



## Our conversation about a word that starts with ‘N’

[Steven Gardner](#)

If I call my wife “Babe” I get no criticism.

If my wife’s former boyfriend, (Let’s name one: Monty) calls her “Babe,” well I kind of have a problem with it.

Our stories last week about the Poulsbo Elementary School principal placed on paid leave for using the “N” word, version one and version two, sparked quite the outcry about our PC culture, ways of educating, equivalent words and whether it’s fair that black people can use that word and no one else can.

There are a handful of things about this particular incident that are worth pulling out in ways that are easier here than they are in a news story. And to be clear, I won’t use the word in this piece or any of the stories. I see the point that when I write “the N-word” I’m making you think it. I get that. Louis C.K. does a comedy bit about that and the reason comedy is often so effective is because of how much truth there is to it. But, at the risk of taking a comedian literally, there are parts of his argument I do not agree with. And I feel better not saying it, just letting you think it. Or, if you don’t know what it is, causing you to go ask someone. I’m OK with that.

So, back to the point.

1. No one has said anything negative to me about Claudia Alves, the principal who is on paid leave. No one, that I know of, ever asked for her to be disciplined. I can even see where what has happened is technically not a disciplinary action, although I’m sure it feels like it. Parents

have understandably come to her defense, and the parents at the center of this issue said they never asked for any disciplinary action to be taken.

2. The issue for the district, the way I understand it, was in the word's repeated use. In fact, a *North Kitsap Herald* editorial makes that case clear as well:

“The school district’s director of elementary education said it was not necessary for Alves to use the N-word in explaining that difference. And it wasn’t necessary for her to use the actual word again, and again in discussing the issue with the student’s parents.”

What Patty Page, North Kitsap School District superintendent, confirmed to me, as well, is that Alves used the word even after the district talked to her about it. The district did not place Alves on leave after her first use of the word. The way Shawna Smith tells it, Alves used the word four times, at least once after she had been advised not to. After the fourth instance, Smith called district officials again. She did not ask for disciplinary action. Smith told district officials, “She’s not getting it,” Smith said.

3. Some were confused by what word caused the problem. It was not “negro,” though that word was troubling to kids in the class asked to use it several times in the play *Martin Luther King, Jr. 10-minute mini: Overcoming Segregation*. In the play the kids were asked to sing lines pulled verbatim from actual Jim Crow laws. Here’s a snippet of the script:

NARRATOR #7: On living and dying:

CHORUS A: All marriages between a white person and a negro are forever prohibited.

CHORUS B: It is unlawful for anyone to rent an apartment to a negro person when the building has white people living there.

CHORUS A: Every hospital will have separate entrances for white and colored patients and visitors.

CHORUS B: At a cemetery, no colored persons may be buried in ground set apart for white persons.

Neither “negro” or the other “N-word” are considered acceptable anymore, but one was never neutral. The Leonard Pitts Jr. column referenced in the Herald editorial addresses the N-word.

*“The N-word is unique. It was present at the act of mass kidnap that created “black America,” it drove the ship to get here, signed the contracts at flesh auctions on Southern ports as mother was torn from child, love from love and self from self. It had a front row center seat for*

*the acts of blood, rape, castration, exclusion and psychological destruction by which the created people was kept down and in its place. The whole weight of our history dictates that word cannot be used except as an expression of contempt for African Americans.”*

“Negro” was for many little more than a description of race, but in the late 1960s began, and “began” is important, to fall out of fashion. [Slate’s Explainer column](#) offers this history:

“The turning point came when Stokely Carmichael coined the phrase black power at a 1966 rally in Mississippi. Until then, Negro was how most black Americans described themselves. But in Carmichael’s speeches and in his landmark 1967 book, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, he persuasively argued that the term implied black inferiority. Among black activists, Negro soon became shorthand for a member of the establishment. Prominent black publications like *Ebony* switched from Negro to black at the end of the decade, and the masses soon followed. According to a 1968 *Newsweek* poll, more than two-thirds of black Americans still preferred Negro, but black had become the majority preference by 1974. Both the *Associated Press* and the *New York Times* abandoned Negro in the 1970s, and by the mid-1980s, even the most hidebound institutions, like the U.S. Supreme Court, had largely stopped using Negro.”

In the North Kitsap incident it was the lesser word that launched the use of the worse one, but it was the repeated use of the worse one that led to the paid leave.

4. It might seem a small point to many, but Alves was not “suspended.” She was placed on paid leave.

5. Answering why it’s OK for blacks to say the word and not other races skips over one point and deserves expansion on another. The first point is that many blacks argue against its use. Pitts did in his piece. “*How can we require others to respect us when this word suggests we don’t respect ourselves?*” he wrote.

Neal Lester, an English professor at Arizona State University, taught a course devoted to the N-word, and said this in a Southern Poverty Law Center [Teaching Tolerance interview](#):

*“The poison is still there. The word is inextricably linked with violence and brutality on black psyches and derogatory aspersions cast on black bodies. No degree of appropriating can rid it of that bloodsoaked history.”*

In addressing why there are different rules for non-blacks, I go to the first two sentences of this blog post. I have permission to say things to my wife that other people don't. I mean, they *can* say it, but they shouldn't expect there to be no consequences. If my wife and her sisters each called each other the B-word (not "Babe"), that wouldn't give me permission to say that to my wife. I might not want my wife and her sisters to say that to each other, but I would also not argue that I should have the right, too. Nor would it mean the same thing. Her relationship with her sisters is different than the one she has with me.

The N-word, when said from a white person to a black person, carries a history with it that is different from the history when one black person says it to another. Perhaps you agree with Pitts that it still carries an oppressive energy no matter who says it, but you can't deny that it's different depending on who's saying it.

And I like this answer, which is technically a question: Why do you want the right to say it anyway? Just don't.

The video below comes from CNN and I think offers a pretty good treatment of the word, as good as you can get in 10 minutes. It addresses something we didn't, the fact that there is no word you can use for white people that has anywhere near the meaning the N-word does. A word of warning: The N-word, the real one, is used several times.

Following the first story I got a call from a woman who said she was 92. She had no idea "negro" was no longer a word we use. She also said "I never say (the N-word)," only she used the real word. Later on in our conversation she said it again. Maybe that's what we should be talking about, the act of saying what we "never" say.

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[Link to original piece.](#)