

The “a” is not much help, because “ar” often substitutes for “er” — as in “beggar,” “burglar,” “hangar,” and “scholar.”

Worst of all, the deducible meaning makes all-too-good linguistic sense. Terms for stinginess and duplicitousness are among the most common examples of racist language: “to gyp” (probably from gypsy), “to welsh” (perhaps from Welsh), “Dutch treat,” “Indian giver.”

Does this mean a perfectly innocent word is doomed? It would not be the first time. Words are often sacrificed when they take on secondary, emotionally charged meanings. “Queer,” for example, is now problematic, and many animals (like donkeys) are losing their fine old Anglo-Saxon names.

If you find yourself vaguely offended thinking of the other words I could have included here, you should have some sympathy for David Howard’s audience.

Still, Mr. Howard should get his job back. Though “niggardly” begs to be misunderstood, the misunderstanding can be overruled. After the various associates of a word light up in the mental dictionary, the rest of the brain can squelch the unintended ones, thanks to the activity that psycholinguists call “post-lexical access processing” and that other people call “common sense.”

WRITING SUGGESTIONS

1. The Hayakawas’ discussion of loaded words reflects a national movement and debate — termed *political correctness* — that, among other goals, seeks to aggressively remove loaded words from common use. Such terms as *chairperson*, *physically challenged*, and *sanitation technician* have become part of our everyday vocabulary. Still, many argue that political correctness has gone too far, and some even parody the movement: Should short people, for example, be termed *vertically challenged*? What do you think about political correctness? How has it changed the way you speak and the level of awareness — and respect — you have for others who are different from you? Write an essay in which you discuss your experiences with political correctness and how important you believe it is. Has it gone too far, making it too easy for some people to take offense at just about anything you say? Or is it helpful in eliminating loaded terms that imply disrespect?
2. Reread the quote from John Ciardi (18). He has a pessimistic view when he says, “In the long run the usage of those who do not think about the language will prevail.” What does he mean by this statement? Write an essay in which you agree or disagree with his view. How does language change? How can those who do not care about it affect its change? What can those who do care about it do to fulfill what Ciardi calls their “duty to resist”?

The Meanings of a Word

GLORIA NAYLOR

Novelist and essayist Gloria Naylor was born in New York City in 1950. She worked as a missionary for the Jehovah’s Witnesses from 1967 to 1975 and then as a telephone operator until 1981, the year she graduated from Brooklyn College. Naylor later started a graduate program in African American studies at Yale University. In her fiction, she explores the lives of African American women, drawing freely from her own experiences and those of her extended family. As Naylor has stated, “I wanted to become a writer because I felt that my presence as a black woman and my perspective as a woman in general had been underrepresented in American literature.” She received the American Book Award for First Fiction for *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), a novel that was later adapted for television. This success was followed by *Linden Hills* (1985), *Mama Day* (1988), *Bailey’s Cafe* (1993), and *The Men of Brewster Place* (1998). Naylor’s short fiction and essays have appeared widely, and she has also edited *Children of the Night: Best Short Stories by Black Writers, 1967–(1995)*.

More than any other form of prejudiced language, racial slurs are intended to wound and shame. In the following essay, which first appeared in the *New York Times* in 1986, Naylor remembers a time when a third-grade classmate called her a nigger. By examining the ways in which words can take on meaning depending on who uses them and to what purpose, Naylor concludes that “words themselves are innocuous; it is the consensus that gives them true power.”

WRITING TO DISCOVER: Have you or someone you know ever been called a derogatory name? Write about how this made you feel.

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 know that 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 ongoing 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.

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:

"Did Johnny *really* do that?"

"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."

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."

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.

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.

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

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 important 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.

FOCUSING ON CONTENT

1. How, according to Naylor, do words get meanings?
2. Why does the boy sitting behind Naylor call her a nigger (3)? Why is she confused by this name-calling?
3. When Naylor was growing up, what two meanings did the word *girl* convey? How were those meanings defined by the speaker? In what way was age an important factor in the correct uses of *girl*?
4. Why does Naylor disagree with the notion that the use of the word *nigger* within her community was an internalization of racism?

FOCUSING ON WRITING

1. Naylor begins her essay with an abstract discussion about how words derive their meaning and power. How does this introduction tie in with her anecdote and discussion of the word *nigger*? (Glossary: *Abstract/Concrete*) Why is the introduction vital to the overall message of her essay?
2. Naylor says she must have heard the word *nigger* many times while she was growing up; yet she "heard" it for the first time when she was in the third grade (15). How does she explain this seeming contradiction? (Glossary: *Paradox*)
3. Define what *nigger* means to Naylor in the context of her family. (Glossary: *Definition*) Why do you suppose she offers so little in the way of definition of her classmate's use of the word?
4. How would you characterize Naylor's tone in her essay? (Glossary: *Tone*) Is she angry, objective, cynical, or something else? Cite examples of her diction to support your answer. (Glossary: *Diction*)

LANGUAGE IN ACTION

Naylor's essay discusses how those in her community used the word *nigger* for their own purposes and "rendered it impotent" (14). Nevertheless, the word still has a lot of negative power, as revealed in the following 1995 essay by Keith Woods, which was published by the Poynter Institute for Media Studies.

The consensus to which Naylor refers — here represented by Mark Fuhrman — gives the word that power, making news organizations report it in euphemisms or as a deleted expletive. You may remember that Mark Fuhrman was a Los Angeles homicide detective whose racial profiling and negative attitude toward African Americans made him one of the most controversial figures

in the O. J. Simpson trial. In preparation for class discussion, think about your position on the following questions: What should be done about the word *nigger*? Should African Americans use it and try to "render it impotent" by creating their own prevailing context for it? Should the word be suppressed, forced into the fringes of racist thought, and represented in euphemisms? Or is there another way to address the word's negative power?

AN ESSAY ON A WICKEDLY POWERFUL WORD

When I heard Mark Fuhrman's voice saying the word "nigger," I heard a lynch mob. I saw the grim and gleeful faces of murderous white men. I felt the coarse, hairy rope. I smelled the sap of the hangin' tree and saw Billie Holiday's "strange fruit" dangling from its strongest limb.

What a wickedly powerful word, nigger. So many other slurs could have slithered from Fuhrman's tongue and revealed his racism without provoking those images.

Jiggaboo.
Spade.
Coon.

I hear the hatred in those words, but I don't feel the fire's heat the way I do when this white former policeman says nigger. Somewhere in that visceral reflex is the reason news organizations had to use that word this time around.

Somewhere in the sting of seeing it, hearing it, feeling it is the reason they should think hard before using it the next time.

In context, there is no other way to report what Mark Fuhrman said. "Racial epithet" doesn't quite get it, does it? "Spearchucker" is a racial epithet, but it doesn't make you see burnt crosses and white sheets. Just rednecks.

The "n-word" sounds silly, childish, something you'd say when you don't want your 3-year-old to know what you're talking about. And "n----?" What does that accomplish other than to allow newspapers the dubious out of saying, "Well, it's actually the reader who's saying nigger, not us."

When Mark Fuhrman or any person armed with a club or a gun or a bat or a judicial robe or a teaching certificate or any measure of power says "nigger," it's more than an insult. It summons all the historic and modern-day violence that is packed into those six letters.

Nigger is "Know your place."

Nigger is, "I am better than you."

Nigger is, "I can frame you or flunk you or beat you or kill you because . . ."

Nigger is, "I own you."

You just can't convey that definition with n-dash-dash-dash-dash. You can't communicate it with bleeps or blurbs or euphemisms. The problem is that sometimes the only way to do your job as a journalist is to say or write the word that furthers the mission of racists.

I'd like to believe that there's some lessening of harm every time the word sees the light of day. I once fantasized about a day when a group of black rappers or comedians would appropriate the white sheets and hoods of the KKK and go

gallivanting across MTV or HBO and forever render that image so utterly ridiculous that no self-respecting racist would ever wear it again.

But then, Richard Pryor tried to appropriate nigger, didn't he? Took it right from the white folks and turned it into a career before he thought better of it. So did the rappers NWA ("Niggas With Attitudes"). So did my friends on the streets of New Orleans. So has a generation of young black people today.

Still, the definition didn't change.

Dick Gregory tried it. In the dedication of his autobiography, "Nigger," the comedian-turned-activist wrote: "Dear Momma — Wherever you are, if ever you hear the word 'nigger' again, remember they are advertising my book."

He wrote that 31 years ago, but if Lucille Gregory were here to hear Mark Fuhrman, she'd surely know he wasn't talking about her son's novel. The definition doesn't change. It doesn't hurt any less after three decades. No less after three centuries.

It's the same word, spiked with the same poison, delivering the same message of inferiority, degradation, hatred, and shame. The same word whether it's Fuhrman saying it or Huck Finn or Def Comedy Jam or Snoop Doggy Dogg or my old friends from Touro Street (Because, they do call themselves nigger, you know).

It hurts every time it's in the paper or on the air or in the street. Every time. Sometimes there's no way around using it in the media, but only sometimes.

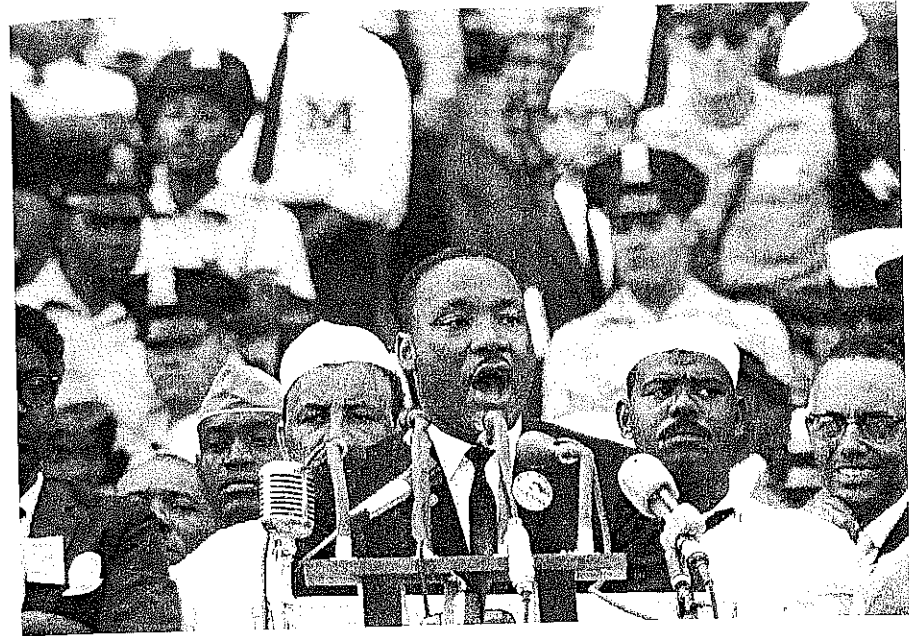
Could there come a day when you see it or read it or hear it from the homeboys so much that you hardly notice? When your eyebrow doesn't arch as often or your jaw suddenly drop when the six o'clock anchor plops the word onto your living room coffee table?

Maybe. And you might even say, that day, "Oh, they're just talking about niggers again."

Are we better off then?

WRITING SUGGESTIONS

1. Write an essay in which you describe the process through which you became aware of prejudice, either toward yourself or toward another person or group of people. Did a specific event spark your awareness, such as that detailed in your Writing to Discover entry? Or did you become aware of prejudice in a more gradual way? Did you learn about prejudice primarily from your peers, your parents, or someone else? How did your new awareness affect you? How have your experience(s) shaped the way you think and feel about prejudice today?
2. In addition to discussing the word *nigger*, Naylor talks about the use of *girl*, a word with far less negative baggage but one that can still be offensive when used in an inappropriate context. Write an essay in which you discuss your use of a contextually sensitive word. What is its strict definition? How do you use it? In what context(s) might its use be inappropriate? Why is the word used in different ways?



PICTURING LANGUAGE

"I Have a Dream," the keynote address for the March on Washington on June 23, 1963, is one of the most renowned and recognized speeches of the past century. Delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to commemorate the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, King's speech resonates with hope even as it condemns racial oppression. How do you read King's facial expression in this photograph? How do you read the facial expressions of those standing in support of him? What mood is conveyed by the scene depicted in this photograph?