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Book Review: The N Word: Who Can Say It. Who Shouldn't. And Why

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The N Word: Who Can Say It. Who Shouldn't. And Why. Jabari Asim. 2007. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. 288 pages. \$26.00 (Hardcover).

Reviewed by Kimberly Burke, N. Reyes Franco, KB Bowman and Esther Rothblum¹

Jabari Asim admits, in his final chapter, that he envisions a “nigger” as a man, perhaps because he is a man himself (233). His idea of the already male “nigger” is abundantly clear throughout *The N Word* which has relatively little mention of women in its lengthy account of the history of racism in the U.S. and does little to examine and critique the particular impact the N word has had on black women.

Asim's few references of women and his lack of attention to how the N word has specifically impacted black women throughout the centuries were just some of the issues we negotiated in the process of writing a review of *The N Word*. We were also faced with the question of whether or not to put to paper a word that still evokes so much visceral emotion that even typing it has the ability to trigger a multitude of memories and feelings. Supporters of the “N word eradication Movement” believe that “the word ‘nigger,’ its derivatives, or any racial slur” should only be used “while educating others about why they should not use them” (170). Asim's book is definitely educational but does not necessarily seek to prevent use of the N word by anyone; he acknowledges “a distinction between private speech and public behavior” and asserts that if white people refer to him as a “nigger” when they are at home it “is of little consequence” to him (230). Our decision to use “nigger” was to avoid the sort of euphemism that Asim describes in his discussion of “racist language”; “the s word” (slavery) was once avoided in the U.S. during the time of Washington and Jefferson out of deference for the sensibilities of white men from the South. By employing euphemisms like “persons held to Service or Labour” and “migrations” to speak of the Atlantic slave trade, the horror of their actions was glossed over, making the subject easier to handle (28). Reading *The N Word* should be hard to do, however, and Jabari Asim does an excellent job of illustrating the racist history of the United States, which cannot be truly conveyed without spelling out every letter of this terrorizing word, nigger.

According to Asim, the first known appearance of the ‘N word’ was in 1619, the year in which the diary of North American colonist John Rolfe indicates that “twenty negars” (African captives) had arrived on a Dutch ship (10). The words “nigger” and “Negro” originate from the Latin word for black (niger). The book's subtitle—“Who can say it. Who shouldn't. And why”—could have been “Who did say it and when.” The book is an extensive historical overview of anti-Black racism in the United States. Asim covers the Declaration of Independence, slavery, scientific writing on racial differences, Jim Crow laws, minstrelsy, anti-Black violence, the O.J. Simpson case, as well as books, television, movies, comedy acts, songs, and slogans through the decades and at times across centuries. Over the course of 14 chapters, Asim covers the historical legacy of the use of the “N” word from early 1600s America to present day by chronicling its (mis)use

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in literature and poetry, science, music, film, theatre, politics and legislative policies, and how each of these mediums have created and shaped representations and stereotypes of African-Americans, the African-American community, and Black ways of living that continue to resonate into contemporary arenas. Asim points out that cultural and public notions of “honor, courtliness, and refinement,” especially during the time of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and the building of the plantation-era South altered public behavior and discourse (27). Language is an extension of action and can be a form of terrorism, and Asim outlines the clearest example of this in the creation of “nigger” (166-167).

In contrast to the extensive focus on the ‘N word’, the ‘W word’ (women) barely appears. In chapter 2, Asim mentions how the “N” word was used to dehumanize all Black people and specifically over-sexualize Black women, and thus, was used by white men to justify the rape of Black women (23). This idea, which has warranted essays upon essays by Black feminist writers, earned only a *parenthetical* note in Asim’s book (23). For example, he points out that by 1862 one out of four or five U.S. readers owned a copy of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and focuses on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s role in “strengthening the role of Negro inferiority” but never specifically addresses how the “Uncle Tom” stereotype affected Black women (Aunt Tomasina?) (71). Next, Asim describes the language in Margaret Mitchell’s book *Gone with the Wind* but does not fully discuss how white femininity was defined against that of Black women; for example, Scarlett became more of a woman the more she dehumanized her female Black slaves (132). In addition, Asim mentions Ida B. Wells only briefly, as a defender of the lynched “negro” (already male) in his sexual relations with white women (152-153).

By completely neglecting Wells’ work towards women’s rights in his male-dominated discussion of nigger, Asim ignores black women’s unique struggles and progresses throughout history in the same way black women/feminism was overlooked in the civil rights efforts and (white) women’s movement. As exemplified in the 2008 U.S. presidential election, Democratic presidential nominees Hilary Clinton and Barack Obama represented the fragmentation of the black female identity; in this show of identity politics, black women were once again asked to prioritize different aspects of their identity, race or sex, without having a candidate that fully understood both. The N word perpetuates Black women’s identity as in a state of limbo, significant neither as black nor as woman.

Similarly, connections need to be drawn between the N word and sexuality. In Chapter 15 Asim describes how “the N word can function as a term of endearment when exchanged by blacks...” (212). However, he points out that the N word differs from other terms, such as “queer,” that “has lost some of its homophobic sting in the general culture” (213). For example, there are television programs such as *Queer as Folk* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, whereas similar titles using the N word would be unthinkable. Nigger was the identity of Black Americans, already debased in their creation, whereas queer became a slur after people were identified as homosexuals. Asim adds (214): “Compare the short shelf lives of those insults (gay and queer) to the seemingly immortal N word, which was used to describe blacks in America as far back as 1619.”

Asim’s text is heavy in its use of history to frame the N word, while conversation regarding contemporary usage and debates surrounding its continued use or nonuse are limited to one chapter, situated at the end of the book, and an epilogue. There is little

discussion on concretely defining or outlining guidelines for who should or should not use the N word. We see Asim beginning to address the issue of who can use this word and how, in his discussion of Huck Finn (110-111) and the use of “nigger” in pedagogy. Ultimately, he presents arguments for both why it should be used and why it should not without a resolution. Asim does not offer a definite answer to the questions in his subtitle, but maybe the point of the book is to begin a conversation about a controversial word, with its roots deep in a history of racial oppression, that is used in our language.

Asim also notes that historically Blacks “would find themselves as restricted by their oppressors’ unfamiliar language as by the shackles and irons with which they were often punished” (41). Now, however, Black people have the power to create their own vocabulary. Asim quotes bell hooks, “Language is also a place of struggle” (228). As seen with Asim’s contemporary example of comedian Chris Rock, nigger is still used to create hierarchies and divisions among Black people that are detrimental to the eradication of racism, rather than progressive. Concomitant with the rise of gangsta rap is the notion that incorporating the N word into everyday speech somehow deconstructs it and removes its power to offend. The great poet Sonia Sanchez has written of her own efforts in this direction. Sanchez heard that a group of young Black students had been chased by older white students who used the N word; she wrote “If they could chase someone with just one word, then they have the power, but if you could stop the word’s importance by replacing it with something new, then you had the power” (223). In 2000 the National Black Family Empowerment Agenda Network introduced a resolution to condemn the N word as the “most harmful and enduring symbol of slavery and Black oppression” (170). It is clear that overcoming racism and racist oppression is a collective effort that crosses lines and definitions of race. Asim states, “African-Americans’ ability to overcome the effects of white supremacy still depends as much if not more on whites’ willingness to resolve their own ‘warring ideals’” (239). Asim believes that “the language we use helps us determine a new and invigorating reality” and he imagines “a world where ‘nigger’ no longer roams confined instead to the fetid white fantasy land where he was born” (234).

In the same way that whiteness is unmarked and thus inscribed as the norm, Asim uses masculinity as the unmarked body that relegates femininity to the “other.” Zora Neale Hurston, writes Asim, “seemed to be far less uptight about the N word than older Black writers” (139) but even when he quotes her he specifies “Negro women” as opposed to just “Negro” for men (157). Additionally, he uses the word “pimp” without offering a critique of the ways in which it functions to oppress women (specifically women of color and poor women) in many ways parallel to the N-word, and how its “trendy” and “slick” use belies the “blood” and “filth” with which it is associated (200). Without addressing Black women’s unique experiences with the “N word” and their use/disuse of it, the conversation is limited and continues to function within an oppressive framework.

Whether used endearingly or not, nigger/nigga represents a racial divide that obfuscates any efforts towards unity and overcoming oppression. Although Asim believes he and anyone else should be able to use the word in the privacy of their homes as long as their public behavior is void of racism, feminism has already shown that the personal is political. We find ourselves agreeing with the supporters of the N word

eradication movement in thinking that all racial slurs should only be used in educating people about why to not use them.