In defense of the N word.

by J. Clinton Brown

African Americans' refusal to use the word nigger will not have any impact on changing the attitudes of racists. The word nigger represents both an emotion and an experience. African Americans should feel free to use it to reflect cultural and social opinions.

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'Banning the N word from our conversations should not be a high priority. Many of my friends use it eloquently.'

I was casually talking to a friend on the phone when she interrupted me. "Define that," she said in a serious tone. "What?" I asked, completely confused. "That word you just used, define it."

The conversation ground to a halt as I, panic-stricken, searched my short-term memory for some sexist remark I might have let slip. I was relieved, if a little exasperated, to find that the problem was not gender, but jargon: I had spoken the N word: nigger. Girlfriend wasn't having it.

She suggested that I look up the "definition." I quickly resumed my story before we got bogged down in Funk & Wagnalls.

I'm seeing this scene played out more and more. Conversation is flowing, somebody's laughing, then, uh-oh, there it is—that word. And the music stops as someone steps onstage to strut their "consciousness."

When they indignantly ask for a definition, I know they've missed the point. Slang does not define, it evokes—or provokes. It does not denote, it connotes. It resistis literalism and cares little for etymology. When the word in Webster's can't contain your idea, stretch it around both ends and put a pin in the middle. Let it snap back on the unsuspecting. If someone throws a word at you, grab it, transform it, make it your own.

African Americans have a talent for this. So I find it sad that among the most privileged and best educated generation are many who believe that being politically correct means being culturally stilted.

Banning the N word from our conversations with one another should not be a high priority. Even if we all agreed to the prohibition, the effect would be nil. Crack dealers wouldn't run for cover. That ugly virus would not mutate into something harmless. David Duke wouldn't change his ideology because we tightened our terminology.

Some armchair psychologists drop theories about damage to self-image. In my book, such shallow intellectualizing ignores the complexity and subtlety of African-American thought and speech. I have heard the word "niggah" (note the spelling, dig the sound!) all of my life. Many of my elders and friends use it with phenomenal eloquence. They say it to express amusement, incredulity, disgust or affection. These people are very much about being themselves—proudly, intensely, sometimes loudly.

Others argue that we cannot expect "them" to stop using it until we do. Wake up! The racists in white America will use whatever derogatory term suits them. They do not care about our intracommunity resolutions. That reasoning seems to spring from the same adolescent urge that gave us "It's a Black thang. You wouldn't understand." Did I miss that meeting? Who started the rumor that white people are trying to "understand"?

This N word debate is another symptom of our condition. The discussion of "Black" versus "African-American" reflects the same struggle for self-determination, an effort sustained by the hard, luminous spirit that has survived every evil from the Middle Passage to the Los Angeles Police Department.

Here, too, some people lose the point in the fog of their passion. Lately many of us have started using "African-American" with much clenched-fist attitude, but some people have been using it interchangeably with "Black" for years. After all, the term is not so much political as it is simple anthropology. How else can you accurately describe that portion of the African diaspora living in the United States? Even that quiet realization has the power to change people.

Still, there may be one more step in this evolution. A decade ago, a sister I know decided to cut it to the bone and call herself African—no modifier, no qualifier, no middlemen. African. Lawd, you should've heard the Black folks gasp.

So a humble suggestion for those of us who disapprove of the N word: Chill. The next time someone as "cellul" as I use it in your presence, don't raise your eyebrows or try to raise their consciousness with some jive science. Just politely express your objection. I, for one, will sincerely apologize, substitute an inoffensive term and continue my discourse. It's a courtesy thang. We should all understand.