Why Some People Defend the Word Nigger

❌ Back when I was a correspondent with CBS News I anchored a documentary called, "In Your Face, America" — about the rudeness and vulgarity that was increasingly infecting the nation's bloodstream.

As part of the program I spent a day in Houston with a rapper who used the n-word over and over all day long. When I sat down with him for an interview, I asked why he used the word "nigger" as often as he did. He looked straight at me and said that he had never used that word. Confused, I told him he had used it a hundred times that day, and asked what the heck he was talking about. Without the slightest hint of humor or irony he said, "I used the word nigga," emphasizing the last part, making the distinction between "nigger" and nigga."

At the time, I found the difference foolish — and 20 years later I still do. And even though I did that interview a long time ago, the conversation and debate over the n-word — whether it ends with an "er" or an "a" — is as fresh today as it was way back then.

I mention this because of a guest column I just read in the New York Times, written by Ta-Nehisi Coates, a senior editor at the Atlantic. Mr. Coates is black. Under the headline, "In Defense of a Loaded Word," Coates says words have context. Your dad's friends can call him Billy. But you, his son, probably can't. You can call your wife "baby," but if your friend called her that, it would be wrong.

He's right, of course. But this, as you may have already guessed, is only the appetizer. The main course is that as far as Mr. Coates is concerned it's O.K. to use the word

"nigger" — but only if you're black. Some blacks agree with Coates, some don't. And the same goes for white people.

Being in that second group, I have no desire to tell black people which words they can use and which ones they can't. Black people know more about black culture than I do. Their say on the matter is more relevant than mine; their vote carries more weight. But I know more about how whites think than most blacks do. And on that, my vote carries more weight.

If I hear black people using the n-word, I think less of them. If black people have a right to use the word — and of course they do — I have a right to think they're low class when they do. The word has a vile history attached to it. It conjures up images, none of them good. But it also conjures up "a deep fear of what our use of the word 'nigger' communicates to white people," as Coates points out before quoting Al Sharpton on the matter. "If you call yourself the n-word," Sharpton said, "you can't get mad when someone treats you like that."

On this, the Rev. Sharpton is right. If black people feel empowered by calling their friends "nigger" or "nigga" be my guest. But don't blame the rest of us for thinking you're black trash.

So why use the word? On this, Mr. Coates is clear. This is how he ends his column: Nigger is a word, he says, that "tells white people that, for all their guns and all their gold, there will always be places they can never go."

There it is! The real reason so many African-Americans, especially young black males, feel so comfortable with the n-word, despite the fact that for many of us, black and white, it brings up memories of lynching and beatings and all sorts of other degradation of black people. White people can't use the word, not unless they want to be seen as racists. So it's

a way for blacks to say, "Whitey may have more money and live better and all that, but here's one place where we hold the cards; here's one place where we have the power. We can call each other 'nigger' and you can't."

Mr. Coates is a bright man. But this is not smart. Jews don't call each other kikes. Italian-Americans don't call each other WOPs. Asian Americans don't call each other gooks. If we feel the need to stick it to those who found us inferior, we find better ways than to demean each other. But blacks can call each other the n-word *simply because whites can't*? Yes, words have context. And yes, the word "nigger" means one thing when a black kid uses it and something entirely different when a skinhead uses it. Let's give Mr. Coates that. But does context really trump everything else?

As a white man my vote doesn't matter all that much. I do, however, get to think that blacks who use the word, are inviting contempt. Or as Al Sharpton put it: "If you call yourself the n-word, you can't get mad when someone treats you like that."