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# hip hop culture and america's most taboo word

by geoff harkness



When Sonny Black raps, the words sound like gunfire. This could have something to do with the fact that Black was shot twice by rival gang members last year, or that he hails from Logan Square, one of the grittier neighborhoods on the north side of Chicago. It certainly has something to do with his membership in 108, a hard-core rap outfit that's created a buzz in the city's hip-hop underworld.

But there's also something about Black's lyrics and inflection that set him apart. While his bandmates rap with ironic winks of the eye, Black delivers every line at face value. His rhymes are gleefully violent and willfully aggressive, with nary a sense of humor to temper the savage images.

Tonight Black and 108 are performing at Club Capitol, a former strip joint that still features a dancer's pole running through its tiny stage. 108 enter from the wings, 10 members strong, and the crowd erupts, pushing forward to get a closer look. Superfans in the front row cheer and raise their hands toward the ceiling, exposing a series of forearm-length "108" tattoos of various design.

Black steps forward for a solo number and the place goes berserk. He performs a song titled "Watch Yo' Mouth," and in less than 90 seconds covers a range of topics including drug dealing, gangbanging, shooting cops, having sex, and boasts of being a "career criminal." He punctuates each stanza with a warning that sounds more like a threat.

*Watch yo' mouth, nigga, watch yo' mouth, nigga.*

Sonny Black is Latino.

### taboo for whom?

The n-word was part of "street" language long before hip hop ever existed. Given sociologist Charis Kubrin's finding that commercial rappers inject linguistic cues from street language into mainstream rap songs, it's not unusual to hear black and Latino rappers utter the n-word onstage, in the studio, and in conversation. They apply the word to people of all races, including whites, most of whom are reluctant to use it themselves.

Urban scholar Alejandro Alonso has argued that non-blacks who use the n-word should "expect a certain level of backlash regardless of context," but this doesn't seem to prove

Sonny Black, a Latino rapper with the hard-core group 108, thinks anyone who comes from an impoverished community has a legitimate claim to the n-word's use. Photo courtesy Geoff Harkness

true for Latino rappers. Acts such as Fat Joe, Cypress Hill, and Cuban Link are among those who use the word in standard vernacular; their works are evidence of how the word has filtered into Latinos' music.

Specifically in Chicago, the site of research that inspires this article, use of "nigga" by Latinos and blacks is commonplace. Not every Latino or black rapper says it—the term appears more frequently in "gangsta" rap circles than other forms of the genre—but many do. Despite its widespread use

A common belief in the black community is that the n-word should be used exclusively by blacks. This perspective has resulted in a double standard—blacks can say it, non-blacks can't.

by Latino hip hoppers, Latinos have been largely absent from the ongoing debate over who—if anyone—is "allowed" to say America's most taboo word.

In *The N Word: Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn't, and Why*, Jabari Asim notes that "most whites now adhere to post-civil rights notions of public decorum," and avoid voicing the term publicly. When someone violates this norm it can make the evening news. Former *Seinfeld* actor Michael Richards torpedoed his career in late 2006 during an n-word laced altercation with hecklers in a Los Angeles nightclub. In 2007, Duane "Dog" Chapman, star of the popular TV show *Dog the Bounty Hunter*, found himself in hot water after a recording of him using the term surfaced. Chapman issued a formal apology and confessed to talk show host Larry King, but the A&E network placed his top-rated show on hiatus and said it hoped Chapman would continue "the healing process that he has begun." (Satisfied he had done so, the network resurrected the show earlier this year.)

Rap's close relationship with the n-word has raised hackles in Washington, D.C., particularly as hip hop culture has become





Courtesy photo

Frank Nit believes African Americans and Puerto Ricans have biological and socioeconomic bonds that make it okay for Puerto Ricans to use the n-word.

increasingly synonymous with youth culture. In September 2007 the House Energy and Commerce subcommittee held hearings over the negative language, violent images, and misogyny found in rap music. The hearings weren't the first time rap music was singled out for the proliferation of the n-word, and some critics have linked its increased use to larger social declines within the black community.

Actor/comedian Bill Cosby raised eyebrows during a 2004 speech in which he condemned gangsta rap music and culture, blaming it for the suffusion of the n-word.

"When you put on a record, and that record is yelling 'nigger this' and 'nigger that' and cursing all over the thing and you got your little 6-year-old and 7-year-old sitting in the back seat of the car ... what are you saying to your children?" he asked the audience, which roundly applauded the diatribe.

Black scholar Michael Eric Dyson fired back the following year with the retort *Is Bill Cosby Right? (Or Has The Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?)*. Dyson affirmed the latter question, castigating the elite black "Aristocracy" for its attacks on the "Ghettocracy," or black poor. In a 2005 interview, Dyson "retired" his own use of the word, but said that he had "no problem with its use by hip hoppers who continue to use it with verve, color, imagination, love and affection."

Harvard professor Randall L. Kennedy disagreed, blaming hip hop culture for an increased dissemination of the n-word but conceding that rappers eschew "nigger" in favor of the

somewhat softer "nigga," and that the term is an important aspect of hip hop identity. In a 2007 interview, scholar Cornel West enjoined rappers to be "more sensitive to the vicious history of the n-word. I know that 'nigga' as opposed to 'nigger' is a term of endearment for some young people. But the history of 'nigger' with its connotation of self-hatred and self-disrespect needs to be acknowledged."

Alonso asserts that a common belief in the black community is that the n-word should be used exclusively by blacks. This perspective, he writes, has resulted in a double standard—blacks can say it, non-blacks can't.

Perhaps a better understanding, though, lies in looking beyond the notion of a double standard to examine how hip hop has blurred existing racial distinctions.

In hip hop culture, differing sets of norms regulate use of the n-word. These rules are dependent upon context as well as one's position in the racial hierarchy. At the top are blacks, who are "allowed" use the word freely and without penalty; for whites, at the bottom, the word remains largely taboo. The rules are less concrete, however, for non-black ethnic minorities, who fall somewhere between blacks and whites in hip hop's racial stratification.

In particular, Latinos (especially Puerto Ricans) are exempt from n-word regulation under many contexts. It's not a double standard, but a lack of an agreed-upon set of standards—even within ethnic groups—that underscores the fluid, socially constructed nature of race and authenticity. This serves as a powerful example of how people of all ethnicities contribute to and reshape the meaning of hip hop culture.

In his book *Colored White*, David Roediger details the black community's long-standing derision of Caucasians who try to act "too black" or adopt black culture falsely, invoking one of hip hop's more frequent issues: authenticity or "keeping it real."

Authenticity is that which is deemed to be genuine, original, and representing some sort of inherent or pure quality. Kembrew McLeod further argues that hip hop authenticity can be defined along six dimensions, one of which is this contrast

The rules are less concrete for non-black ethnic minorities, who fall somewhere between blacks and whites in hip hop's racial stratification.

between black "realness" and white "fakeness."

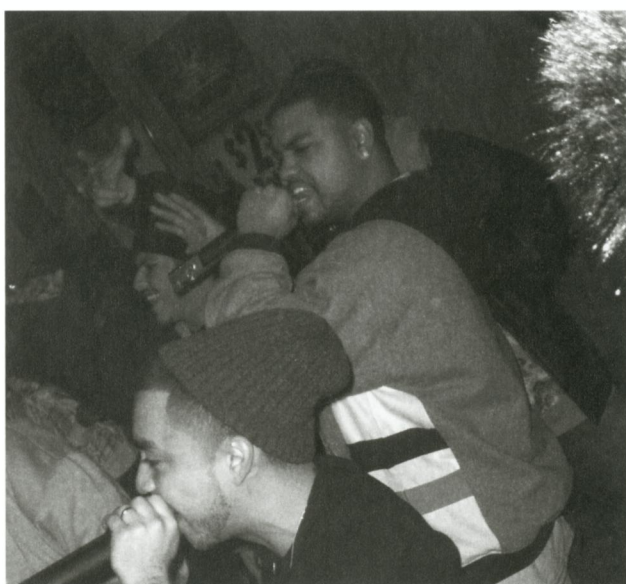
Drawing upon these notions, use of the n-word by black rappers might function as a means of preserving hip hop culture's "pure" or authentic black core, a symbolic boundary that creates ingroup-outgroup distinctions between "real" rappers who can use the term and "fake" rappers who can't.



## do the white thing

Within subcultures, however, boundaries can be flexible. Sociologist Andy Bennett argues that hip hop culture—and its accompanying themes of authenticity—is under constant revision as various youth groups throughout the world adopt it. This notion of cross-cultural pollination is hardly new. In his famous 1957 essay “The White Negro,” Norman Mailer describes “urban adventurers who drifted out at night looking for action with a black man’s code to fit their facts. The hipster had absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro, and for practical purposes could be considered a white Negro.” White negros, Mailer wrote, resist mainstream “white” society, and immerse themselves in black culture, taking cues from its linguistic, stylistic, and musical practices.

Mailer’s hipsters reverberate in contemporary studies of whites who submerge themselves in hip hop culture. In her ethnography of British “wiggers” (“white niggers”) Anoop Nayak suggests that white appropriation of hip hop culture has led to a sort of racial hybridity that bodes well for race relations. This cultural adaptation, she writes, “may be seen as postcolonial forms of mimicry that subvert, parody and reconfigure whiteness, race and nationhood, setting it free from any *a priori* sense of biological origins.” In *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop*, Bakari Kitwana goes so far as to say that we live in an “age of appropriation,” where black styles are assumed with progressive frequency by others. “Hip hop, for today’s average kid—black or white—is just another part of growing up,” pop-culture maven Charles Aaron writes.



Latino rapper Eoshel thinks the n-word will remain part of rap parlance.

Photo courtesy Geoff Harkness

There are limits, however, to racial hybridity. Kennedy explains that white use of the n-word is taboo because it’s understood to be negative and racist, but black use of the term is construed in a positive manner.

“I would never say that word,” avows T-Scar, a white rapper from the Chicago suburbs. “Hip hop was started by black people, so for me to say the n-word would just be

Though hip hop is sometimes portrayed as having grown strictly out of African American culture, in reality it was the product of black interaction with a variety of ethnic groups, including large numbers of Latinos, particularly Puerto Ricans.

disrespectful to everybody that built this culture strong enough so that I could participate in it.”

For T-Scar and his like-minded white peers, using the word is dishonest—they don’t employ it in their everyday speech, and so to use it onstage or in the studio would mean committing hip hop’s deadliest sin of being inauthentic, or untrue to their social lives. Others sidestep the word out of very real fears for their physical safety. “I don’t use it ‘cause I don’t want to get my ass kicked,” says white rapper Mike Don.

Sociologists Michele Lamont and Virag Molnar note that boundaries “separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership. They are an essential medium through which people acquire status and monopolize resources.” In this sense, “nigga” is hip hop’s most powerful word, as a valuable status symbol and resource for those who are “allowed” to use it and a means of both dividing “authentic” rappers from fake and creating race-based distinctions between different groups of rappers.

## latino roots and contours

So long as it isn’t used pejoratively toward African Americans (including its “er” form), the word seems to be acceptable for Latino rappers in most situations, because contexts and history are paramount.

African Americans commonly invoke images of historical slavery and the general struggle for civil rights in the United States to explain why the boundary exists for whites but not Latinos. “If some Spanish dude is like ‘nigga this,’ ‘nigga that,’ I don’t think he’s thinking, ‘You a nigga, and I’m a higher species,’” Wondur, a Chicago-based black rapper, explains. “Whereas you hear that shit out of a white dude’s mouth, it goes right back to where it came from,” meaning slavery and notions of white superiority.

“I can understand why the Latinos can do it, but the white



people can't," says QT, a black rapper who uses the term frequently. "They can use it cause they ain't nothing but us, man. They do the same shit we do. They trapped, they grinding, they hard. Plus, they weren't the people that enslaved us. I'm keepin' it real, man. The Caucasian folks enslaved us. So when they say the word nigger, of course it would offend us."

Like blacks, Latinos also invoke historical images and lineages when explaining why they get an n-word pass, although this often occurs within a context of the Latino contribution to hip hop culture. Though hip hop is sometimes portrayed as having grown strictly out of African American culture, in reality it was the product of black interaction with a variety of ethnic groups, including large numbers of Latinos, particularly those of Puerto Rican descent. In *Puerto Rocks: Rap, Roots, and Amnesia*, Juan Flores argues that Latinos have been sorely overlooked in hip hop history and writes of the sense of "instant amnesia" that occurred as rap become increasingly commercial.

"When the media puts a face on hip hop, automatically the first face they put on it is a black face. But we all know that hip hop was started by blacks and Latinos. This was put on it when capitalism came into this music," says O-Zone, a Dominican DJ and producer.

In 2001, Latina actress/singer Jennifer Lopez caused a minor scandal when she dropped an n-bomb in her song "Jenny From the Block." Some media pundits took her to task for it, but the controversy blew over quickly. Black comedian Paul Mooney defended her right to use the term based on her Puerto Rican heritage: "Puerto Ricans and Cubans, aren't they black?" he asked. "I just thought they were niggas that could swim."

Kidding aside, many Chicago hip hoppers share the perception that African American and Puerto Ricans have a unique relationship. Rapper Frank Nit believes the two communities have biological and socioeconomic bonds that exempt Puerto Ricans from regulation of the n-word. Thus, it's a word he uses frequently, both onstage and in his everyday speech. Unlike some Latinos, who are cautious not to use the word in certain contexts (as an insult, for example), Nit uses it without restraint.

"Black people consider me to be *black*," he insists. "They understand that as Puerto Ricans, we've had it bad, too. I could say 'nigga' a thousand times and no one would care."

Pinqy Ring, who bills herself as the Puerto Rican Princess of Chicago and who uses the n-word onstage and in her everyday speech, also draws upon historical and biological connotations that link blacks and Puerto Ricans. These associations give Puerto Ricans a unique claim to "authentic" hip hop culture that isn't shared by whites—or perhaps other Latinos.

"Puerto Ricans were oppressed and the African Americans were oppressed," Ring explains. "Puerto Ricans have Taino Indian and African in our blood. We can all appreciate the struggle that our families have been through, take it and make it something beautiful, make it something that we can call our own."

## unattended funeral

Not everyone in Chicago believes it's a good idea for Latino rappers to say the n-word. Some disparage its use by people of any race, while others think African Americans, but no one else, should be able to use it. Alo is one of the few rappers to denounce its use by his fellow Latinos.

"I can't *stand* it when Latino people use that term," he says, adding that he doesn't have a problem with blacks using it. "It's just not cool. I know a lot of cats that use it and stuff, but that just ain't my thing. Call me old fashioned."

That probably wouldn't faze Sonny Black, the Latino rapper from 108, who believes the word is no longer a simple racial construct. Black asserts that anyone who comes from an impoverished community has a legitimate claim to the word's use, a perspective shared by many Chicago hip hoppers.

"If you 'hood,' you can say it," he insists. "I know white niggas that are hood, and they can say 'nigga' cause they in the hood. They hood niggas, plain and simple. That's how it is. If you hood, you got passes." None other than Bill Cosby expressed similar sentiments in a 1971 speech delivered to the Congressional Black Congress. "Niggas come in all colors," he told the audience.

The impact of hip hop and the n-word on racial relations and cultural practices remains to be seen. During its annual convention in July 2007, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People held a mock funeral for the term, calling upon the rap community in particular to end its use. But apparently none of these musicians attended, or even read the n-word's obit.

"Until they outlaw the word, people are gonna use it," says Eshel, a Latino rapper who plans to continue using the term in his music. "For the better or for the worse."

## recommended resources

Jabari Asim. *The N Word: Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn't and Why* (Houghton Mifflin, 2007). A historical look at the lengthy history of the n-word, with the author concluding the term helps keep blacks at the lowest rungs of society, regardless of context.

Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, eds. *That's the Joint! The Hip Hop Studies Reader* (Routledge, 2004). An excellent selection of articles that examine hip hop culture from a variety of perspectives.

John L. Jackson. *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (The University of Chicago Press, 2005). A kaleidoscopic ethnography of New York City, with the author concluding racial sincerity trumps racial authenticity.

Bakari Kitwana. *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America* (Basic Books, 2005). A cogent analysis of the conditions that lead whites to embrace hip hop culture, underscoring the new forms of racial hybridity that have stemmed from the dissemination of hip hop culture.

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