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Q&A: The N-Word

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Q&A: The N-Word

Abstract

Question: What is the best way to approach someone who uses blatantly disrespectful language such as the n word and argues that if it is said in the presence of only white people it is not offensive? [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, discrimination, Education, Gloria Naylor, Gwyneth Paltrow, history, Jay Smooth, language, MLK, Q&A, Race, racism, Social Justice

Disciplines

Civic and Community Engagement | Race and Ethnicity

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

Q&A: The N-Word

January 26, 2016



Question: What is the best way to approach someone who uses blatantly disrespectful language such as the n word and argues that if it is said in the presence of only white people it is not offensive?

Answer: Let's treat the question with two parts.

First, we'll address how to approach the person about their behavior.

Remember that this person may not fully understand the historical background surrounding the n-word, so when you prepare to approach them for a conversation, refrain from demonizing them. You won't accomplish anything if you act in an accusatory manner towards them. They'll be more receptive to what you have to say if you're open and honest when you speak to them. Take a look at [this article](#), which expands on this idea and outlines several tips for holding a conversation about offensive language.

In your explanation of the n-word to the person, be sure to discuss the genesis and historical significance of it.

The n-word, or virtually any other blatantly disrespectful language, is generally rooted in rhetoric created to perpetuate power hierarchies. Historically, they were used to physically and emotionally harm communities by undermining their own power, intelligence and autonomy as human beings. For those reasons, regardless of the setting, those words are steeped in painful experiences for others. An English professor at Arizona State University, Dr. Neal A. Lester, [explains it thus](#): "We know that as early as the 17th century, 'negro' evolved to [the n-word] as intentionally derogatory, and it has never been able to shed that baggage since then—even when black people talk about appropriating and re-appropriating it. The poison is still there. The word is inextricably linked with violence and brutality on black psyches and derogatory aspersions cast on black bodies. No degree of appropriating can rid it of that blood-soaked history."

Secondly, we'll discuss how to address the argument that the use of the word is not offensive if it is only said in the presence of white people.

There's been quite a bit of discussion surrounding the use of the n-word by white people. Take, for example, [Jay Smooth's response](#) to Gwyneth Paltrow's controversial tweets. (He was the speaker at last year's Martin Luther King, Jr. Day celebration.) If the person gets defensive during this discussion, it might be a good idea to follow Jay Smooth's example and ask why this person is fighting so hard to be able to use the n-word. This way, you encourage them to reflect in on themselves. More generally, explain that the historical significance of the word doesn't disappear when white people say it around other white people. It still perpetuates the hatred and violence that birthed it. It doesn't matter whether or not a person of color was there to hear it.

Read and share with the person this testimony from Gloria Naylor: "[Mommy, What Does \[the n-word\] Mean?](#)" In it, Naylor describes the first time in which she encountered the use of the n-word as a young child. Sometimes personal experiences, like this one, can get through to someone.

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