Growing up in the 1960s in the affluent, almost all-white Don Mills, Ont., I was told by my black father that education and professional achievement were the only viable options for black people in North America. He laid down three rules as if they had been received from the mouth of God: 1) I was to study like the dickens; 2) anything less than complete success in school or at work was to be regarded as failure; 3) if anybody called me “nigger,” I was to beat the hell out of him.

This is the legacy of being black in Canada. You overcompensate for the fluke of your ancestry, and stand on guard against those who would knock you down. Over 400 years of black history here, we have had to overcome numerous challenges: the chains of slave vessels, the wrath of slave owners, the rules of segregation, the killing ways of police bullets, our own murderous infighting, and all the modern vicissitudes of polite Canadian oppression.

Blacks in Canada, like our metaphorical brothers and sisters all over the world, have a vivid collective memory. We know what our ancestors have been through, and we know what our children still face. Most of us cringe when we hear the word “nigger.” No other word in the English language distills hatred so effectively, and evokes such a long and bloody history.

These days, more people than ever are talking about the word “nigger,” as a result of the publication this year of the book Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word, by Randall Kennedy, a black American law professor at Harvard University. It’s a fascinating read, but it raises a troublesome argument that I ultimately reject: Kennedy praises “African American innovators” (by which he means comedians and hip hop stylists) for “taming, civilizing, and transmuting ‘the filthiest, dirtiest, nastiest word in the English language.’”

Some misguided white people have bought into this same way of thinking. We have hit the pinnacle of absurdity when white teenagers sling their arms around black friends and ask, “Whassup my nigger?” And some white people seem to want a piece of that word, and feel the need to apply it to their own difficult experiences. The Irish have been referred to as “the
niggers of Europe.” In the 1970s, Québécois writer Pierre Vallieres titled one of his books *White Niggers of America*. And just the other night, when I visited a drop-in centre catering mostly to black junior high and high school students in Toronto’s Kensington Market area, a white teenager decked out in baggy pants and parroting what he imagined to be black-speak complained that some kids accused him of being a “wigger”—an insulting term for whites who are trying to act black. Whatever that means.

As Randall Kennedy rightly asserts, the word abounds in contemporary black urban culture. True, when it crops up in hip hop lyrics, it’s not intended to carry the hate of the racist. It signals an in-group, brotherly, friendly trash talk. This is well known in American culture but it has penetrated black Canadian culture, too. Chocclair, a leading black Canadian hip hop artist, uses the word “nigga”—a derivation of “nigger”—frequently in his lyrics.

Some people might say that the N-word is making a comeback. That the old-style, racist use of the word has faded into history and that it’s now kosher to use the word in ordinary conversation. This argument fails on two counts. First, racists and racism haven’t disappeared from the Canadian landscape. The comeback argument also fails because it suggests that reappropriating the word reflects a new linguistic trend. This is naive. As a way of playing with the English language’s most hateful word, black people—mostly young black males—have called themselves “nigger” for generations. The difference now is that these same young blacks have broadcast the word, via music and TV, to the whole world. In the middle-class black cultures I’ve encountered in Canada and the United States, such a young man usually gets slapped or tongue-lashed by his mother, at just about that point, and he learns that the only time it’s safe to use that word is when he’s chilling on the street with his buddies. Black people use the word “nigger” precisely because it hurts so much that we need to dance with our own pain, in the same way that blues music dives straight into bad luck and heartbreak. This is very much part of the black North American experience: we don’t run from our pain, we roll it into our art.

But does that take the sting out of the word? No. And what’s the proof of that? We don’t use the word around our mothers, our teachers, the people we fall in love with, or our children. “Nigger” is a word that young black men use on each other. But the word still pains most black Canadians. Let me share an image of just how much the word hurts. A friend of mine—a black woman, community activist and graduate student—was dying to read Kennedy’s book. She bought it last week, but couldn’t bring
herself to start devouring it on the subway to work until she had ripped off the cover: she wouldn’t allow herself to be seen on the subway with the word “nigger” splashed on the cover of a book, so close to her face.

NOTES AND DEFINITIONS

like the dickens: work very hard (informal expression; “dickens” is a euphemism for the devil). (para. 1)

vicissitudes: change of circumstances, usually unpleasant. (para. 2)

kosher: acceptable, correct (informal). The word originally described foods that follow Jewish dietary law. (para. 7)

STRUCTURE AND TECHNIQUE

Hill begins his essay with some personal background to establish his viewpoint. He then expands to the black experience in Canada and then to America. He narrows back to give an example of a personal friend.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. Whose point of view do you agree with? Is the word nigger becoming more acceptable?
2. Discuss Hill’s statement: “No other word in the English language distills hatred so effectively, and evokes such a long and bloody history” (para. 3).
3. When can artists such as musicians and writers get away with using offensive language? Can people use racial epithets and ethnic slurs to refer to themselves? Is it acceptable for a comedian to make jokes denigrating his or her own ethnic group? Consider the comedy of Russell Peters and Margaret Cho, for instance.
4. The way we refer to groups of people has always been controversial. Consider terms such as “black” and “Afro-American”; “Indian” and “First Nations”; “Eskimo” and “Inuit.” Discuss the history and connotation of such designations.
5. Other offensive terms, such as “bitch” and “queer,” have undergone similar changes of meaning and connotation. Do such words ever become acceptable? Can they be used in specific contexts in which they are not epithets? Discuss.