A racial slur entrenched in American vernacular is more prevalent than ever

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This season, the National Football League is attempting the impossible, a reasoned but dubious mission that has already tripped up an institution as venerable as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, municipalities as large as New York City and countless parents of teenagers across the land. The goal: banning the n-word within the chalk-lined borders of its purview.

As with the previous attempts, the NFL’s “zero tolerance” policy - which gives referees leeway to issue a 15-yard penalty for a first offense and ejection for a second - comes with good intentions: to establish a field of play free of the most racially charged word in American history.

But like the others, it is almost certainly doomed to fail; to be ignored, at best - or mocked and flouted, at worst.

If there is one thing certain about the modern n-word - a shifty organism that has managed to survive on these shores for hundreds of years by lurking in dark corners, altering its form, splitting off into a second specimen and constantly seeking out new hosts, all the while retaining its basic and vile DNA - it is that it defies black-and-white interpretations and hard-and-fast rules.

The word is too essential as an urban slang term to be placed in a casket and buried, as NAACP delegates attempted to do in a 2007 mock “funeral” for the word. It is too ingrained in youth culture to be eliminated from city streets, as the New York City Council attempted with a symbolic resolution banning the word the same year. And more than likely, it will prove too complex and nuanced to be policed by football referees wielding yellow flags and penalties. Never mind the troublesome optics of a group of mostly white NFL executives dictating the language rules of a majority-black player pool.

If anything, in 2014, it is the very notion of banning the n-word that appears dead and fit for burial. It was a long and noble fight, waged largely - but not exclusively - by an older generation for which the word is inseparable from the brutality into which it was born. If there is still a meaningful n-word debate left to have, it is over context, ownership and the degree to which it should be tethered to its awful history - or set free from it.

A word that is used 500,000 times a day on Twitter - as "nigga" is, according to search data on the social media analytics Web site Topsy.com - is almost by definition beyond banning. By comparison, "bro" and "dude" - two of the terms with which the n-word is synonymous to many people younger than 35 - are used 300,000 and 200,000 times, respectively. For many of this generation, the word is tossed around unthinkingly, no more impactful than a comma.
"It's such a regular part of my vernacular. It's a word I use every day," said comedian/actor Tehran Von Ghasri, a 34-year-old D.C. native of African-American and Iranian American heritage. "I'm a 'nigga' addict."

Though the word has long been entrenched in American vernacular, by all accounts it is more prevalent than ever - expanding into new corners of the culture, showing up in places (college debate, Christian rap, video-game culture) where it would have been almost unimaginable a generation ago and no longer following any clear rules about who can say it and who can't.

"People are integrating on a faster level today than ever before in history, [so] it's unfathomable to me to think that with everything that we have crossing over, the language would not have crossed over as well," Von Ghasri said. "I'm still uncomfortable with [a] white guy saying, 'You're a cool nigga.' But in 25 years, I would hope that my kid's not uncomfortable - because that white guy wouldn't mean it in a demeaning, degrading way. He would mean it as a positive thing."

The NFL's move to ban the n-word - technically, a directive from the league to game officials to aggressively enforce an existing rule barring racial slurs on the playing field, with a particular emphasis on this specific one - came in the wake of a series of high-profile incidents involving the n-word and the league.

In July 2013, Philadelphia Eagles wide receiver Riley Cooper was recorded on video yelling the word menacingly at a country music concert.

Four months later, details began to emerge in the Miami Dolphins bullying scandal, in which a white lineman, Richie Incognito, at one point called Jonathan Martin, a black teammate, a "half-nigger" in a voice mail. The NFL suspended Incognito for three months.

That same month, Washington Redskins tackle Trent Williams, who is black, was accused of directing the word at an African-American official who was attempting to intervene in a dispute between opposing players that included similar abusive language. Williams denied using the slur to the official, and the official, umpire Roy Ellison, was suspended for one game for using derogatory language toward Williams.

Taken together, the incidents might have signaled to some an n-word problem in the NFL. The Fritz Pollard Alliance, a group that advises the league on diversity issues, certainly thought so, pushing the NFL to adopt its "zero tolerance" stance toward racial slurs - a policy that was met by a firestorm of criticism, with many players and pundits blasting the rule as unfair, or even inherently racist.

This season, several players - including the San Francisco 49ers' Colin Kaepernick, a mixed-race quarterback who is one of the game's top young stars - have been penalized and fined by the league for saying the word to an opponent.

But any larger exploration of this subject leads to the inevitable conclusion that it isn't just the NFL that has an n-word problem. It's all of America.
One of the biggest problems in confronting the n-word is that, for decades now, there have existed two n-words, one that ends in "er" and one that ends in "a." For many, they have distinctly different meanings - the "er" version linked to the word's hateful, racist origins, the other more a term of endearment.

But it isn't quite that simple. There are those who argue that the versions are not so much distinct words as they are different pronunciations of the same word, with the same vile underpinnings. "You change a vowel or two. It doesn't change the meaning," said Dineytra Lee, a dancer and youth advocate in Los Angeles who is of African-American and Puerto Rican heritage.

At its essence, the word - in either form - remains inseparable from its basic, historic meaning. Even if you believe the form that ends in "er" and the one that ends in "a" are two distinct words, the latter would not exist were it not for the former. And the former would not exist were it not for the scourge of racism.

There is no better proof of its enduring toxicity than the fact that, in polite society, it is spoken and written only in its euphemistic shorthand - "the n-word" - than its full, spelled-out form.

"It's impossible to separate the word from various manifestations of white supremacy," said Jabari Asim, an Emerson College literature professor and author of "The N Word: Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn't, and Why." "Racist violence against black people has seldom been implemented without the recitation of the n-word at the same time."

At its core, the word has always been about power: the power whites held over blacks for centuries, and the power that some in the black community once sought to regain by "reclaiming" the word for itself in hopes of lessening, or eliminating, its sting - an argument others never fully bought.

"The n-word was created to divest people of their humanity," the poet Maya Angelou once said on the Sundance TV show "Iconoclasts." "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."

Banning the word, in a sense, is an attempt to exert another degree of power over it. It is a laudable thought in theory, but one that in practice is seemingly impossible, given the word's vast reach. Even worse, it raises the question of who, exactly, has the right to ban it.

"Y'all birthed the word," said Washington, D.C.-based educator Gabriel Benn, rhetorically addressing white America. "You can't kill it."

But many would argue the word doesn't need to be banned as much as it needs to be policed. A straight ban affords no room for the nuances and contextual variations of the word - for example, the way the word might be used as a neutral term of familiarity or community between two competing football players in the heat of battle.
"If I ran a double move on [an opposing defensive back] and he grabbed me, I would say something like, 'Nigga, quit holding me,'" said former NFL wide receiver Donte' Stallworth. "He wouldn't care about that. He'd be upset about me saying he's holding. It's nothing negative. It doesn't hurt my feelings. It doesn't hurt his feelings. It's not meant to incite. [But] now, that [word] would get me a [penalty] flag."

Unlike a strict ban on the word, policing it allows a community to set its own ground rules and check those who stray outside the lines.

The problem is, policing the word has become more difficult in an America where the lines between white and black have become grayer, where the use of the word is expanding all the time, and where the bar for what is outrageous and provocative continues to rise.

"One should have a lot of responsibility when using the word," said Patricia Wilson, a Los Angeles-based television producer who is African-American. "When [non-black] people say, 'Well, you hear it in rap music. . . . Is it OK for others to use?' And the answer is hell no. It's not OK, and I don't think it will ever be OK. Because when others use it, it's more dehumanizing, and they don't take on the historical responsibility. Anybody can be checked at any time, [and told], 'Look, that's not cool. You can't use it like that. I don't give a damn what you hear on the radio.'"

The word still possesses its power to rend. Wielded indelicately, it can destroy careers and reputations. It still divides the country, even within African-American communities, on the question of whether it should be banished to the dark corners of history or embraced as a term of endearment. None of that is new.

But what is new is the growing acceptance and use of the word in different settings and among different groups. That growth has been fueled by the generation - more multicultural and tolerant than any before it - that came of age during the 1980s and 1990s, as the n-word exploded anew in popular culture.

But this generation has almost no personal connection to the civil rights struggle and doesn't equate the word, at least not exclusively, with racism. Perhaps these Americans had parents or grandparents who felt strongly about the inappropriateness of the n-word, but they grew up themselves with a level of comfort with it, and wouldn't be as stringent in raising their own children.

"I'm empathetic to the older generation because they lived it - [but] why are we still attaching ourselves to that word?" said Stallworth, the former NFL wide receiver. "Let it go. I'm not saying let the emotions go or let what happened [in the past] go, but that word - let it go. To me it's a word of the past. I'm not downplaying the significance of it. But today, in 2014, it's time for us to let go of the baggage that word comes with and just start looking at ourselves as a different type of 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."
Removed from its loaded context, and viewed only through the lens of linguistics, the n-word is a marvel of modern language - springing from the Latin word for black ("niger"), obtaining its awful power during the era of slavery, retaining that power through a century of lynchings and Jim Crow segregation, then splitting off into a second, distinct word that means pretty much the exact opposite of the original.

There is no other word like it in the English language, encompassing both the ugliest sort of hate and a communal, if subversive, sense of love and affection, depending upon who is saying it and in what context. It can be wielded as a tool of both white racism and black empowerment. Its most accomplished practitioners can drop it into conversation as a noun, adjective, verb or interjection.

Linguistically, the phenomenon of a community taking a word meant as a slur and reappropriating it as a term of endearment is called semantic inversion or semantic looping. The word's use by African-Americans, wrote linguist Andrew T. Jacobs in 2002, "is a strategy for asserting the humanity of black people in the face of continuing racism, a strategy that celebrates an anti-assimilationist vision of African-American identity."

Other oppressed communities have similarly reappropriated slurs, seen perhaps most vividly in the gay community's adoption of terms such as "dyke" and "queer." But the comparisons between those words and the n-word are imprecise; "dyke" and "queer" have never moved outside the gay community to become universal.

Perhaps more than any other word, the n-word is dependent upon context. Other words may be influenced by context, but this one is totally inseparable from it. It scarcely exists outside of context. Its meaning is never fixed.

Was it said by a black man to other black men? By a white person in a multi-racial group? Were they in a locker room? At a rap concert? A change in setting alters the entire dynamic.

"To me, it's just a word, a word whose power is owned by the user and his or her intention. People give words power, so banning a word is futile, really," rapper Jay Z wrote in his memoir, "Decoded." "'Nigga' becomes 'porch monkey' becomes 'coon' and so on if that's what in a person's heart. The key is to change the person. And we change people through conversation, not through censorship."

A Jay Z concert is like a social experiment on the reach of the word in modern culture. At his show at Baltimore's M&T Bank Stadium in July - where he shared the spotlight and the stage with his wife, Beyonce, on their "On the Run" tour - the sold-out crowd was a healthy mix of black, white, Asian and Hispanic fans. The rapper invited everyone to sing along to "Jigga My Nigga," and the lyrics, which helped take the song to the top of the rap charts in 1999, echoed throughout the crowd in melodious unison. Beyonce joined in on a later track, mouthing the words "I'm the nigga" as her husband performed.

Janeace Slifka, a 27-year-old white woman who self-identifies as a feminist and works as a digital strategist in Washington, stood in the upper deck with her husband, swaying side to side as Beyonce
and Jay Z performed. She sang along at times, but when "nigga" appeared in the lyrics she let her voice drop out, while thousands of others kept singing.

"I didn't find myself uncomfortable at all, but I can't imagine signing along, either," she said. "I wouldn't even do it in my car, let alone in a crowd of 50,000 people - even if I was being encouraged."

Some artists, including superstar Kanye West, have been known to grant white concertgoers permission to keep singing along even when the lyrics contain the word - an offer that is frequently accepted wholeheartedly.

"He said, 'OK, white people - this is your only opportunity. So I want you to sing at the top of your lungs,' " Benn, the D.C. educator, recounted about a recent West concert. "And they did it."

For decades, a debate has raged within the hip-hop community about the extent to which the prevalence of the n-word among youth of all races is connected to its rise in hip-hop - and the debate has perhaps never been more relevant. When N.W.A. - short for Niggaz Wit Attitude - first appeared on the scene in the late 1980s, its use of the word felt revolutionary. Now, to achieve the same effect, it requires more effort - and more n-words. The 2013 hit song "My Nigga" by YG used the word a whopping 128 times.

"The word has staying power because we keep saying it, period," said acclaimed African-American opera singer Denyce Graves, a Washington native. "The issue of reclaiming the word and taking ownership - I reject that entire idea. My mother used to tell us when we were kids, 'The shackles had been taken off the ankles and wrapped around the mind.' And she would say that we were continuing the oppressors' work . . .

"I know we will never be rid of this word, [but] I would love to see it just vanish."

But as hip-hop has aged and evolved as an art form, so, too, have its practitioners. They don't necessarily hold the same views in their 30s and 40s that they did in their teens.

"We have indirectly given a pass to a lot of people - to just say it and sing along," said Benn, formerly a rapper who, under the stage name Asheru, released a song called "Niggaz." "We let that happen on our watch. . . . The problem is, white people want to be able to say it, and they want somebody to give them that permission."

It isn't difficult to imagine how a white teenager, perhaps lacking a deep understanding of the United States' racial history, could be left wondering whether it is OK to use the word - when it is a constant presence in his generation's music and in the hallways of his school, and when African-American peers sometimes give him a "pass" to use it.

Nathan Brandli, a white University of Maryland senior majoring in African-American studies, said he wrestled with those "gray areas" during high school. His three best friends, all African-Americans, gave him permission to use the word with them, he recalled, but he never did so. However, he did use
the word occasionally, and always privately, with a white friend.

"We kind of used the word to each other as a friendly sort of word, like, 'That's my nigga,'" Brandli said. "But eventually I became more and more uncomfortable with that . . . just because I was aware that, as a white person, maybe you shouldn't use that word, [since] that would make people get the wrong idea."

At the University of Oklahoma this year, a pair of African-American debaters won eight rounds in the prestigious National Debate Tournament, before losing in the semifinals, by employing an argument that made liberal use of the n-word - a strategy intentionally tailored to challenge existing norms in debate.

In Atlanta, Christian rapper Sho Baraka reached the top of the U.S. gospel music charts (and peaked at 12th on the rap charts) with an album, "Talented 10th," that makes judicious use of the n-word - a development that roiled the world of Christian pop music.

The website Gamers Against Bigotry, launched in 2012 as a movement to combat widespread racist and sexist language and behavior in the video-gaming community, was attacked by hackers within a week and defaced with, among other things, slogans containing the n-word.

In Orlando, Fla.; Forsyth County, Ga.; Killeen, Texas; and King County, Wash., graduating high school students - some of them white - hung banners last summer featuring the phrase "nigga we made it," made popular by the anthemic song "We Made It," by the Canadian-born hip-hop star Drake.

Spend some time in the hallways of a high school and you are likely to hear not only African-Americans using the word among themselves, but also Asians, Latinos and whites. They probably don't mean any harm, but it is jarring to anyone with the perspective of an older generation.

"Kids today lack the historical perspective," said Michael Nesmith, head football coach at Paint Branch High School in the Maryland suburbs of Washington. "That, plus its use in hip-hop, is why it's so prevalent. They're desensitized to it. I hear kids using it all the time - whites to other whites, Latinos to other Latinos." Nesmith said he doesn't allow his players (roughly 90 percent of whom are black) to use the word, but he added, "We're fighting a losing battle."

These days, it might make more sense to ask which groups aren't using the word than which groups are.

John McWhorter, a Columbia University linguistics professor and contributing editor at the New Republic, peers into the future and envisions a day when the word is omnipresent and universal. "Frankly, we're just going to have to get used to it," he said. "It's a generational shift, and it's permanent. There will be potbellied middle-aged white men calling each other 'nigga' in 30 years."

Others would question whether such a universal acceptance could ever occur. Despite its expansion,
the n-word hasn't really joined mainstream American culture - just mainstream American youth culture. That it is growing in volume doesn't necessarily mean it is growing in influence. As has happened throughout history, young people grow up, they take jobs, they have kids and their viewpoints change.

The sheer number of prominent artists who went from using the n-word frequently to disavowing it - a group that includes comedians Richard Pryor, Paul Mooney and Chris Rock - suggests a coming of age or an awakening to the word's powers to harm.

Indeed, the most effective form of policing the word may be self-policing. When Ayana Evans, a 24-year-old Howard University student, gave up the word for Lent this year, she said it was almost like an epiphany.

"I was motivated because I was listening to someone speak, and they said, 'What you say, you become,'" she said. "And I thought, 'Wow, I say this [word] to my friends all the time - and then tell them to get their lives together. It's a contradictory statement. So [in using the word] I'm perpetuating this state of ignorance."

The story of the n-word, in many ways, parallels the overall story of race in America - from the bloody circumstances of its birth to the messy state of its present. The word is visible almost anywhere there is racial conflict: the lawless realm of social media, the vast landscape of pop culture or the streets of Ferguson, Mo.

There are some who would say that debating the merits of the n-word is missing the bigger picture. The problem isn't the n-word. The problem is racism. But it's easier to fight a word than a complex, institutionalized system of oppression.

If life were as simple as the National Football League would like us to believe, the United States could simply police the word with yellow penalty flags, as if everyone were referees. A yellow flag on the hip-hop artist with the egregious lyrics.

Another flag on the white kids at the mall, dropping the word on one another with no thought to its history. Another, if you wish, on the NFL for trying to ban in the first place a word used largely by African-American players to other African-American players.

A United States where everyone is using the n-word at will - where it contains no deeper, outside meaning at all - is difficult to imagine. But no more unimaginable than a country where the word is completely gone. What is far more likely is that the word continues to exist for generations to come - and continues to vex us with the same issues of history, context and ownership that it does now.

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Washington Post staff writer Lonnae O'Neal Parker contributed to this report.