N-Word on Trial Again
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The never-ending debate over the "N-word" heated up again on the street -- and, oddly, in a courtroom. A parade of black scholars, writers, activists, hip-hop artists and plain folk sparred over the use of the N-word during a panel discussion in New York. Some defended it. Some railed against it.

The renewed public debate is sparked in part by the wind down of the trial of Nicholas Minucci. "Fat Nick," as he is affectionately known, is charged with assault and robbery in the June 2005 baseball bat attack on Glenn Moore in Queens. Minucci is white and Moore is black.

The case has drawn national attention because Minucci allegedly pummeled Moore with the bat, and the N-word, before the assault. The N-word debate is also sparked by a national campaign by black activists to ban the use of the word. There's even a website that hawks T shirts, DVDs and exhorts blacks, especially young blacks, to solemnly pledge not to use the word or patronize anyone who puts out products that use the word. Presumably, that's aimed at rappers -- and a popular comic strip writer -- who have turned the N-word into a lucrative growth industry.

The anti-N-word campaigners are both right and wrong in assailing the N-word. There's no disagreement that the term hurled by white bigots is vile, offensive and hate filled. And that it has caused much personal pain and suffering. But that's where agreement ends. Many rappers have made a mighty effort to stand the word on its head, and take the hurt out of it. Their effort has some merit, and is not new. Dick Gregory had the same idea some years ago when he titled his autobiography, Nigger. Black writer, Robert DeCoy also tried to apply the same racial shock therapy to whites when he titled his novel, The Nigger Bible. Richard Pryor for a time made the term practically his personal national anthem.

Though words aren't value neutral and are often used to promote hate, they in themselves don't trigger racial violence, or psychologically destroy blacks. The N-word did not stir the century of Jim Crow violence, segregation, and disenfranchisement, and poverty that blacks suffered. That was done to preserve white political and economic power, control, and privilege. But even in those days, when a white person, especially a celebrity, athlete or public official, slipped and used the word or made any overt racist reference, black outrage was swift and ferocious. The NAACP even pushed Merriam Webster dictionary to purge the word. But the word in and of itself is not a code sign for discrimination, or a trigger to commit racial violence. The outcry, however, pointed to the double standard far too many blacks apply to whites. In the past a small band of activists, and Bill Cosby, waged war against the use of the word by blacks.

They have been the exception. Blacks have been more than willing to give other blacks that use the word a pass. The indulgence sends the subtle signal that the word is hardly the earth-shattering, illegitimate word that many blacks and whites brand it. Fat Nick pretty much argued
that in his defense. He claimed that his black friends routinely use the word. A black attorney who is also a hip hop record producer partially backed him up and said that the word had lost some of its sting since white hip hoppers use the word and do mean any offense by it. It was self-serving ploy by a defendant grasping to paint himself as bigotry free. But the point was a good one.

That's not the only reason the N-word debate is suspect. The day before the New York panelists shadowboxed over the term, the nation marked the 25th anniversary of the AIDS epidemic. Other than a handful of articles and remembrances, the day mostly came and went. But blacks, particularly the black poor, have been hammered the hardest by the disease. Then a few days before that, beltway sniper John Muhammad was convicted, and following close on that was the slaughter of a family in Indianapolis allegedly by young blacks.

That's a warning that the cycle of crime and violence, hopelessness, desperation, that wracks some poor black communities has reached beyond those communities with deadly consequences. Failing inner city public schools, the near depression level unemployment among young black males, the more than 1 million blacks that pack America's jails, and the surging homelessness numbers, in which blacks make up a disproportionate share of, is more warning that the ills of the black poor are mounting. Yet, there are few impassioned panels, pulsating websites, marches and demonstrations by blacks demanding action on these crisis problems.

Then again it's much easier and more fun to generate passion and heat over a word, than to generate passion and heat over real crisis problems. Putting the N-word on trial again won't change that.

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