

Nothing Hip in 'Boondocks' N-Word

(by Earl Ofari Hutchinson, AlterNet, Nov. 11, 2005) The much-anticipated new cartoon has crossed the line by relying so heavily on a racist slur.

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by Earl Ofari Hutchinson

(AlterNet, Nov. 11, 2005) In a panel discussion at the Summer Television Critics Association tour this past summer, Aaron McGruder, creator of the popular comic strip, [The] Boondocks, defiantly told the audience that he'll use the N-word as much as he pleases in episodes of the series on the Cartoon Network's Adult Swim. If folk don't like it, then they'll just have to get over. After all, everyone uses it.

He's right. Black comedians and rappers sprinkle the word throughout their rap lyrics and comedy lines, and Black writers, and filmmakers go through lengthy gyrations to justify using the word. The word has been canonized in hip jargon. Harvard professor Randall Kennedy, in a provocative but conflicted, short polemic, nigger, published a few years ago denounced the double standard that Blacks apply to whites. He railed that nigger is hardly the earth-shattering, illegitimate word that many Blacks and whites brand it.

McGruder and N-word users and apologists loudly agree. Their rationale boils down to this, the more a Black person uses the word, the less offensive it becomes. They claim that they are cleansing the word of its negative connotations so that racists can no longer use it to hurt Blacks. Comedian turned activist Dick Gregory had the same idea some years ago when he titled his autobiography, Nigger. Black writer Robert DeCoy also tried to apply the same racial shock therapy to whites when he titled his novel, The Nigger Bible.

McGruder and N-word apologists tick off an endless storehouse of defenses to justify use of the word. They claim that that it is a term of endearment or affection. They say to each other, "You're my nigger if you don't get no bigger." Or, "that nigger sure is something." Others use it in anger or disdain, "Nigger you sure got an attitude." Or, "A nigger ain't shit." Still, others are defiant. They say they don't care what a white person calls them since words can't harm them.

N-word apologists have no patience with those who want to purge the word from public discourse, wage war against classics such as Huckleberry Finn, encode it in hate speech laws and impose penalties and sanctions on professors, basketball coaches, and public officials who use it no matter how instructive or benevolent their intentions.

Yet in their passionate plea to recast public thinking and debate over the word, they forget, ignore or distort one thing. Words are not value neutral. They express concepts and ideas. Often, words reflect society's standards. If color-phobia is a deep-rooted standard in American life, then a word, as

emotionally charged as nigger, will always reinforce and perpetuate stereotypes. It can't be sanitized, cleansed, inverted, or redeemed as a culturally liberating word. Nigger can't and shouldn't be made acceptable, no matter whose mouth it comes out of or what excuse is tossed out for using it.

There are still dozens of daily examples where whites (and other non-Blacks) taunt, and harass Blacks by calling them nigger, spray paint the word on their homes, businesses, churches, physically assault and even murder Blacks. In the FBI's annual count of hate crimes in America, Blacks still make up the overwhelming majority of victims. The N-word reigns supreme at the top of the stack as the favorite racial epithet hurled at Blacks during these crimes. Even when the word isn't used, the sentiment is that Blacks are still fair game to be abused and dehumanized, and the N-word reinforces that belief.

The word nigger is grotesque and will always have deadly meaning to them. And even if some Blacks do occasionally go off the deep end and wrongly harangue whites for using the word, maybe that's because nigger pricks agonizing historical and social sores.

Some years ago comedian Richard Pryor publicly admitted his complicity in aiding and abetting the legitimizing of the word. The irreverent Pryor had practically made a career out of using the word in his routines. But following his return from Africa, he told a concert audience that he now considered the word profane and disrespectful. He was dropping it from his act because he had too much pride in Blacks and himself. The audience exploded in thunderous applause.

McGruder would probably frown on Pryor's racial conversion as a betrayal of cultural faith and freedom. But Pryor got it right. And anyone who apologizes for McGruder's defense of the N-word should rent the tape of that concert to understand why there's nothing hip in using or misusing the word.

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