LET'S ARGUE*; \$tupid Young, "Mando"; Lil Pump, "D Rose."

you have to have encountered a certain amount of racism or have enough historical awareness of the word ‘nigger’ as well for you to be able to properly reappropriate the term ‘nigga’ and use it yourself? And lastly consider a black child adopted into a white family, growing up in a white neighborhood never partaking in black culture or the black experience. Are they authorized to use the word?

Even when we let go of philosophy of language notions and follow common intuitions on what traits make someone a black person and what traits do not, we see that the more nuanced questions we ask, the harder it gets to answer them in a seemingly objective way. Even following common-sense reasonings confirms the complexity of identities. Exceptions to the rule like Tekashi69, \$tupid Young and Lil’ Pump show us the instability of the notions we adhere to in our current commonly accepted usage of the word ‘nigga’. In their case it are negative attributions like gang affiliation, violence and drug use that gives them authority over the word because these qualities give rappers credibility in the current Hip-Hop industry and with that it is turning negative traits into part of black culture. Often in popular Hip-Hop music we can hear phrases like ‘dumb ‘nigga’ and ‘fuck niggas’, expressions that could not be further from their intended expression of endearment.⁴⁹ Is addressing a stranger with a loaded term like ‘nigga’ in a negative context suddenly not harmful and oppressive just because someone with a similar skin color uttered it to you? How much do two people with a similar skin color from different social and economic backgrounds, different interests, living on opposite sides of the world have in common? Very little I would say, but it is more socially accepted for two black strangers to address each other with the phrase ‘nigga’ in a negative context then for a white person to rap the word along in song or use it to address a friend in an endearing way.

Our last notion is that our current usage of the word is ‘correct’ and that black people are the authority on who is allowed to say the word. This notion once again encompasses the assumption of identities being rigid, but it also introduces the idea of our usage of the word ‘nigga’ being correct, meaning our usage of the word should stay linked to skin color. Appiah’s work on identity will help us respond to this notion. In thinking that it is correct for the utterance of a word to stay linked to skin color we still adhere to an essentialism in people. Remember how Appiah mentioned that the introduction of race theory started to define people less by what they do but more by how they look. This idea on ‘race’ is still present in our common contemporary

⁴⁹ Chief Keef, “I Don’t Like.”

usage of the word 'nigga'. If you combine this essentialism with Derrida's argument that the structure of language makes us think in oppositions, it becomes clear how our current usage of the word 'nigga' substantiates an 'us versus them' mentality.

The way we categorize the outside world has a big influence on how we perceive it. As long as the meaning of a word is defined by the skin color of its user (or parentage or the community one might be part of) instead of their intention and the context it was used in, then it will continue to produce this 'us versus them' mentality. Our identities give us an important sense of belonging, but it is important that we do not let the history of identities weigh down on and define us.⁵⁰

7. Conclusion

Language is a powerful tool but just like any other tool, it is its application that decides whether it has been used for bad or good. On the other hand, language is also one big mess making identities messy as well.⁵¹ Just like Derrida said, iteration is never pure and a performative which always produces more than that which the author intended.⁵² Iteration makes it so that we are always subjected to the history of language. This however does not mean that we should not strive to 'clean up the mess' that has accumulated through time within language so that our understanding of the relation between language and the outside world can keep growing. You will never be able to be completely understood as you intend by everybody. This is because language is not only performative, but also describes experiences about the world instead of actual states of the world. There is no such thing as a 'black person' or a 'white person', just everyone's individual experience and ideas of what these words mean. Some of our experiences are shared, with the most frequently appearing experiences becoming our common-sense meaning of these concepts. It is when we start talking about 'black people' and 'white people' as unshakable and irreducible concepts that we enter dangerous ways of thinking like 'us versus them'. If there was a hard line or trait that defines what a 'black' and 'white' person is, that you can objectively point out, then you could objectively say if someone is part of 'us' or 'them'. (Fortunately) this line does not exist.

⁵⁰ Appiah, 'De les is: jij bent niet die geschiedenis.'

⁵¹ Think of how 'white' and 'black' describes people based on color while 'Asian' is based on geographic location and 'Hispanic' is based on the language one speaks, yet all these terms are used to indicate ethnicity.

⁵² Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 128.

Our use of language is never a pure representation of the world, but is always paired with experience, intentions and context.

Context is something that should always be taken into consideration. 'Nigga' has many similarities to other insulting or derogatory word. While terms like 'motherfucker' and 'bitch' have their origins as insults (and often still are used in that manner), they are used as terms of endearment as well. They may not have the same loaded history as 'nigga', but their double meaning shares important similarities. The only difference is that with something like 'motherfucker' we let the context decide what a person means when uttering this phrase and not something like skin color. Saying 'you motherfucker!' to a stranger who spilled a drink on you means something completely different than uttering 'It has been a while you motherfucker!' when greeting a close friend, you have not seen in long time.

I acknowledge that from a common-sense viewpoint linking the usage of the word 'nigga' is a simple way to learn people about sensitivity on the topic of racism, but by the same token oversimplifies the matter. The irony in our current commonly socially accepted usage of the word is that it is supposed to be a non-racist way of using it, but it also substantiates a harmful 'us versus them' mentality of thinking about people which is at the core of racism. Having a politically correct term like 'the N-word' for the 'them' group to use, further solidifies this mentality. We might find out that the word 'nigga' has too many negative connotations and cannot be separated from its origin as a racial slur. In that case it would be better for the word to naturally dissipate and slowly be forgotten like many other racial slurs have in the past. Will we ever be able to think 'grey'? Only time will tell.

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