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Who Can Use The N-Word? That's The Wrong Question

Updated June 23, 2015 · 10:14 AM ET



GENE DEMBY



The actress Gwyneth Paltrow tweeted the N-word while at a Jay Z/Kanye West concert. Her music industry friends shrugged it off. Twitter did not.

Joel Ryan/AP

Editor's Note: This is a post about a racial slur, and there's no way around using it.

Just a heads up.

The impulse to make the world neat and simple, with hard and fast guidelines, bumps up against the messiness of real life all the time.

Earlier this week, a New York City man named Rob Carmona was being sued by a former employee named Brandi Johnson, who said that Carmona harassed her and other employees. The story gained national attention because of what Carmona was heard saying on a recording Johnson made to document the abuse at the office.

"I'm gonna give it to you hard-core," Carmona was heard saying on the recording. "You and her are very bright ... but y'all act like niggers ... seriously."

Oh, yeah: Both Johnson and Carmona are black. The federal jury hearing the case awarded Johnson \$280,000 in damages.

The dynamics of the workplace in question were much more troubling than this slur alone — Carmona reportedly called another woman a "whore" and dismissed a separate sexual harassment complaint because he said the woman in question was "too ugly" to be the target of such a thing — but everyone distilled it down to the act-like-niggers bit.

From the Associated Press article:

"In a case that gave a legal airing to the debate over use of the N-word among blacks, a federal jury has rejected a black manager's argument that it was a term of love and endearment when he aimed it at [a] black employee. ...

"The case against Rob Carmona and the employment agency he founded, STRIVE East Harlem, hinged on the what some see as a complex double standard surrounding the word: It's a degrading slur when uttered by whites but can be used at times with impunity among blacks."

Ah yes, the old "double-standard-around-nigger" conversation. It's a slippery word, with complicated, ugly histories baked into it. But still, we treat it as if there are to be clear rules around it so that we might point out the transgressors and avoid transgressing ourselves. *There shouldn't be a double standard*, the arguments go. *Just one standard.*

Here are some of the ways folks suggest we could deal with *nigger*.

- *We can take the venom out of it by assuming ownership of it and using it affectionately.*
- *Black people shouldn't use it if they don't want anyone else to use it.*
- *It can never be used in a positive way.*
- *It will just go away if everyone stops using it.*

To the extent that any of those prescriptions are true, they're only true in the narrowest sense. There's this fiction that there are arbiters who can grant people permission to say *nigger* and set the rules around how they say it.

But there are no rules. There are only contexts and consequences.

When Asian folks or Latinos or white folks ask why they can't say it but black people can, the question misses the point. Anyone *can* say it — that doesn't mean there won't be fallout for doing so. As we saw this week in the Carmona case, even black people can't say *nigger* to other black folks without consequence. (Hell, there are even spaces where not saying it will earn you a side eye.)

Last year, when Gwyneth Paltrow tweeted a photo captioned "Ni**s in paris for real" from a Jay Z/Kanye West concert in France, it ignited a tiny tempest. Russell Simmons, Paltrow's friend, rushed to her defense, saying that the actress "didn't mean any harm." That didn't go over too well, because, again, it's not within Simmons' (or anyone else's) power to grant permission. Paltrow's music industry buddies may have had a more forgiving take, but in the much larger world of Twitter people were far less willing to extend her the benefit of the doubt.

But it would be just as futile for the folks on Twitter to issue some mandate on whether Paltrow can use it among her famous hip-hop friends; Kanye, Jay, et al. greeted it with a shrug.

Imagine a circle of friends that contained no black people, wherein everyone might lob

"nigger" or one of its variants back and forth with little pushback. But if one of those people tried to do the same thing in a different setting among different folks, the word might be greeted like a live grenade.

The contours of one social context don't often map very easily to different ones, which is why the response to what's ostensibly the same language is so varied. It's why a term of endearment like "baby" might be affectionate at home, but grounds for a sexual harassment complaint at work. The relationships of the speakers to each other matter — their relative power, their pasts with each other, even stuff like who's around them when they say it.

Like talking about race more broadly, talking about "nigger" requires us to hold different and at times contradictory ideas in our heads all at once. We have to acknowledge that we have different histories and live in different spaces, and that those spaces come with their own shared (or not-so-shared) understandings.

In that aforementioned workplace harassment case, Carmona's lawyer argued that black folks use *nigger* among one another with a specific, intraracial orientation to the word. But, of course, that's wrong. There isn't one black orientation to *nigger*, as is evidenced by the very different responses to Paltrow's tweet, or Chris Rock's infamous "Black People vs. Niggas" skit, and by the fact that Johnson saw Carmona's use as emblematic of a larger constellation of workplace abuse. He was trying to shoehorn his orientation to "*nigger*" into a space in which no one was feeling him. (When Code-Switching Goes Wrong.)

We don't need rules around this stuff — not that we could we enforce them if we had them — but we *do* need a much better understanding of our contexts. We need a stronger sense of why some things are received differently in different situations. We need to be more thoughtful, more deliberate and more fluid about the many spaces that we navigate.

If we venture outside of the very tiny universe of safe behaviors and interactions, we also need to accept that there will be consequences. Some may be good, some may be disastrous, but they will be not be neat and simple.

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