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Sunday, August 05, 2001

## The evolving N-word

### News uses divide the races and the generations

By **Kevin Aldridge, Richelle Thompson**  
and **Earnest Winston**  
The Cincinnati Enquirer

The makeshift memorial to Rickey Moore, the African-American killed last month in a gun fight with a police officer, reads, "We gon miss you my nigga."

Using the word "nigga" five years earlier got Thomas Haas, the white officer who shot Mr. Moore, a reprimand and a two-week suspension.

The n-word: odious slur to some, friendly slang to others.

Once considered vile by nearly everyone, the word has undergone profound change, further dividing and confusing the races.

Many young blacks — and some young whites — increasingly use the word as a sign of friendship. Yet use of the word is risky in mixed-

race company, even among friends.

Some African-Americans who use the word say whites never should, which bewilders some whites who see a double standard.

And friendly use of “nigga” upsets many older blacks, who know the pain and humiliation that “nigger” has brought.

“Anybody who really knows his or her history knows there is no way you can put ice cream and chocolate syrup on the word ‘nigga’ and make it sound good,” says the Rev. Elmon Prier, 54, of Middletown. “Some of our younger kids are dying a slow death by using the n-word, and they don’t even know it.”

### Young people use it

In schools, on the streets, at home and at work, younger African-Americans call each other the n-word daily.

“In the black community, it’s like a pet name,” says Gabe Folmar, a black 29-year-old sociology major at Miami University-Hamilton. “We use it as a way to communicate with each other. You may hear it thousands of times a day.”

In more than 100 interviews with people black and white, the *Enquirer* found that the word is still regularly used in its meanest form, and it remains repugnant to many.

Many blacks are quick to point out, however, that there’s a big difference between saying “nigga” and “nigger.”

When “nigger” is uttered, they say there is no misunderstanding that it’s meant to degrade. But the ability to change a historically demeaning word, and make it a friendly word among peers, represents a bond among blacks and triumph over the word’s power and sting, these blacks say.

Alice Karim, 33, a black Roselawn resident, says she calls her husband the n-word all the time.

“To me, it’s just a word,” she says. “People say, ‘What’s up, my nigga?’ It doesn’t mean anything. Right now, the only power it has is if a white person calls a black person a nigger.”

In a radical departure from their parents, some younger whites are using the word to express friendship, too.

They’re copying their black friends and taking a cue from pop culture and rap music, which frequently uses the word to tell stories of urban life. Rap music may be identified with black culture, but whites buy more than 60 percent of rap music, according to the Recording Industry Association of America.

“It’s everywhere,” says Misty Hobbs, 17, a white senior-to-be at Hamilton High School. “It doesn’t really surprise me anymore.”

Brian Holzberger’s white friends use the word among themselves, and “they’re not saying it as a racial thing,” says Mr. Holzberger, 20, a white Hamilton resident. “They’re saying it like, ‘That’s my



**A makeshift memorial to Ricky Moore uses "my nigga" as a tribute.**  
(Glenn Hartong photo)  
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nigga.'

"They're saying it as, like, a cool thing in a positive way. It seems like more of the younger people use it the friendly way, and more older people use it as, like, a negative way."

Yet missteps over use of the word sometimes occur even in pop culture. Singer Jennifer Lopez recently was stunned by the outcry over her use of the word in her new *J.Lo* album.

## Interracial dangers

Whether or not they use the word themselves, many blacks say it is unacceptable for whites to say it, under any circumstance.

And that befuddles some whites.

Laura Canter, 22, a white Villa Hills resident, says her black cousins sometimes call her the n-word and her black friends use it, too. She never knows what to say.

"You just never know how to respond when people are using it around you," she says. "You don't know where to draw the line between the word being friendly or derogatory or when you cross the line. It's really a tough topic."

To understand the word's power, Vincent Staley, 28, a black Over-the-Rhine resident, cites history.

"When (the word is) coming from our people, I don't take it personal. But when I hear it from white people, I take it personally because of how the word was used by whites during slavery," Mr. Staley says.

"Words have power. They can produce either life or death. And words can hurt — I don't care what anybody says."

Dr. Sherman Jackson, a black professor of African-American history at Miami University, acknowledges a double standard exists when it comes to the word.

"But double standards between blacks and whites have existed throughout history," he says. "A black person's reaction to the word depends largely on where, how and who is using it."

"The word could be said in local bars and saloons among black folk and not be seen in a derogatory way," Dr. Jackson says. "But at the same time, if a white person used the word it would be offensive because it is a word that originated among whites in a derogatory way."

## "Very mistaken"

When Rickey Moore's friends mourned his death last month, they built a wooden memorial with a cardboard sign for handwritten tributes from friends. One of the first tributes read: "To my nigga forever. We miss you already."

A more recent tribute says: "We gon miss you my nigga."

Yet the white Cincinnati police officer who shot Mr. Moore was disciplined five years earlier for using the same n-word variation.

Officer Thomas Haas says he was trying to subdue a difficult prisoner at the Hamilton County Justice Center in November 1996, when he pulled a knit stocking cap over the man's face and called him "nigga."

"Officer Haas claims he used the term in a friendly manner and that he was not attempting to be disrespectful," a police report of the incident says. "He also claims this is an acceptable term used by persons on the street, primarily drug dealers. He states that he is trying to be a good community police officer by 'acting the role' and by presenting himself in a manner close to the persons he serves."

Capt. Kenneth Jones, the police supervisor who wrote the report, disagreed with Officer Haas.

"Officer Haas is under the belief that in order to communicate with members of the community, it is OK to talk exactly as they do," Capt. Jones wrote. "He is very mistaken.

"We must be aware that there are various cultures within our community where certain language may be acceptable within that culture, but not by outsiders."

Officer Haas' two-week suspension in 1996 was reduced to a day after arbitration. And Police Chief Tom Streicher, who was criticized for using the n-word during a training session last year, called Officer Haas one of his top officers after last month's shooting.

That doesn't surprise the Rev. Damon Lynch III, an outspoken black activist and one of three co-chairmen of the the mayor's commission on race relations, Cincinnati Community Action Now.

"It seems to be, in Cincinnati, that we are enamored with the n-word," Rev. Lynch says. "It seems to flow too easily out of people's mouths."



**Lynch**

## Generation gap

Many older African-Americans couldn't agree more. They grew up during times when the n-word was used solely to dehumanize, belittle and control, and they say any variation of the word is always wrong.

"Blacks want the n-word to be an in-house term. So when it goes outside the house, we get upset," says James Ewers, 51, a black Middletown resident. "Well, if we didn't say it ourselves the issue wouldn't even be out on the table."

As a boy growing up on the streets of Glassboro, N.J., during the 1930s and '40s, the word "nigger" had only one meaning for Milton Hinton: war.



**Hinton**

"In my youth, one's reaction to the n-word was such that if you were called that by a white person you fought," says Mr. Hinton, 74, of North Avondale. "No question about it. There wasn't no arguing. You simply went to war."

Sixty years later, Mr. Hinton is fighting the word's use by a generation of young blacks who have adopted it as part of daily conversation.

Blacks who use the word give white racists an excuse to use the word, too, says Mr. Hinton, past president of the Cincinnati branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

"Meanwhile, it perplexes and confounds those whites who hear us when we complain about the n-word being such a bad word," he says.

Nationally, the NAACP condemns use of the n-word in all forms. The nation's leading black civil rights group bought the rights to nigger.com to prevent groups from exploiting the word in cyberspace.

"If a black uses the word, it doesn't lessen the impact of the word itself. It hurts the African-American race as a whole," says Cecil Thomas, 48, a black North Avondale resident and executive director of the Cincinnati Human Relations Commission.

"Young people believe it's OK, but the older people will die to see that word removed from our language. And they have died," Mr. Thomas says.



**Shuttlesworth**

The Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, 79, fought alongside the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in civil rights battles. "Nigger" was one of many racial epithets that whites hurled at him.

Today, he says, he hears the word in the most unlikely places.

"I'm around many friends, preachers as well, who use the word just like that," he says, snapping his fingers. "In Cincinnati, Birmingham (Ala.), and wherever I have gone to visit, even among people celebrating Martin Luther King's birthday, at some point in conversation with black folks that word comes up.

"We ought to make it a target, just like racism, as something negative that we need to get rid of."

The Rev. Prier, the Middletown preacher, grew up in Rhine, Ga. One of his first experiences with the n-word came during a trip to a movie theater in the nearby town of Abbeysville in the 1950s.

"I was a young boy at that time, and I didn't understand that you didn't go into the downstairs part of the theater to get popcorn because it was for whites only," he says. "But I went inside, and that's when one of the (white) guys looked at me and said, 'Nigger, if you don't get outta here, I'll slap your head clean off.'"

For the Rev. Prier, the word always will be vile.

"I'm not your nigger or anybody else's nigger," the retired educator says. "You call me by my name, and I'll call you by your name."

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