The history of the word nigger is often traced to the Latin word niger, meaning Black. This word became the noun, Negro (Black person) in English, and simply the color Black in Spanish and Portuguese. In early modern French, niger became negre and, later, negress (Black woman) was unmistakably a part of language history. One can compare to negre the derogatory nigger and earlier English substitutes such as negar, neegar, neger, and niggor that developed into its lexico-semantic true version in English. It is probable that nigger is a phonetic spelling of the White Southern mispronunciation of Negro.

No matter what its origins, by the early 1800s, it was firmly established as a derogative name. In the 21st century, it remains a principal term of White racism, regardless of who is using it. Social scientists agree that words like nigger, kike, spic, and wetback come from three categories: disparaging nicknames (chink, dago, nigger); explicit group devaluations ("Jew him down" or "niggering the land"); and irrelevant ethnic names used as a mild disparagement ("jewbird" for cuckoos having prominent beaks or "Irish confetti" for bricks thrown in a fight.)

Over time, racial slurs have victimized all racial and ethnic groups; but no American group has endured as many racial nicknames as Blacks: coon, tom, savage, pickaninny, mammy, buck, samba, jigaboo, and buckwheat are some. Many of these slurs became fully traditional pseudo-scientific, literary, cinematic, and everyday distortions of African Americans. These caricatures, whether spoken, written, or reproduced in media and material objects, reflect the extent, the vast network, of anti-Black prejudice.

The word, nigger, carries with it much of the hatred and disgust directed toward Black Africans and African Americans. Historically, nigger defined, limited, made fun of, and ridiculed all Blacks. It was a term of exclusion, a verbal reason for discrimination. Whether used as a noun, verb, or adjective, it strengthened the stereotype of the lazy, stupid, dirty, worthless nobody. No other American surname carries as much purposeful cruelty. The following shortlist is important information on the word's use and meaning:

Naggers: Acting in a lazy and irresponsible manner.  
Niggerlipping: wetting the end of a cigarette while smoking it.  
Niggerlover: Derogatory term aimed at Whites lacking in the necessary loathing of Blacks.  
Nigger luck: Exceptionally, but undeserved good luck.  
Nigger-flicker: A small knife or razor with one side heavily taped to preserve the user's fingers.  
Nigger heaven: Designated places, usually the balcony, where Blacks were forced to sit, for example, in an integrated movie theater or church.  
Nigger knocker: Axe handle or weapon made from an axe handle.  
Nigger rich: Deeply in debt but flamboyant.  
Nigger shooter: A slingshot.  
Nigger steak: A slice of liver or a cheap piece of meat.  
Nigger stick: Police officer's baton.  
Nigger tip: Leaving a small tip or no tip in a restaurant.  
Nigger in the woodpile: A concealed motive or unknown factor affecting a situation in an adverse way.  
Nigger work: Demeaning, menial tasks.

Nigger (as a word) is also used to describe a dark shade of color (nigger-brown, nigger-Black), the status of Whites that mix together with Blacks (nigger-breaker, dealer, driver, killer, stealer, worshipper, and looking), and anything belonging to or linked to African Americans (nigger-baby, boy, girl, mouth, feet, preacher, job, love, culture, college, music, etc). Nigger is the ultimate American insult; it is used to offend other ethnic groups. Jews are called White-niggers; Arabs, sand-niggers; Japanese, yellow-niggers. Americans created a racial hierarchy with Whites at the top and Blacks at the bottom.

In biology, heredity refers to the transference of biological characteristics from a parent organism to offspring. The word, nigger, speaks to the human heredity of Black people. Defining which characteristics of a person are due to heredity and which are due to environmental influences is often a controversial discussion (the nature versus nurture debate), especially regarding intelligence and race.

The hierarchy was set up by an ideology that justified the use of deceit, exploitation, and intimidation to keep Blacks "in their place." Every major societal establishment offered legitimacy to the racial hierarchy. Ministers preached that God was White and had condemned Blacks to be servants. Scientists measured Black skulls, brains, faces, and genitalia, seeking to prove that Whites were genetically superior to Blacks. White teachers, teaching only White students, taught that Blacks were less evolved cognitively, psychologically, and socially. The entertainment media, from vaudeville to television and film, portrayed Blacks as docile servants, happy-go-lucky idiots, and dangerous thugs, and they still do this today. The criminal justice system sanctioned a double standard of justice, including its unspoken approval of mob violence against Blacks and there is still a similar double standard today. Both American slavery and the Jim Crow laws which followed were saturated by anti-Black laws and images. The negative portrayals of Blacks were both reflected in and shaped by everyday material objects: toys, postcards, ashtrays, detergent boxes, fishing lures, and children’s books. These items, and countless others, portrayed Blacks with bulging, darting eyes, fire-red oversized lips, jet-Black skin, and either naked or poorly clothed.

In 1874, the McLoughlin Brothers of New York produced a puzzle game called "Chopped Up Niggers." Beginning in 1878, the B. Leidersdory Company of Milwaukee, WI., produced NiggerHair Smoking Tobacco. Decades later, the name was changed to BiggerHair Smoking Tobacco. A 1916 magazine ad, copyrighted by Morris & Bendien, showed a Black child drinking ink. The caption read, "Nigger Milk" (shown). In 1917, the American Tobacco Company had a NiggerHair redemption promotion. NiggerHair coupons were redeemable for "cash, tobacco, S&H Green stamps, or presents." The J. Millhoff Company of England produced a series of cards in the 1930s which were widely distributed in the United States. One of the cards shows ten small Black dogs with the caption: "Ten Little Nigger Boys Went Out To Dine."

This is the first line from a popular children's story called, "The Ten Little Niggers." it reads like this.  
Ten Little Nigger Boys went out to dine;  
One choked his little self, and then there were nine.  
Nine Little Nigger Boys sat up very late; one overslept, and then there were eight. Eight Little Nigger Boys traveling in Devon; one said he'd stay there, and then there were seven.  
Seven Little Nigger Boys chopping up sticks; one chopped himself in halves, and then there were six.  
Six Little Nigger Boys playing with a hive; a Bumblebee stung one, and then there were five.  
Five Little Nigger Boys going in for Law; one got in Chancery, and then there were four.  
Four Little Nigger Boys going out to Sea; A Red Herring swallowed one, and then there were three.  
Three Little Nigger Boys walking in the Zoo; the big Bear hugged one, and then there were two;  
Two Little Nigger Boys sitting in the Sun; one got frizzled up, and then there was one.  
One Little Nigger Boy living all alone; He got married, and then there were none.

In 1939, writer Agatha Christie published a book called Ten Little Niggers. Later editions sometimes changed the name to Ten Little Indians, or And Then There Were None, but as late as 1978, copies of the book with the original title were being produced. It was not rare for sheet music produced in the first half of the 20th century to use the word nigger on the cover. The Howley, Haviland Company of New York produced sheet music for the songs "Hesitate Mr. Nigger, Hesitate," and "You'se Just A Little Nigger, Still You'se Mine, All Mine." This last example was promoted as a children's lullaby. Some small towns used nigger in their names, for example, Nigger Run Fork, Virginia. Nigger was a common name for darkly colored pets, especially dogs, cats, and horses. So-called "Jolly Nigger Banks," first made in the 1800s, were widely distributed as late as the 1960s. Another common piece with many variations, produced on posters, postcards, and prints is a picture of a dozen Black children rushing for a swimming hole. The caption reads, "Last One In's A Nigger."

The civil rights movement, Supreme Court decisions, the Black empowerment movement, broad civil rights legislation, and a general embracing of democracy by many American citizens have worn down America’s racial pecking order from slavery moving into Jim Crow period and today’s institutional racism. Yet, the word nigger has not left and its relationship with anti-Black prejudice remains symbiotic, interrelated, and interconnected. Ironically, it is co-dependent because a racist society created nigger and continues to feed and sustain it. But, the word no longer needs racism, or brutal and obvious forms, to survive. The word nigger today has its own existence.

Another interesting and confusing experience in American speech is the use of nigger by African Americans. Poetry by Blacks is instructive; one can often find the word nigger used in Black writings. Major and minor poets alike have used it with startling results: Imamu Amiri Baraka, contemporary poet, uses nigger in one of his angriest poems, "I Don't Love You," and what was the world to the words of slick nigger fathers too depressed to explain why they could not appear to be men. One wonders how readers are supposed to understand "nigger fathers.” Baraka's use of this imagery, regardless of his purpose, reinforces the stereotype of the worthless, pleasure-seeking “coon” caricature. Ted Joans's use of nigger in "The Nice Colored Man" is an example of explainable expression. Joans said he was asked to give a reading in London because he was a "nice colored man." Infuriated by the labels "nice" and "colored,” Joan's wrote a quintessential rebellious poem. While the poem should be read in its entirety, a few lines will do:  
Smart Black Nigger Smart Black Nigger Smart Black Nigger Smart Black Nigger Knife Carrying Nigger Gun Toting Nigger Military Nigger Clock Watching Nigger Poisoning Nigger Disgusting Nigger Black Ass Nigger.  
This piece uses adjective upon adjective attached to the word nigger.

The reality is that many of these uses can be heard in present-day African-American society. Herein lies part of the difficulty: The word, nigger, endures because it is used over and over again, even by the people it insults. Writer Devorah Major said, "It's hard for me to say what someone can or can't say, because I work with language all the time, and I don't want to be limited." Poet and professor Opal Palmer Adisa claims that the use of nigger or nigga is "the same as young people's obsession with swearing. A lot of their use of such language is an internalization of negativity about themselves." Rappers, themselves poets, rap about niggers before mostly White audiences, some of whom see themselves as wiggers (White niggers) and refer to one another as "my niggah." Snoop Doggy Dogg’s single, "You Thought," raps, "Wanna grab a skinny nigga like Snoop Dogg/Cause you like it tall/and work it baby doll." Tupac Shakur’s "Crooked Ass Nigga" lyrics included, "Now I could be a crooked nigga too/When I'm rollin' with my crew." Also rap lyrics that degrade women and glamorize violence reinforce the historical Brute Caricature.

Erdman Palmore researched lexicons and said, The number of offensive words used correlates positively with the amount of out-group prejudice; and these express and support negative stereotypes about the most visible racial and cultural differences. When used by Blacks, nigger refers to, among other things, all Blacks ("A nigger can't even get a break."); Black men ("Sisters want niggers to work all day long."); Blacks who behave in a stereotypical, and sometimes legendary, manner ("He's a lazy, good-for-nothing nigger."); things ("This piece-of-shit car is such a nigger."); enemies ("I'm sick and tired of those niggers bothering me!"); and friends ("Me and my niggers are tight."). This final habit, as a kind word, is particularly challenging. "Zup Niggah" has become an almost universal greeting among young urban Blacks. When asked, Blacks who use nigger or its variants argue that it has to be understood in its situation; repeated use of the word by Blacks will make it less offensive. It’s not really the same word because Whites are saying nigger (and niggers) but Blacks are saying niggah (and niggaz). Also it is just a word and Blacks should not be prisoners of the past or the ugly words that originated in the past.

These arguments may not be true to the real world. Brother (Brotha) and Sister (Sistha or Sista) are terms of endearment. Nigger was and still is a word of disrespect. More to the point, the artificial dichotomy between Blacks or African Americans (respectable and middle-class) and niggers (disrespectable and lower class) ought to be challenged. Black is a nigger, regardless of behavior, earnings, goals, clothing, skills, ethics, or skin color. Finally, if continued use of the word lessened its damage, then nigger would not hurt or cause pain now. Blacks, from slavery until today, have internalized many negative images that White society cultivated and broadcast about Black skin and Black people. This is mirrored in cycles of self- and same-race hatred. The use of the word,nigger by Blacks reflects this hatred, even when the user is unaware of the psychological forces involved. Nigger is the ultimate expression of White racism and White superiority no matter how it is pronounced. It is linguistic corruption, an attack on civility.

To a smaller scale, words other than Nigger also remain accepted public banter in White America. In 1988, on Martin Luther King's birthday, sports commentator Jimmy “The Greek” Snyder said (on national television) that Black people were better at sports because of slave plantation breeding techniques. "During the slave period, the slave owner would breed his Black with his big woman so that he would have a big Black-kid. That's were it all started." Another sports announcer, Billy Packer, referred to pro-basketball player, Allan Iverson, as a "tough monkey." Another announcer, Howard Cosell, referred to Alvin Garrett, a pro football player with the Washington Redskins as "little monkey" during a Monday Night Football game. The comments made by Cosell and Packer did not go without any punitive consequences.

Nigger is one of the most notorious words in American culture. Some words carry more weight than others. But without trying to exaggerate, is genocide just another word? Pedophilia? Clearly, no and neither is nigger.

After a period of relative dormancy, the word nigger has been reborn in popular culture. It is hard-edged, streetwise, and it has crossed over into movies like Pulp Fiction (1994) and Jackie Brown (1997), where it became a symbol of "street authenticity" and hipness. Denzel Washington's character in Training Day (2001) uses nigger frequently and harshly. Richard Pryor long ago rejected the use of the word in his comedy act, but Chris Rock, Chris Tucker, and other Black male comedy kings use nigger regularly and not affectionately. Justin Driver, a social critic, makes a case that both Rock and Tucker are modern minstrels shucking, jiving, and grinning, in the tradition of Step 'n Fetchit. White supremacists have found the Internet an indispensable tool for spreading their message of hate. An Internet search of nigger using Netscape or Alta Vista locates many anti-Black web pages: Niggers Must Die, Hang A Nigger for America, Nigger Joke Central, and many others. Web searchers find what most Blacks know from personal experience, that nigger is an expression of anti-Black hostility. Without question, nigger is the most commonly used racist slur during hate crimes.

No American minority group has been caricatured as often or in as many ways as Black people. These misrepresentations feature distorted physical descriptions and negative cultural and behavior stereotypes. The Coon caricature, for example, was a tall, skinny, loose-jointed, dark-skinned male, often bald, with oversized, ruby-red lips. His clothing was either ragged and dirty or extremely gaudy. His slow, exaggerated walk suggested laziness. He was a pauper, lacking ambition and the skills necessary for upward social mobility. He was a buffoon. When frightened, the Coon's eyes bulged and darted. His speech was slurred, halted, and stuffed with malapropisms. His piercing, high-pitched voice made Whites laugh. The Coon caricature dehumanized Blacks, and served to justify social, economic, and political discrimination. Nigger may be viewed as an umbrella term, a way of saying that Blacks have the negative characteristics of the Coon, Buck, Tom, Mammy, Sambo, Pickaninny, and other anti-Black caricatures.

In 2003, the fight to correct the shameful availability of this word had positive results. Recently Kweisi Mfume, president and CEO of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), gave a speech at Virginia Tech. There everyone was informed that a landmark decision was made with the people at Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Recognizing their error, beginning with the next edition, the word nigger will no longer be synonymous with African Americans in their publication.

Nigger, like the false impressions it incorporates and means, puts down Blacks, and rationalizes their abuse. The use of the word or its alternatives by Blacks has not lessened its hurt. This is not surprising in a racial hierarchy four centuries old, shaping the historical relationship between European Americans and African Americans. Anti-Black attitudes, motives, values, and behavior continue. Historically, nigger, more than any other word, captures the personal hatred and institutionalized racism directed toward Blacks. In 2013, incidences such as Atalanta born restaurant entrepreneur Paula Dean and Oklahoma football player Reilly Coopers comfortable reference to the word against Blacks shows that it is alive in the White vocabulary and it still does great harm.

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|  | Nigger (also spelled niggar): a word that is an alteration of the earlier neger, nigger derives from the French negre, from the Spanish and Portuguese negro, from the Latin niger (black). First recorded in 1587 (as negar), the word probably originated with the dialectal pronunciation of negro in northern England and Ireland. --*Anti-Bias Study Guide,* Anti-Defamation League, 1998  In the United States, "nigger" was first regarded as pejorative in the early nineteenth century. In the era of enslavement, the words "nigger" or "black" were inserted in front of a common American first name (e.g., John), given to a slave to distinguish the slave from any local white person with the same name. While usage of the word in African American culture is complex in that it can be used affectionately, politically, or pejoratively, the epithet is considered an abusive slur when used by white people. Langston Hughes in *The Big Sea* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1940) offered an eloquent commentary:  Used rightly or wrongly, ironically or seriously, of necessity for the sake of realism, or impishly for the sake of comedy, it doesn't matter. Negroes do not like it in any book or play whatsoever, be the book or play ever so sympathetic in its treatment of the basic problems of the race. Even though the book or play is written by a Negro, they still do not like it. The word nigger, you see, sums up for us who are colored all the bitter years of insult and struggle in America.  The word has gained more acceptance in recent years in youth culture through song lyrics and stand-up comedy. Some claim that the word can be defused through reclaiming it. However, most adults continue to view the word as offensive and harmful.  **In the Classroom**  Whether in the context of *Huck Finn* or in any other text in which the word is used, "nigger" raises a number of concerns for both teachers and students when it is used in a classroom setting. When the issues surrounding the word have not been previously addressed in the classroom, it "changes everything," according to parent Danny Elmore. "Five seconds before that word is used, everyone in class might have been your friend. But now you're reassessing yourself, and they're reassessing you. It has a profound effect. Nothing is the same after it is used."  The feelings and reaction of students may depend on the demographics of the student population. In schools that are predominantly African American, students may feel more comfortable with the word, although not necessarily with its repeated use by white characters in a "classic" text. When African American students are in the minority, however, they often feel embarrassed and singled out. Said one African American student in Cherry Hill, "Every time the word came up [during oral reading], everybody turned around to look at me." It's equally important, however, to address the issue regardless of whether the class is racially mixed or homogeneous.  Different teachers handle the word in different ways. Some never use it, and will not allow students to use it. Instead, they skip over it or use a euphemism such as "the 'n' word." Here again race can be a factor. A white teacher, for instance, may be far more reluctant to use the word than a teacher of color, regardless of the class demographics. Nancy Methelis, the English teacher at Boston Latin School featured in the film Born to Trouble: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* explains her decision not to use the word aloud in class:  Words are among the most powerful things there are. . . . A grown-up, middle-aged white woman using that word gives another level of meaning than a 15-year-old African American student. I think I could hurt students by using it, and I don't feel that my minority students want to hear their white peers use that word either. . . And if it turns out we're sacrificing a little academic rigor in the service of not adding to anyone's pain, maybe that's okay. . . .  In the film one of Methelis's students, Shantae, adds, "I hear it every day in school, but I just . . . kind of like the fact that [she] didn't use it in class." Chrissy Hayes, an African American student at Cherry Hill East High School, acknowledges that the word is problematic: "There's no way to completely ease the tension when they keep saying 'nigger, nigger, nigger' and you're the only one in the room it could apply to. But even if teachers say 'the n word' instead, it's written right there in the book, and everyone still reads it in their minds."  Kathy Monteiro, the mother in the film who wanted the book removed from the school's required reading list, says, "How can you ask kids to go home and read the word 'nigger' two hundred-something times in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and then expect kids to come back to school and not use the word?"  In deciding how to handle the word, consider how its use in the classroom -- reading it aloud or as part of assigned silent reading -- will affect students. Some educators believe that the word should be said and discussed openly. Professor Maghan Keita says, "Within the framework of the text, if you don't understand how that word can be used, that it's satire [in the case of *Huck Finn*] -- if you don't teach that, you've missed a teaching moment. Our task is to prepare students to think so that when confronted with these words in a text they can see what the author's intent is. What is the meaning of it in *this* text?"  Writer David Bradley agrees. "We cannot avoid being hurt. Language hurts people, reality hurts people. . . . If the word 'nigger' did not have meaning today we wouldn't care that it was in [*Huck Finn*]. The hurt is that it still does have meaning. . . . People sometimes think the book causes things. It only causes things if there are things there that are waiting to happen. If I go into a school or talk to a school administrator who says, well, gee, this book is going to cause all kinds of trouble, I'm going to say, you've already got trouble."  **Teaching Tips**  Some teachers may feel apprehensive about exploring racism and related issues. The following suggestions will help teachers deal with these or other emotionally charged issues. You may also want to inform parents in advance about how you will be approaching the use of the word in the classroom and in the book.   * Never assume of your students either 1) complete ignorance of and disdain for discussing race relations and cultural differences, or 2) complete awareness of and extreme willingness to discuss and better understand race relations and cultural differences.\* * You may want to ask the group to decide the format for discussion of these issues. (Anything said in the discussion session should not affect grades.) Depending on the demographics of your classroom, you may want to speak privately with African American students (or other students as needed) before beginning the unit.\* * Set ground rules for the discussion, such as no name-calling, no put-downs, and respect for all viewpoints. Do not press for a resolution of friction that may occur during the discussion of these issues. Students should be responsible for their words and actions.\* * No one individual or group should be expected to be spokespersons for their race, gender, socioeconomic group, political affiliation, or any other group.\* * Invite outside experts or community leaders to give other perspectives. * Be honest with students about your own feelings, and explain to them why you want to explore the subject. * If the class is initially hesitant to talk, try having students express their feelings through journal entries, free writing, or anonymous responses. |