MY father’s name is William Paul Coates. I, like my six brothers and sisters, have always addressed him as Dad. Strangers often call him Mr. Coates. His friends call him Paul. If a stranger or one of my father’s friends called him Dad, my father might have a conversation. When I was a child, relatives of my paternal grandmother would call my father Billy. Were I to ever call my father Billy, we would probably have a different conversation.

I have never called my father Billy. I understand, like most people, that words take on meaning within a context. It might be true that you refer to your spouse as Baby. But were I to take this as license to do the same, you would most likely protest. Right names depend on right relationships, a fact so basic to human speech that without it, human language might well collapse. But as with so much of what we take as human, we seem to be in need of an African-American exception.

Three weeks ago the Miami Dolphins guard Richie Incognito, who is white, was reported to have addressed his fellow Dolphin as a “half-nigger.” About a week later, after being ejected from a game, the Los Angeles Clippers forward Matt Barnes, who is black, tweeted that he was “done standing up for these niggas” after being ejected for defending his teammate. This came after the Philadelphia Eagles wide receiver Riley Cooper, who is white, angrily called a black security guard a “nigger” in July.

What followed was a fairly regular ritual debate over who gets to say “nigger” and who does not. On his popular show “Pardon the Interruption,” Tony Kornheiser called on the commissioners of the National Football League, the National...
Basketball Association and Major League Baseball to ban their players from publicly using the word. The ESPN host Skip Bayless went further, calling “nigger” “the most despicable word in the English language — verbal evil” and wishing that it could “die the death it deserves.”

Mr. Bayless and Mr. Kornheiser are white, but many African-Americans have reached the same conclusion. On Thursday, the Fritz Pollard Alliance Foundation, a group promoting diversity in coaching and in the front offices of the N.F.L., called on players to stop using “the worst and most derogatory word ever spoken in our country” in the locker rooms. In 2007 the N.A.A.C.P. organized a “funeral” in Detroit for the word “nigger.” “Good riddance. Die, n-word,” said Kwame Kilpatrick, then the mayor. “We don’t want to see you around here no more.”

But “nigger” endures — in our most popular music, in our most provocative films and on the lips of more black people (like me) than would like to admit it. Black critics, not unjustly, note the specific trauma that accompanies the word. For some the mere mention of “nigger” conjures up memories of lynchings and bombings. But there’s more here — a deep fear of what our use of the word “nigger” communicates to white people. “If you call yourself the n-word,” said the Rev. Al Sharpton, “you can’t get mad when someone treats you like that.”

This is the politics of respectability — an attempt to raise black people to a superhuman standard. In this case it means exempting black people from a basic rule of communication — that words take on meaning from context and relationship. But as in all cases of respectability politics, what we are really saying to black people is, “Be less human.” This is not a fight over civil rights; it’s an attempt to raise a double standard. It is no different from charging “ladies” with being ornamental and prim while allowing for the great wisdom of boys being boys. To prevent enabling oppression, we demand that black people be twice as good. To prevent verifying stereotypes, we pledge to never eat a slice a watermelon in front of white people.

But white racism needs no verification from black people. And a scientific poll of right-thinking humans will always conclude that watermelon is awesome. That is because its taste and texture appeal to certain attributes that humans tend to find pleasurable. Humans also tend to find community to be pleasurable, and within the
boundaries of community relationships, words — often ironic and self-deprecating — are always spoken that take on other meanings when uttered by others.

A few summers ago one of my best friends invited me up to what he affectionately called his “white-trash cabin” in the Adirondacks. This was not how I described the outing to my family. Two of my Jewish acquaintances once joked that I’d “make a good Jew.” My retort was not, “Yeah, I certainly am good with money.” Gay men sometimes laughingly refer to one another as “faggots.” My wife and her friends sometimes, when having a good time, will refer to one another with the word “bitch.” I am certain that should I decide to join in, I would invite the same hard conversation that would greet me, should I ever call my father Billy.

A separate and unequal standard for black people is always wrong. And the desire to ban the word “nigger” is not anti-racism, it is finishing school. When Matt Barnes used the word “niggas” he was being inappropriate. When Richie Incognito and Riley Cooper used “nigger,” they were being violent and offensive. That we have trouble distinguishing the two evidences our discomfort with the great chasm between black and white America. If you could choose one word to represent the centuries of bondage, the decades of terrorism, the long days of mass rape, the totality of white violence that birthed the black race in America, it would be “nigger.”

But though we were born in violence, we did not die there. That such a seemingly hateful word should return as a marker of nationhood and community confounds our very notions of power. “Nigger” is different because it is attached to one of the most vibrant cultures in the Western world. And yet the culture is inextricably linked to the violence that birthed us. “Nigger” is the border, the signpost that reminds us that the old crimes don’t disappear. It tells white people that, for all their guns and all their gold, there will always be places they can never go.

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