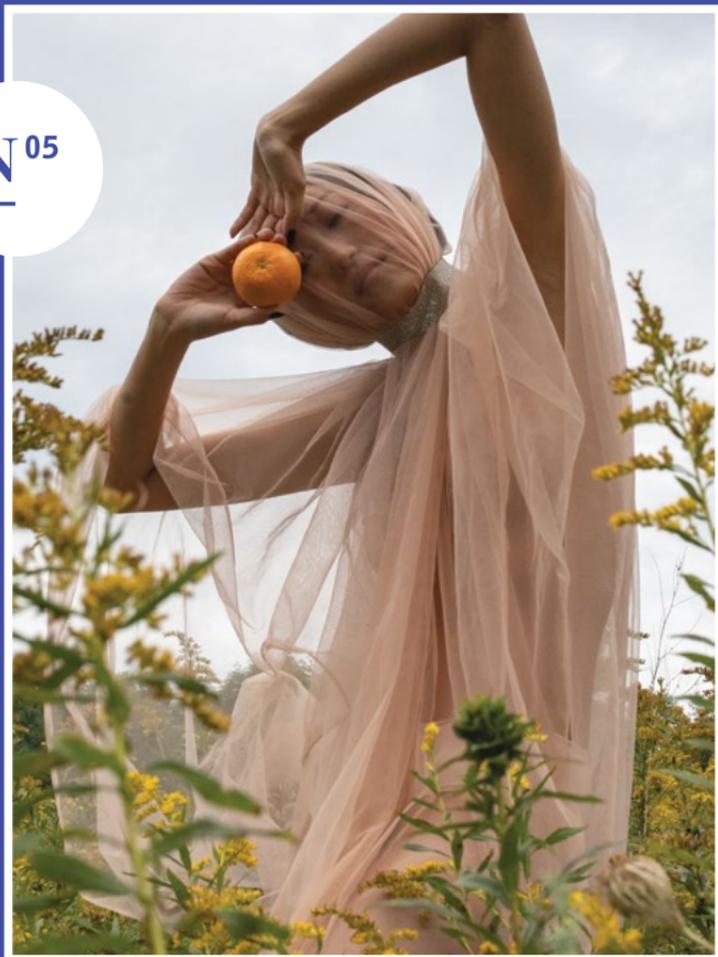


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The Power Issue



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The W*rd

I was **eight** years old the first time I heard that word. I remember being confused by the pain and anger that swelled within me, not fully understanding the word but gathering enough to know that it was a bad one. I called the other kid a name, nowhere near as inappropriate, but a name nonetheless.

Both the second and third time, I was an idealistic (read: naive) 20-year-old, still clinging to the high of my first solo trip abroad to transcend racial boundaries and “find myself.” I was shocked that people I let into my life (and in one case, my bed) would betray me so carelessly. Even now, I can remember the feelings of loneliness, sadness, and frustration reaching up like a hand and constricting my throat, choking me as we debated the use of the word.

The most recent instance, I was making my way back to my apartment after an excruciatingly hot afternoon at the beach when a stranger spat the word at me as I biked past him. I remember rolling my eyes and scoffing in revulsion as I sat up straighter on my seat and forced my tired, sun-soaked limbs to pedal harder. I can't recall much about that experience but I do remember feeling annoyed and, at my core, hurt.

How I've dealt with overt discrimination has always shifted depending on my age, the person with whom I was interacting with, and my general disposition that day. The only constant was the burning sensation of anger, pain, humiliation, and sadness.

Recently I've noticed people lamenting society's regression into sensitivity and "political correctness." They say things like, "this wouldn't have been offensive 20 years ago!" and "people nowadays are offended by everything." I'm certain that my parents and grandparents have been subjected to forms of discrimination similar to the verbal interactions I described. Would they have been any less offended by the experiences I described or was their pain simply overlooked?

When power and visibility are concentrated in one community, when their definition of "society" and "people" only includes those who look like them, and when their lack of empathy hinders them from defending the well-being of people who look different to them, the hegemonic lie of "general opinion" is strengthened. However, when those relegated to the margins push their way into public discourse, demanding their experiences and opinions be heard and held with the same legitimacy, it complicates our ideas of who belongs to the collective and which voices shape public opinion. Yes, people nowadays are offended by many things not because they weren't offended in the past but because we're finally forced to listen.

Power is diffused throughout discourse as it is in every aspect of society. When we look at our academic curriculums, our technology, the land we live on—it's all molded by power. Acceptable ways to speak and express opinions about race have been shaped by power, too. Discourse, theorized

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by Foucault, is more than a linguistic concept. It simultaneously defines and restricts what we consider to be "acceptable and intelligent" ways of "talking or conducting ourselves in relation to [a] topic or constructing knowledge about it."¹ Discourse is a system of representation and it's capable of shifting as contexts change and time passes.

There is one idea that self-proclaimed "counter-cultural rebels" who eschew political correctness in search of the capital-*T* Truth get right. All of us, armed with learned discourse and bolstered by an aptitude for tribalism and an innate fear of social isolation, force each other to follow a script. To conduct ourselves in certain ways—in public, that is. Increasingly, the people who were forced to remain silent and express themselves in "acceptable" ways are broadening the dialogue. The discomfort those "rebels" feel can be attributed to mass abandonment of the script with which they are most comfortable.

I often come across stories about viral social media controversies. When reading them, I usually see the claim that Twitter "clapped back," "exploded," or "wasn't having it today," as if the personification of a stream of code served as a more dynamic storytelling technique than the humaniza-

¹ Wetherell et al., *Discourse and Practice*, 73

tion of the people who breathe life into the platform by creating the content. Portraying public outcry as a “social media mob” trivializes human concerns and makes it easier to dismiss their pain. The abstraction of real people who take time out of their days to publicly share their thoughts as a nameless, faceless wall of criticism is an exertion of power itself.

Social change ebbs and flows—progresses, regresses, and progresses further—but social media has accelerated that process. For better or worse, platforms like Twitter have become public archives of some of our innermost reflections. Social media gives us some of the tools necessary to decentralize the publishing of content and participate more freely in shaping discourse. People have been given the power to share their feelings and opinions—to tell their own stories. Access to social media platforms allows us to resist and subvert the strategies of power² by refining the ways our communities define and situate themselves within society-at-large, often intersecting with and brushing up against other communities. And it’s all archived in real time to serve as a reminder of how quickly discourse changes.

The word people have used to strip me of humanity countless times was created to make black people feel as though we have no power, so the act of taking up space and reshaping dominant discourse is one of the many ways in which marginalized groups have wielded their power. In “The Means of Correct Training,” Foucault explained that power doesn’t just radiate from the top down, it permeates society and shapes truth. The act of contributing to conversations in a public sphere—taking up space and letting your truth be known—is to have a say in informing reality. It pushes back against dominant social groups’ monopoly on shaping history.

This past summer, my friends Marzia, Victoria, and I snagged tickets to see Jay-Z and Beyoncé’s concert in New York. Surrounded by a diverse crowd, we sang and danced along to our favourite songs and marvelled

at the wonderfully crafted cinematic scenes interlaced between performances. The word “nigga” is liberally sprinkled throughout songs like “Apeshit” and “Sorry,” barely meaning more than a synonym for “dude”—almost devoid of the historical context that birthed it. Honestly, I was too busy singing loudly, noises of the crowd masked by the silicone putty in my ears, to care—but I noticed Marzia bristle beside me as many in the crowd freely and happily sang along.



I had a stark moment of awareness during Jay-Z’s performance of “The Story of OJ.” The stadium went dark and a sample of “Four Women,” morphing Nina Simone’s deep voice with a tangy filter, rang out: “My skin is black, my skin is yellow.”

Jim Crow-era style cartoons, jarring yet satirical in nature, flashed across the screen as Jay-Z began.

*“Light nigga, dark nigga, faux nigga, real nigga
Rich nigga, poor nigga, house nigga, field nigga
Still nigga, still nigga”*

The discomfort in the air was palpable. “The Story of OJ” critiques the idea, prevalent within black communities, that it’s possible to transcend race by amassing wealth. It is a call to action to forgo materialistic displays of success in pursuit of building intergenerational wealth. The song attempts to trace the black experience from human property, conquered by our oppressors and divided into subclasses of field and house negroes, to the ultimate goal of financial freedom.

² John Gaventa, *Power after Lukes: a review of the literature*,

(Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2003)

I picked up my phone and showed Marzia a message: “lol ppl who were just screaming nigga are pretty quiet now.” I used humour to mask the fact that, regardless of context, hearing that word opens a floodgate of painful and uncomfortable memories so strong that I can feel it in the pit of my stomach. My only comfort was that this performance recognized the source of my pain.

That’s why I appreciate songs like “The Story of OJ,” “F.U.B.U.” by Solange, and, more recently, Noname’s “Blaxploitation.” They use the word “nigga” pointedly so that non-black people can’t sing along to those songs without being fully aware of the pain their actions perpetuate. It’s impossible to sing along and simultaneously deny the black experience. The lyrics of those songs acknowledge the context in which that word is used to this day and challenge the idea put forth from the dominant discourse that black people don’t have a right to say it if we don’t want others to repeat it.

We exist in a time where it’s become a norm to grapple with our personal understandings of social justice on a global stage. It has complicated the ways we interact with each other, and fundamentally changed the ways we construct knowledge. Just like our communities, multiple truths intersect with and brush up against each other. When I think about the complexities of the human experience, I often find myself returning to Paul Kalanithi’s memoir, “When Breath Becomes Air.” “Human knowledge is never contained in one person,” he wrote. “It grows from the relationships we create between each other and with the world, and it is never complete.”

I think conflicting versions of truth will always coexist, but as long as power is concentrated within a dominant group, allowing truth to skew in their favour, our understandings of history and contemporary society will lack nuance. Recognizing each community’s power to define itself and honouring those boundaries can help to not only push discourse to evolve but craft a more honest, well-rounded view of our collective story. ♦



Ephemera is a magazine
exploring permanence in
a world of rapid change.

This issue is about POWER:
how it can change hands, and
how it impacts various facets
of society in diverse ways.

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