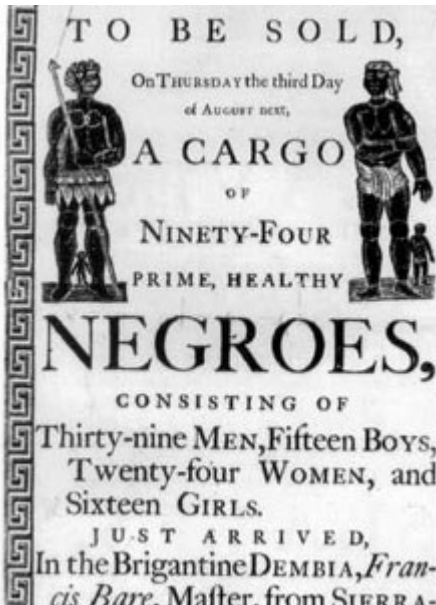


# The 'n-word'

by [Brandt Williams](#), Minnesota Public Radio  
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*Some scholars say 'nigger' is a deliberate mispronunciation of 'negro.'* (The University of Virginia Library Digital Media Lab)

It is probably the ugliest racial slur ever created. It is a word known primarily as a means to denigrate African Americans. The word packs such power to represent overt racial hatred, most people - regardless of race - will not even utter it. This spring, Rich Stanek who was Minnesota's Public Safety Commissioner at the time, admitted he used the word more than 12 years ago in a court deposition. He says he didn't use the word against anybody; he merely spoke it. But the furor over his admission led to his resignation. One word uttered 12 years ago. How can one word have such power?

St. Paul, Minn. — There's something you should know - I'm black. I don't ever remember ever being called nigger, at least not in a hostile way. One time some white guys yelled, 'go back to Africa' at me from a passing car. Another time a group of white men in a bar accused me of stealing a wallet; one of them called me 'Jackson.' But they didn't use the word, 'nigger'.

So, what's it like to be called, 'nigger'?

I decided to talk to someone with a little more life experience.

My dad's name is Carl Williams. We share the same middle name, Louis. He's 63 and spent his early childhood in Oklahoma. When he was a teenager the family moved to Flint, Michigan. After living in Minnesota for nearly 20 years, he and my mom moved to Colorado.

Dad couldn't think of a story right off the bat, so I agreed to call him back in a few hours. No more than 10 seconds later he called me back with a story that surprised me.

It turns out, somebody had called me 'nigger'.

When my older brother and I were probably seven and 10 years old, we got into a sandbox altercation with a couple white kids our age. The father of those kids yelled at us and threatened us. My dad confronted him.

"Immediately I was totally, totally upset," says my dad. "Because I knew that his intent was to try and demean my boys and to really, to undercut their manhood and their sense of self. So I immediately took them both by the hands and went back to the man's house, knocked on his door and as soon as he came to the door, I remember letting him know that in no uncertain terms - with every bit of force and potential violence that I had in me -- that if that ever happened to my boys again, there would be no restraint and I would, frankly kick his butt."

"Everybody seems to have a 'nigger story'," says Dr. Keith Mayes.

Mayes is a professor in the African-American studies at the University of Minnesota. Mayes is in his mid-30s. He remembers being called nigger by a white kid when he was 12.

"It felt funny and it's stayed with me all these years," says Mayes. "I wasn't furious but I was mad; confused."

Mayes was probably confused because up until that time he'd only heard the word used by other black people - like his friends and in the hip hop music they listened to.

Rappers convinced a generation of young African Americans that 'nigger' was cool. Or at least a version of it. Take the 'er' off the end of the word and replace it with an 'a', and 'nigga' becomes a term of endearment.

Before them, in the 1970's, comedians like Richard Pryor showed us that 'nigger' was funny.

"I grew up, comedy-wise listening to Richard Pryor," says Alex Jackson. "And I probably started using (nigger) then because it was hip."

Jackson is a stand-up comedian and a deputy chief in the Minneapolis Fire Department. He's 46 and has been a professional comedian and firefighter for more than 20 years. He grew up knowing the negative power of nigger. But from Richard Pryor he learned the word could be funny. Like a lot of other African Americans his age, he began to change his mind when Pryor did.

In Pryor's concert movie "Live on the Sunset Strip," the comedian talks about an epiphany he experienced while he traveled to Africa. Pryor said he looked at the people there and didn't see any niggers so he vowed never to use the word again.

"That really affected me," says Jackson. "You'll never hear me call another brother that."

In researching this story, I looked for the origins of 'nigger.' Some scholars say 'nigger' was derived from the Latin word for the color black which is spelled 'n-i-g-e-r.' Then I spoke with Professor Robin Lakoff. She's a sociolinguistics professor at the University of California's-Berkeley Campus.

She believes the word 'nigger' is a deliberate mispronunciation of the word 'negro.' That, she says, is why the word has so much negative power.

"There's something about deliberately, knowingly mis-pronouncing someone's name," says Lakoff. "That conveys, 'I don't even care what your name is, you have so little power you matter to me so little.' So it wasn't just the phonetics of the word, it was all that it conveyed about the power of one person to not even care about the other person."

During our conversation, Lakoff and I talked about how African slaves were robbed of the power of self-identity; how African Americans have been trying recapture that ever since.

Indeed, we've been known by many names: colored, Afro-American, black, Negro, African-Americans. Lakoff says when young black people call each other 'nigga', instead of 'nigger,' they're merely writing a new chapter in the African American re-naming tradition.

But I had neglected to ask the professor an important question: Is she African-American? She is not.

"If I were, it change the entire complexion of the discourse," says Lakoff. "If I were African-American I could use the word with no fear. But since I'm not, I'm very careful about it."

That's the other peculiar thing about 'nigger.' It can make white people very nervous.

Lakoff is a tenured college professor. She makes a living talking about words. Lakoff speaks the word when she lectures about hate speech. But she does so with caution. Her advice to white people is: just don't use it. Lakoff says sometimes the most well-intentioned use of the word can cause problems.

Most white people will probably acknowledge that the usage of 'nigger' is best left to African-Americans. Black people have essentially become caretakers of the word and have created rules about when and where its use is appropriate.

At Eddie's Barbershop on 4th Ave. South in Minneapolis, owner Eddie Withers is trimming customer Teddy Simmons sideburns and moustache. Both men are black and in their 50s and 60s.

I asked Withers if anyone had ever called him a 'nigger.'

"All the time. But when my brothers, when they say it; when a brother calls me that, then I don't look at as derogatory. If a white guy comes in and calls me that, he's out of line. I don't use that word myself," Withers says.

Teddy Simmons has a second perspective.

"You know why at times they don't realize how the word offends Afro American people? Simple reason. They don't say the word pretty as we do!" says Simmons. "They got to hear that 'r'. That 'r' is what makes us go irate. Instant irate. 'You no-good nigger!' And I say, whoa man! And he turn around and say, well y'all use it. And I say y'all don't say it as pretty as we. That's why. We gotta hear that 'r'. When you hear us call each other 'nigga', you don't hear the 'r'."

For many African Americans it doesn't matter how the word is pronounced or who says it. It is never, ever appropriate.

"You know, I don't even feel comfortable using the word because it causes me pain," says Warren Edwards.

Warren Edwards is a tall, cleanly-dressed, dark-skinned black man with a shaved bald head. He leads an activist group called, 100 Men Take A Stand, in Minneapolis. He doesn't think the nigger is ever appropriate for anyone to use - not even among the young black men he mentors and interacts with everyday. In fact it took him a while during the interview to even say it.

When he finally says the word, he spits it out. He has a look on his face like he's changing a dirty diaper.

"I had an uncle - it happened in Savannah, Georgia in the 1930s - who was dismembered because he confronted a Caucasian man about calling him a nigger and they murdered my uncle," says Warren. "And I'll never forget it. So I lost loved ones who stood up against being called that word."

A man fought and died over a word.

But it goes deeper than that. 'Nigger' was a tool to keep black people in their place in the Jim Crow south.

"Racism and the word nigger -- It was given to us by southerners, by people we love," says Jon Odell. "Not by people we hated. Not the mean, stereotypical sheriffs. The race-baiting governors. It was mothers and fathers. I heard it used in church."

Jon Odell was born in Laurel, Mississippi in 1951. He now lives in north Minneapolis. Jon has written a novel based on his experiences in the south, called "The View from Delphi". He has an uneasy relationship with the word nigger. Jon doesn't like the word. It reminds him of the ugly side of his childhood home.

He admits that the word nigger affords him and other white people a kind of power. When he moved to Minnesota to work as an executive at a Fortune 500 company in 1980, he found that the word gave him an advantage up north as well.

"They knew who I was. They hired me from Mississippi," says Odell. "I was kind of a star-stud. I was a young white guy who was good at public speaking. And that was very valued at this company of salespeople. And I got a lot of promotions. And one of the ways I got attention - I told 'nigger jokes' to liberals. People who gave to the NAACP."

And they laughed at his jokes. Of course, Jon Odell didn't bring the word nigger with him when he came here. It was already here. Black Minnesotans are no stranger to the word.

Before she died last year, Minnesota native Bernadette Anderson shared her memories of northern racism for an American Radio Works documentary called Up South. Anderson, like many of the black elders interviewed for the story could vividly remember scenes that might make some think they were describing the Jim Crow South. She remembered one night in Fergus Falls several decades ago, eating dinner with her husband.

"I sat in the restaurant with my husband (and) this little boy was sitting there with his mother," says Anderson. "He said 'Mommy, mommy look at the niggers!' And his momma corrected -- I'm raising up -- my husband's sayin' 'sit down.' -- I said 'no, did you hear what he just called us?' She said 'no, no those aren't niggers honey, you don't say that. That's not nice. Those are darkies. Smile at the darkies and they'll smile at you.' I'll never forget that! It drove me nuts!"

But what if black people just decided to stop getting mad about the word 'nigger'? I asked comedian and firefighter Alex Jackson what would happen if African-Americans one day look at white people who use the word and say, 'sticks and stones.'

"Sure. After we get through talking about their momma," laughs Jackson. "You gotta do something. But actually, I've found sometimes -- it's true -- sometimes I've had white people get more upset when you don't respond than when you do."

But Jackson is not optimistic that African-Americans will begin turning the other cheek on the slur anytime soon.

The pain and awful memories evoked by the word nigger may just never go away.

And there's one other lesson: As in the case with Rich Stanek - the word 'nigger' can wreak havoc in the lives of some white people as well.

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Brent Williams

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2. What comedian changed his mind about the use of the n-word? Why?
3. What is the origin of the word, according to Professor Robin Lakoff?
4. What is Eddie Withers and Teddy Simmons view on the word?
5. What is Jon Odell's point about the word?

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