

Name \_\_\_\_\_

**N-word has no place in society**  
By Leonard Pitts, Jr. (lpitts@miamiherald.com)  
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Dear Chris Rock:

I apologize in advance for the language that will shortly follow. And yes, there is a certain irony there, given that you are one of the most profane men on the planet.

Also one of the funniest. That's why I eagerly anticipated your new HBO special, *Kill The Messenger*, which premiered a few days ago, even though I knew there would inevitably come a moment that made me embarrassed for you.

And sure enough, it came. During your routine, you noted how, last year, the NAACP held a symbolic "burial" of the N-word. "Well," you said, through that evil Cheshire cat grin of yours, "tonight is Easter." There followed a long and sometimes labored deconstruction of when, according to you, the word is permissible, all in illustration of your thesis that it is "context" that determines whether or not a word is offensive.

I was reminded of a quote that appears in the afterward of *The Slaves' War* by Andrew Ward, about the Civil War as seen through the eyes of black women and men. The speaker is an old woman, an escaped slave who had been reprimanded by a missionary for calling her fellow slaves "niggers."

She replied, "We are niggers. We always was niggers and we always shall be. Nigger here, and nigger there. Nigger do this and nigger do that. We've got no souls. We's animals. We's black and so is the Evil One."

The Bible doesn't say the devil is black, protested the missionary.

"Well," the old woman said, "white folks say so and we's bound to believe them, 'cause we's nothing but animals and niggers. Yes, we's niggers! Niggers! Niggers!"

Chris, this column runs in upwards of 200 papers, and I won't be surprised if some editors regard the above as too raw for print, if they seek to soften it by replacing the offending letters with dashes. But if I had my druthers, it would run dash free in large red type and be required reading for every black person in America. You will seldom read more vivid evidence of the psychological maiming to which white people subjected black ones in this country and of the profound self-loathing that infected us as a result.

*Dehumanizing language*

You find that loathing in the preference some of us still profess for light skin and lank -- or so-called "good" -- hair, in the belief some of us still hold that to be intellectually excellent and speak standard English is to "act white," in the conviction some of us still harbor that only a white professional truly knows what he or she is doing. And you see it, too, in the addiction some of us still suffer to the soul-killing language of our oppressors.



White people -- the majority of them at least -- understand how grotesque and dehumanizing that language is. Meanwhile, black folks run around making lame excuses and lamer justifications. I mean really, Chris, "context"? Negro, please.

I was, as I'm sure you were, a big fan of Richard Pryor. But I never admired him more than when he renounced his use of that word. Pryor understood, I think, that his art was a social construct and as such, carried social responsibilities. He acknowledged, in other words, a need to be intentional in, and accountable for, the things he said.

Compare that to Kanye West, who told Time magazine three years ago that he doesn't like the N-word and has tried substitutes but can't find anything with the same "impact." Or, compare it to you, smart, canny observer of human foibles; universally recognized as one of the most talented men in show business, yet still addicted to the same self-delimiting language a slave woman once used.

I'm not mad at her. She was just days removed from a system that had spent a lifetime teaching her, in every interaction of every day of every year, that she was a soulless thing little different from hogs and dogs. But Chris, that was 150 years ago.

What's your excuse?

### Post-Reading Questions

1. Why is Leonard Pitts', Jr. angry with Chris Rock's use of the n-word? What "excuse" does Chris Rock give for using the n-word? Is his disagreement with Chris Rock's use of the word generational? In other words, is the divide in the African American community one of the younger generation not understanding the older generation and vice versa? Or is the divide something that goes deeper beyond age?
2. Can the n-word be redefined? Can African Americans like Chris Rock *successfully* redefine the n-word to mean something different even cool or will it always be too controversial? Why or why not?
3. To what extent would Pitts, Jr. support or reject the censorship of the n-word in *Huck Finn*? Explain your answer with support from the text.