

## The N-Word, a Double-Edged Sword

By Amy E. Wong



The battle for free speech is going down at West Hollywood's Laugh Factory.

As you most likely recall, on November 17<sup>th</sup>, comedian Michael Richards (aka Cosmo Kramer from the hit TV show *Seinfeld*) exploded in anger as a few African-American audience members heckled him. The camera caught Richards' racial tirade, which included comments like "Fifty years ago, we'd have you upside down with a f\*\*\*ing fork up your ass." He continued ranting, "You can talk, you can talk, you're brave now motherf\*\*\*er. Throw his ass out. He's a nigger! He's a nigger! He's a nigger! A nigger, look, there's a nigger!"

Throwing out the N-word one last time, he declared, "They're going to arrest me for calling a black man a nigger."

Well, we can't quite arrest him. However, the Laugh Factory can inflict punishment. After Richards' infamous tirade, the comedy club has banned the use of the N-word and is fining comedians 20 bucks for each offense. That's cool. After all, the Laugh Factory is a private establishment. It makes its own rules, and if you don't abide, you become an outcast.

The entertainment website TMZ.com announced on Dec. 7 that Damon Wayans used the N-word 15 times during his 20-minute skit at the Laugh Factory on Sunday. As a result, Wayans was fined \$320 and subjected to a three-month ban from the comedy club.

I think there's a clear difference between Michael Richards' and Damon Wayans' uses of the N-word. Richards claimed that his "flip out" was caused by a moment of "pure rage." Wayans, on the other hand, is a "brotha from da 'hood." (As down as I am, I wonder if I can get away with saying that as a Chinese girl...it ain't cool, huh?) According to a Wikipedia article, "Actor Damon Wayans of the Wayans Brothers tried in 2005 to trademark the word 'Nigga' for use on clothing, books, and other merchandise. His application was rejected by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, citing a law that prohibits marks that are 'immoral or scandalous.'"

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Now read this blurb from [Wikipedia.org](http://Wikipedia.org):

“Although sometimes used by [black people](#) themselves (especially those who feel an affinity for [hip hop culture](#)) as a somewhat self-deprecating term that is suggestive of familiarity and endearment, the [N-word] is most often regarded as offensive.”

For some people (like Lady O’s best friend, [Gayle King](#)), the N-word is a term of endearment, and using it is sort of like saying, “Hey, what up, bro?” For others (like [N.W.A](#)—Niggaz With Attitude, dubbed “The World’s Most Dangerous Rap Group”), the N-word contributes to a sense of community and empowerment. Using the N-word gives some black people a sense of strength. (Just listen to 2Pac’s [“Troublesome ‘96”](#)). For them, it’s a testimony that they’ve been through tough times, a reminder that they can endure.

Are we so caught up in being politically correct that we’re going to turn our backs on history? The answer, Laugh Factory, should *not* be to instill fear and define repercussions. The answer, Oprah, is *not* publicly berating rappers like Ludacris and 50 Cent for using the N-word in their songs. (I mean, as a person who epitomizes black empowerment, I thought she’d be more open-minded.) The answer is to encourage open discourse about why “nigger” is so horrible. How are we supposed to move beyond the word “nigger” without confronting and dealing with it?

What’s so frustrating for me is that I feel that now is the time! We should not submissively shut up. We should not put limitations on our nation’s First Amendment. If it’s still not even safe for black comedians like Damon Wayans, Chris Rock, and Aaron McGruder to make political statements on their own behalf, when will it ever be safe?