

## THE OTHER N WORD

by *Racialicious* Special Correspondent [Latoya Peterson](#)



The most provocative ideas seem to fly out of nowhere.

I was listening the community discussion of Jabari Asim's new book [The N-Word: Who Should Say It, Who Shouldn't, and Why](#) and I was enjoying the depth of conversation explored by the attendees. One woman, when recounting her experiences made an interesting and illuminating comment.

As a Caucasian woman raising a biracial child who identifies as black, she explained having a lengthy discussion with her child about his casual use of the N-word with his multicultural group of friends. The woman's son informed her that the n-word was no longer a stigmatized term. What was worse, the son explained, was

the "other N-word."

Puzzled, I leaned forward in my seat. As I shivered in the aggressively air conditioned meeting room, I did a quick scan of my mental word bank to figure out another n-word. Nothing. The woman continued.

The other N-word was nerd.

Damn.

The discussion continued to swirl around me, but that phrase stuck with me for the rest of the evening.

The following day, I attended my younger sister's high school graduation. A graduate of [Charles Herbert Flowers High School](#) (focusing on the Science and Technology program) I am pleased to share that my younger sister graduated in the top 5% of her class.

However, she was outdone by both the class valedictorian and salutatorian, both of whom boasted advanced GPAs, (4.8 and 5.2, I believe), SAT scores, college level course work (one of them had completed Calculus 3), and numerous community service projects.

Both of these young men confidently approached the podium and spoke of opportunity, achievement, and success. As they spoke, I wondered if they had already felt the sting of the "other n-word."

Outwardly, they were both attractive, seemingly popular young men. What were their lives like? Did

they feel penalized for the intellect? Did they feel the burden, the unrelenting pressure placed upon those deemed young, gifted, and black?

After the tassels were turned, I fought through the throng of graduate families to find my younger sister. After giving her my congratulations, I asked her if her valedictorian and salutatorian were ostracized for being so smart.

“No...” she replied, as if thinking about that concept for the first time. “They are really normal.” Apparently the boys had a strong group of friends and both had been dating - a far cry from the nerdy, awkward intellectual stereotype. Apparently, they were living just a normal teenaged existence. Then again, my sister does attend a school with a magnet program.

I kept thinking about the ideas and views on intellectual achievement in the black community, particularly in light of Thomas Chatterton Williams’ article in the Washington Post on Monday. In his article [“Black Culture Beyond Hip-Hop.”](#) Williams writes:

As John H. McWhorter emphasizes in his book “Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America,” “forty years after the Civil Rights Act, African-American students on the average are the weakest in the United States, at all ages, in all subjects, and regardless of class level.” Reading and math proficiency test results consistently show this. Clearly, this *nostalgie de la boue*, this longing for the mud, exacts a hefty price.

A 2005 study by Roland G. Fryer of Harvard University crystallizes the point: While there is scarce dissimilarity in popularity levels among low-achieving students, black or white, Fryer finds that “when a student achieves a 2.5 GPA, clear differences start to emerge.” At 3.5 and above, black students “tend to have fewer and fewer friends,” even as their high-achieving white peers “are at the top of the popularity pyramid.” With such pressure to be real, to not “act white,” is it any wonder that the African American high school graduation rate has stagnated at 70 percent for the past three decades?

The concept of a pervasive culture of non-achievement is argued by many scholars in and outside the black community, including the above referenced John McWhorter. In his first offering, **Losing the Race**, McWhorter writes about being mercilessly teased at the hands of other African-Americans because he was more interested in language tapes than in socializing or sports.

I understand his perspective, but it is not an experience that I shared. Growing up inquisitive and intelligent did not brand me with a scarlet letter *n*. While I remember being teased about being bookish and nerdy, it was never a malicious kind of teasing. My friends and classmates would say things like “Toya reads the dictionary for fun,” but always in a more fraternal, playful kind of manner. Even those who teased me about “talking like a white girl” never made any derogatory comments about my intelligence. In fact, most of the comments about my mental capacity were made respectfully - being smart may not be for them, but they would never say anything to dissuade someone else from pursuing knowledge.

I called my friend Ken to get another perspective on the matter. Ken is smart - like speaks multiple languages, got sent to space camp in middle school smart. I figured he could help shed some light on the issue.

“Yeah...you know, it was kind of the same for me,” Ken confirmed. We discussed the attitudes of our friends and family when it came to intelligence, and how our minority backgrounds impact the pursuit of learning. For the most part, people seem to fall into two camps: the implied education camp (“you will go to school, you will achieve, you will go to college”) and the education-is-not-for-me-but-be-proud-you’re-smart contingent.

Either way, being intelligent was a quality we both possessed but do not remember being penalized for daring to think.

Still, popular intellectual black thought says that smart black children will be penalized for their smart little thoughts and fall into a cycle of underachievement.

I wonder to myself, is that assertion still correct? I do not doubt that bullying exists - but bullying solely for the crime of being intelligent? Is this a definitive snapshot of today’s youth culture?

Or is this thought process reflective of the older generation failing to think about intelligence and intellect in new ways? In an era where scholastic achievement is stagnating but entrepreneurial efforts are flourishing, are we simply looking at an outdated model of what it means to be smart?

Hopefully, the clothing company [Dangerous Negro](#) is on to something with one of their new tee-shirt slogans: Smart is the new gangsta.