

It's time to bury the N-word

by Marc_H._Morial

A little over a year ago, a very disturbing case in New York City grabbed national headlines and provoked much controversy. It was that of a white man named Nicholas Minucci accused of attacking a black man with a bat while uttering an ugly racial epithet. His defense was that the N-word had become so mainstream and so common in its usage that it was no longer a derogatory term. Now, he's behind bars for hate crimes.

Justice had been done. But the black community does shoulder a little of the responsibility for that grievous event. Had we not tolerated the casual use of the N-word within our own community and through our culture, the sting of Minucci's attack upon Glenn Moore might not have been so penetrating.

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary tells us that while the N-word is found in the works of writers of the past - Joseph Conrad, Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, James Baldwin, among others - it now ranks as perhaps the most offensive and inflammatory racial slur in English. It is a word expressive of racial hatred and bigotry.

The term "nigger" - meaning black - mutated into the N-word as a result of a mispronunciation by southern slave masters. As contempt for slaves grew, the word's use proliferated throughout the 1700s and 1800s. By the 1900s, it was replaced by the word "black" to reference African-Americans. In 1906, Booker T. Washington endorsed the term "negro" instead.

Though some blacks in the early 1920s referred to themselves by a more euphemistic version of the N-word - "niggah" now "nigga," it was still considered a pejorative term. The Black Power Movement of the 1960s declared, "Black is beautiful." They didn't proclaim the N-word to be beautiful. The movement's followers referred to each other as "brother" and "sister" and not "nigga."

In the 1960s, black comics wouldn't touch the N-word with a 2,000 foot pole. Even comedian Richard Pryor who freely invoked the slur in his stand-up act in the 1970s decided to lose it in the 1980s after a visit to Africa.

The Brooklyn-based group known as Abolish the "N" Word presents a very compelling multimedia argument against the word's use on its Web site. Employing vivid and harrowing Jim-Crow-era photos with Billie Holiday crooning her classic protest song "Strange Fruit" in the background, it evokes a memory of a culture that originally condoned the use of the N-word - the same one that condoned inhumane acts of hatred against blacks - horrible crimes against humanity.

Abolish the "N" Word's members wax nostalgic about the early days of hip-hop music when profanity wasn't used. "We remember referring to our friends as homeboy and homegirl. And we were still cool. We

remember the airing of 'Roots' and the sting of hearing the N-word on national television for the first time," the group explains on its Web site.

But now they're wondering how on earth its use has become so acceptable within the black community.

"What happened in our community that the N-word is tossed around freely in everyday language? When the use of it makes you cool, down accepted?" they wonder. I must concur. When did it become commonplace for us to resort to such a slur as a term of affection?

Earlier this year after the New York City Council approved a ban on the word's use, Tiara Smith, a black teenager from Dallas, made a telling observation when she expressed skepticism over its future impact.

"We grew up saying it and it's what I say all the time," she told the Associated Press. "It's not going to stop anybody from saying it."

What is clear from her statement is that our younger generations are not fully aware of the N-word's painful role in American history. As comedian Bill Cosby observed in a 2004 speech before the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, we are letting our children down if we don't lead by example.

"When you put on a record, and that record is yelling 'n---er this' and 'n---er that' and cursing all over the thing and you got your little 6-year-old and 7-year-old sitting in the back seat of the car - those children hear that. And I am telling you when you put the CD on and then you get up and dance to it ... what are you saying to your children?" he said.

Embracing the N-word or its more euphemistic forms as a symbol of empowerment or term of endearment is as logical as supporting the reinstatement of segregation or of slavery. The word carries with it too much history and hurt. It is beyond rehabilitation - a lost cause. It'll take centuries for us to escape its stigma and its place in America's memory.

Allow the history books to refer to the N-word as an obsolete term - a distant memory of our nation's ignorant past when we were but a fledgling experiment in democracy still trying to figure things out and failing miserably in some respects.

Let it serve as a lesson our community never wants to relearn. Let us not tempt fate and risk repeating history by allowing it to continue to settle deeper into our consciousness. With every utterance of it, we spit in the

face of progress, we disgrace our elders and ancestors and we show that their sacrifices were made in vain. We release the spirit of hatred that conjured up the term in the first place.

Join with me and give this word a permanent funeral. Bury it now.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

Â© Copley News Service

It's time to bury the N-word by Marc_H._Morial