Analysis of the Reclamation and Spread of the N-word in Pop Culture

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The N-word is the only racial slur that has a significant amount of people outside of the specified group who desire to use it.

This reclamation (reappropriation) of this word became popular in the late 70s and early 80s with the introduction of hip hop/rap music which led to an exponential spread in the 90s (Sheinen 2014).

The rise of hip-hop/rap brought the use of the word into the mainstream in a new context which is the most popular genre of music in the U.S.

This word that was once used for the oppression of millions still is used that way at times but has now become a modern colloquialism.

A word that is used 500,000 times a day on Twitter.
Research Questions

• When did the reclamation of n-word occur?
• How did the n-word become a controversial phenomenon in American pop culture?
• Are there moments and people who personified the reclamation of the n-word?
Methodology

- I used the methods of historical analysis and literature review to gain a historically grounded understanding of the n-word’s usage in pop culture
  - Historical analysis - a method of the examination of evidence in coming to an understanding of the past
  - Literature review - A literature review summarizes and synthesizes the existing scholarly research on a particular topic
Findings

• The Reclamation of the n-word became significant due to popular figures and moments
  – Richard Pryor
  – N.W.A.
• The word was reclaimed to take the power and redefine it based on the will of the formerly oppressed
• As hip-hop/rap became commercially viable for white youth in the 90s it spread exponentially
• Younger generations of all ethnicities are using the word more often as they are further detached from the original context
Major Lesson

- This n-word is slowly losing the historical context that it once had even for black people
  - “Let evolution happen. Let pop culture take that word away to the ocean, and let anyone use it. . . . That word’s not meant for us anymore. ‘Nigga’ is a part of pop culture. It’s just a word, but it shouldn’t be chained to us, for lack of a better word. It shouldn’t be a part of who we are.”

- Class and capitalism play a unique role in the story of the n-word

- This reclamation was not a consensus in the black community and causes pain for many older generations
  - “When I see a bottle — [and] it says ‘P-O-I-S-O-N,’ then I know [what it is]. The bottle is nothing, but the content is poison. If I pour that content into Bavarian crystal, it is still poison.”-poet Maya Angelou
Future Research

• In the future I plan to continue this research by looking at the psychology of word
• Why do some white people want to use the word though they know it is socially unacceptable?
• What does being able to use the n-word signify in our society?
• I want to do interviews with white people who use the word
• Searching for the psychological and sociological underpinnings of the word in pop culture
References


