'The Power of the N-Word in Tarantino's Films: Black Intolerance and/or White Audacity?'

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For Duncan, for burning the midnight oil together …

> *'You guys act like a bunch of fuckin'* **niggers**.
> *You ever worked with a bunch of* **niggers**?
> *They're just like you two, always fightin',*
> *always sayin' they're gonna kill one another'.*
> (Quentin Tarantino. *Reservoir Dogs*)

ABSTRACT:

Quentin Tarantino is a controversial figure, whose trademark use of offensive language and explicit violence has, in particular, been subject to censure. A source of consternation for his detractors is the constant use of the N-word. In this article, I offer a detailed examination of the use of the N-word by white people in a broad range of discursive contexts. I begin with a quantitative analysis in the eight films directed by Tarantino –Reservoir Dogs (1992), Pulp Fiction (1994), Jackie Brown (1997), Four Rooms (1995), Kill Bill (vol. I & II) (2003 & 2004), Death Proof (2007), Inglorious

Basterds (2009), and Django Unchained (2013) – followed by choice phrases extracted
from those films in which the presence of the N-word is palpable.
KEYWORDS: *The N-Word, American cinema, Quentin Tarantino, racism, in-*
sults

«El poder de la palabra nigger en las películas de Tarantino: ¿intolerancia negra y/u osadía blanca?»

RESUMEN:

Quentin Tarantino es una figura controvertida cuyo uso característico del lenguaje
ofensivo y la violencia explícita han sido objeto de censura. El uso constante de la
palabra nigger ha sido una fuente particular de consternación para sus detractores.
En este artículo, se ofrece un examen detallado del uso de la palabra nigger por perso-
nas blancas en una amplia gama de contextos discursivos. Comenzaré con un análisis
cuantitativo del uso de la palabra en cuestión en las ocho películas dirigidas por Taran-
tino - Reservoir Dogs (1992), Pulp Fiction (1994), Jackie Brown (1997), Four Rooms
(1995), Kill Bill Vol. I y II) (2003 y 2004), Death Proof (2007), Inglorious Basterds
(2009) y Django (2013) - seguido de algunas frases seleccionadas extraídas de aquellas
películas en las que la presencia de la palabra nigger es palpable.
PALABRAS CLAVE: *Nigger, cine americano, Quentin Tarantino, racismo, in-*
sultos

1. Introduction

Many terms have been employed to hurt black people, but among all, the word *nigger* or its colloquial spelling *nigga* is arguably the most problematic of all; a term that at present 'even in its abbreviated form, possesses a shock value that has the ability to insult most anyone' (Phillips, 2011: 1). Nigger/nigga was a term whose objective was to depersonalize the targeted listener; however, the African American community in an attempt to fight this back, took old terms that used to be contemptuous –including the N-word– and made them acquire a positive meaning (Green, 1996: 33). Consequently, a re-appropriation of the word occurred and it is now often used –among the African American community– as a term of endearment contrary to the pejorative usage

it had in the past. Nevertheless, since it is a colloquial word employed among black people, some people believe that its usage is unacceptable among nonblack individuals, and a white person should not be entitled to say it –not even as a term of endearment– for it is considered a violation of certain taboos (Allan and Burridge, 2006: 84). This is the context in which we need to understand and evaluate the criticisms levelled against Quentin Tarantino as a white filmmaker who employs the word to whom, arguably, black citizens have the exclusive license. According to Judith Butler, 'the insult […] assumes its specific proportion in time […] not all name-calling is injurious. Being called a name is also one of the conditions by which a subject is constituted in language' (1997: 3). In line with this conception, although some are offended by the high volume of racist slurs in Tarantino's films, the director purports to have no desire to devalue the ostensible victims of such words.

In order to advance this line of argument, I will draw on Butler's claim to critically assess the specific use of the word nigger in the films of Quentin Tarantino framed against the more general controversy over the employment of the N-word by white people. My contention is that Tarantino's intention is to replicate authenticity and not to stigmatize African American citizens, I am basing my arguments on Butler's (1997: 3) concept that 'linguistic injury appears to be the effect not only of the words by which one is addressed but the mode of address itself, a mode – a disposition or conventional bearing – that interpellates and constitutes a subject'. I shall first present a broader picture of the etymology of various utterances – nigger, black and negro – to then offer a qualitative classification, supported by figures, of the occurrences of the N-word in the eight films directed by Tarantino,[1] before moving on to the analysis of selected phrases extracted from those films in which the existence of the N-word is palpable. Finally, I shall present a section in which verbal violence on

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1 *Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction, Jackie Brown, Four Rooms, Kill Bill* (vol. I & II), *Death Proof, Inglorious Basterds* and *Django Unchained*.

screen and the comparison between two cinema directors –Spike Lee and Quentin Tarantino– who employ the word in their films will be discussed.

2. Is Black the opposite of White? Etymology of *Nigger, Black & Negro*

Blackness is not just about skin colour. The concept of 'blackness' has been defined by Hall (1991: 53) as 'not a question of pigmentation. […] their histories are in the past, inscribed in their skins. But it is not because of their skins that they are Black in their head (Hall, 1991: 53). […] Black was created as a political category in a certain historical moment. It was elaborated as a consequence of certain symbolic and ideological struggles' (Hall, 1991: 54). By contrast, if we look into the concept of 'whiteness', we come to understand not only that there is no homogeneity in being 'white', as argued by Dyer (1997), but also that it is not the opposite of black. Italians, Irish, Jewish or Polish –or non-Black groups– or even those groups labelled as white trash who are considered minorities, are also subjected to prejudice, and thus rejected as equals by the hegemonic white society. Tarantino himself is of Italian descent and Italians can be considered the second most discriminated group after African Americans. Italians did not belong to the WASP[2] society around fifty years ago, but to the white minority that have only become 'white' in recent past years and who were discriminated against in the same way African American were. In other words, whiteness and blackness are not ontological categories; it is against this backdrop of relativity as opposed to fixity that we must proceed.

One of the definitions given of the word *nigger* is that of a sheer term of endearment among African American people, as described by Folb:

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2 White, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant.

form of address and identification among blacks (can connote affection, playful derision, genuine anger, or mere identification of another black person; often used emphatically in conversation) (Folb 1980: 248 cit. Allan and Burridge, 2006: 84).

Williams and Delphine Abraham were the first to organize a boycott over the meaning of the word *nigger* in the *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*. The primary classification, based on Merriam's policy of listing the oldest one first, reads: '1. A black person, usu. taken to be offensive.' Critics of the normative description argued that a better phrasing would be 'derogatory term used to describe a black person' since the original definition focused on reference (a black person) rather than connotation (a derogative term). *Merriam-Webster* reviewed its definitions for a wide variety of terms and the 1999 edition of the *Collegiate Dictionary* placed a usage warning at the start of the entry so that it read: '1.usually offensive; see usage paragraph below: a black person.'

Thus the word *black* would still be the orthophemistic or politically correct word and *nigger*, when not used as a term of endearment among black people, would be totally dysphemistic (Allan and Burridge, 1991/2006). Let us see the definition of the word black in the OED[3]. Black is:

foul, iniquitous, atrocious, horribly wicked (1581); having dark or deadly purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving death, deadly; baneful, disastrous, sinister (1583); clouded with sorrow or melancholy; indicating disgrace, censure, liability to punishment (1612); dismal, gloomy, sad (1659); of the countenance … clouded with anger, frowning: threatening, boding ill; the opposite of bright and hopeful (1709); to look black: to frown, to look angrily (at or upon a person) (1814).

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3 *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Green (1996) stablished that the use of the term *black* dates back from 1625 and was used for the first time by clergyman Samuel Purchas (1575?-1625) in his study on expeditions named *Pilgrimes*. He then wrote: 'The mouth of the Riuer (Gambra), where dwell the Blackes, called Mandingos'. Later, in 1815, a seemingly endless number of insults referred to the word *black* appeared: *blacky, black nigger, black dust, blackhead, blackmuffin, black Indian, black-tulip, black-cattle, black-teapot, black-jack* (referring to genitalia). For woman: *black cunt, black-doll, black-mama, black diamond*, and so on (Green 1996: 27-30). It was not until the second half of the twentieth century when the term was reclaimed through the 'Black Power' movement and the vast number of slogans or catchphrases that started to become famous at the time: 'Black is Beautiful', 'Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud' (Green, 1996: 27).

Regarding other words used as insults for black people that also appear in Tarantino's films, one can find the term *negro*. Green situates the origin of this utterance in 1555 and states that it was coined to refer to Ethiopians (Green, 1996: 21-22). It derives from the French *nègre* and the Spanish *negro* and it used to be spelt *neger* which has been maintained in countries such as the Netherlands, Germany or the Scandinavian countries. The person who seemed to have used it for the first time was the Scottish poet Robert Burns, 1785 (Green, 1996: 21-22). In 1906, lexicographer William Craigie described the word *negro* as 'an individual (esp. a male) belonging to the African race of mankind, which is distinguished by a black skin, black woolly hair, flat nose and thick protruding lips' (Green, 1996: 21). Green, then, sets its origins in the Spanish and Portuguese *negro* which descends, at the same time, from the Latin *nigrum*.

This word remained respectable for white people for nearly half a millennium and only began to lose that image when the vicissitudes of black self-determination and the struggle for civil rights began putting black self-description, at least in America, through the series of changes of nomenclature that

has currently paused at African American and person of colour (Green, 1996: 21).

3. Analysing the N-Word in Tarantino's Work

Quentin Jerome Tarantino became well-known for his first directed work *Reservoir Dogs*, which had its premiere in 1992; just two years after this debut success, he was awarded the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival with one of his best-known films: *Pulp Fiction*. After a three-year absence, he directed *Jackie Brown*, based on the novel by Elmore Leonard (*Rum Punch,*1992) in which Pam Grier had the leading role. In 1995, Tarantino wrote and directed one of the four stories of *Four Rooms* together with Allison Anders, Alexandre Rockwell and Robert Rodríguez. During 2003 and 2004, he released the two parts of *Kill Bill* respectively; and in 2007, he worked with Robert Rodríguez in a project called *Grindhouse*. This was the name given to two separate films, *Death Proof*, by Tarantino and *Planet Terror* by Rodríguez. Tarantino presented his seventh film, *Inglorious Basterds*, at the Cannes Film Festival (2009) originally conceived a remake of a 1977 film by Enzo Castellari called *The Inglorious Bastards*. Then, in 2013 his second-to last project was released, *Django Unchained*, a slave exploitation film that has led him to win two Oscars including 'best script', and two Golden Globe Awards so far.

The N-word appears repeatedly in the eight films directed by Tarantino aforementioned; the 145 documented occurrences of the N-word in his oeuvre (see Soler, 2015) require both explanation and contextualisation. A classification could be established of the occurrence of *nigger* also spelled *nigga* and the utterance *negro*. I have found that in the eight films analysed in this article, the word *nigger/nigga* has appeared 94% of the cases whilst *negro* comes up in 6% of the situations, and this is the reason why I decided to consider exploring the utterance *nigger/nigga* in depth in this article. As can be observed from the chart below, the number of occurrences of the N-word is as follows: 6 times in *Reservoir Dogs* (*RD*); 13 racist insults employed in *Pulp*

Fiction (*PF*) in which *nigger* appears 12 times and *negro*, 1 time. The word *nigger/nigga* appears 9 times in *Jackie Brown* (*JB*); and the term *negro* appears 7 times in *Inglorious Basterds* (*IB*). Finally, and the most controversial of all, the word *nigger/nigga* appears 110 times in *Django Unchained* (*DU*). In turn, there is no record of racist-related insults in *Four Rooms*, *Kill Bill* and *Death Proof*. See the graph below for a broader summary of the corpus:
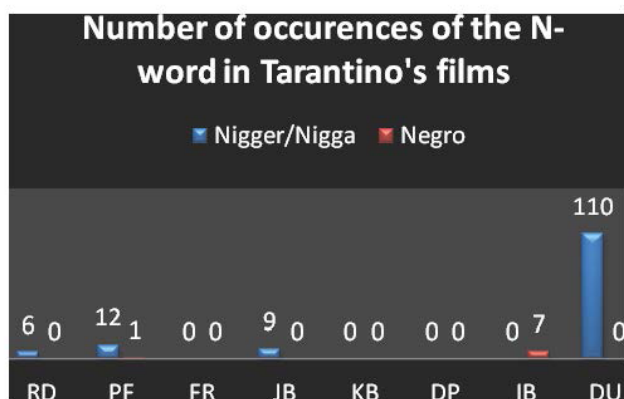

Figure 1 'Number of occurrences of the N-word in Tarantino's films'

Below, we can see a table with the percentages in which the N-word has been pronounced in eight of Tarantino's films:

Films	RD	PF	FR	JB	KB	DP	IB	DU	TOTAL	%
Nigger/Nigga	6	12	0	9	0	0	0	110	137	94.48
Negro	0	1	0	0	0	0	7	0	8	5.52
Total	6	13	0	9	0	0	7	110	145	100.00
%	4.14	8.97	0.00	6.21	0.00	0.00	4.83	75.86	100.00	

Table 1'Occurrences of the *N-Word* in Tarantino's films'

A feasible reason why *Django Unchained* has the highest number of racist epithets, more specifically, the N-word, is the fact that the film is starred by a black slave who happens to be in Texas a few years before the Civil War started. The word, *nigger*, is mostly employed in the films directed by the American director starring black people as an utterance often used by the black community to refer to a person usually belonging to the same background. However, it is occasionally employed by Tarantino too as a contemptuous term in some of his films, more specifically, in *Django Unchained*. He relies on his background which allows him to employ the N-word both in a derogative and in a colloquial manner while he seems to find it essential for imitating real dialogues on the screen. Thus, by using it, Tarantino is not intending to challenge either white or black people but reproducing genuineness. Next, I have selected the examples that, to me, were the most representative ones from each film:

§ 1. You guys act like a bunch of fuckin' **niggers**. You ever worked with a bunch of **niggers**? They're just like you two, always fightin', always sayin' they're gonna kill one another.	[RD]
§ 2. **Nigger** fell four stories (…) nigger fell through that. § 3. Bitch gonna kill more **niggers** than time. § 4. Goddamn, **nigger**, what's up with them clothes?	[PF]

§ 5. Motherfucker hung up on me. Ingrate **nigger**. § 6. Every **nigga** gotta have a 45. (…) cause **nigga** want to be 'the killer'.	[JB]
§ 7. Knowing the Reich Minister as I do, I'm quite positive he wouldn't want the success or failure of his illustrious evening, dependent on the prowess of a **negro**.	[IB]
§ 8. Yeah, yeah, yeah, hello my ass –who's this **nigger** up on that nag? § 9. Calvin, who the hell is this **nigger** you feel the need to entertain?	[DU]

Table 2 'Examples of the N-Word in Tarantino´s Films'

Example number 1 is taken from a fragment of dialogue delivered by a white person in Tarantino´s *Reservoir Dogs*. The N-word in this occasion has been enunciated not as a term of endearment but as a racist insult towards the black community since a derogative comparison with black people is being made. In the next three instances found in *Pulp Fiction*, the character played by Samuel L. Jackson employs the N-word in several occasions with no intention of causing damage but as a term of endearment among equals; however, the N-word still appears sufficient times in this film to upset sensitive audiences. The

same happens in examples 5 and 6, from the film *Jackie Brown*, in which Samuel L. Jackson again plays one of the main characters. The actor uses the word *nigger* in many situations throughout the film to express a sign of camaraderie without intending to harm the targeted person. In Tarantino´s *Inglorious Basterds*, in turn, the term is used to provoke a reaction amongst the audience since the word *negro* is used as a racist slur by an SS officer, character played by Christopher Waltz. Finally, in Tarantino´s second-to-last film, *Django Unchained*, it is mostly the character played by Samuel L. Jackson who utilises the term in a contemptuous sense due to the nature of his personality – a black slave who has given in to his masters´ order and now acts, paradoxically, like a racist man himself; commentators have been very critical of this role since he is a black man using the N-word in a derogative manner – see instances 8 and 9. This controversy has transcended the diegetic universe since Samuel L. Jackson has had to defend both himself and Tarantino explaining why, as a black actor, he was willing to utilise the term in a derogative manner and under the direction of a white man; this refers back to our overarching question: is a white person, Tarantino in this case, entitled to use the word or demand somebody else to use it? To sum up, according to the examples above, the N-word is used as a term of endearment when employed among black people in *Pulp Fiction*, and *Jackie Brown*; it is used as a slur to show the history of slavery and black hatred in *Django Unchained*; and as a racist slur in *Reservoir Dogs* and *Inglorious Basterds*, in which the segregating and offensive implications of the N-word are evident.

4. Swearing on the Big Screen: Lee versus Tarantino's Use of (verbal) Violence

Whether to use or not to introduce verbal violence in cinema is a matter that has been subject(ed) to debate for decades, and this is the reason why the Hays Office was founded in 1927. Its purpose was to convince producers to follow a set of guidelines that embraced the innumerable eliminations and alterations pre-

viously demanded by governments and censors. Studios had to follow these guidelines, known as the 'Eleven Don'ts and Twenty-six Be Carefuls', if they wanted the censors' approval (Couvares, 1996: 137). The words prohibited were the following: *God, Lord, Jesus, Christ, hell, damn, gawd* and 'every other profane and vulgar expression however it may be spelled' (Jay, 1992: 217). During the 1930s, many topics were censored, but censors and audiences were most concerned with crime and sex; the focus later shifted to include politics too (Vaughn, 1996: 237).

Around the 1960s, the system changed dramatically with the eradication of Hay's Production Code in 1961. From that moment on, problems revolved around how to control and regulate films. The norms by which the American film industry had operated no longer existed and cinema was protected under constitutional freedom of speech. The Production Code disappeared entirely in 1966 and was replaced two years later by a rating system. This system was established in order to give the director/scriptwriter the liberty to explore 'unprecedented creative freedom, while at the same time maintaining a system of 'self-regulation' that would ease the pressures for some form of government classification' (Farber cit. in Jowett, 1996: 272-273).

Thus, arguments for and against cursing arose in order to try a consensus over how many swearwords were to be allowed in the media or public acts. Arguments in favour of introducing verbal violence in cinema are often based on the need to appear realistic (Battistella, 2005: 76). Likewise, swearing in films is understood as a way of representing antiheroes: the thief, the gangster, the bank-robber who do not succeed in his/her mission; they are not examples to follow and, thus, these characters are allowed to curse[4]. Arguments against it, on the contrary, imply the need to use vocabulary suitable for any audience.

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4 We can find examples of these antiheroes who curse in Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction, Four Rooms, Jackie Brown, Kill Bill, Inglorious Basterds,* and *Django Unchained*, since the characters are gangsters, bank-robbers, out-law criminals and those who take justice into their own hands.

Besides, sexual expressions, racist/ethnic and gender insults are even stronger than fifty years ago, which leads us to believe that strong language is gradually becoming more acceptable. Research on cursing in films performed by Jay in the 1960s and 1970s showed that the amount of swearing at the end of the 70s had increased three times more in regard to the 1960s (Jay, 1992). If a study were carried out now on films shot during the 1990s until 2013, I believe the findings would be even higher if compared to previous years.

There used to be a tendency of associating (verbal) violence in cinema –drug-dealers, prostitutes, gangsters, murderers, etc.– with black people since black people have traditionally been portrayed as the *bad guys*. During the 60s and 70s Hollywood cinema provided new aesthetics in which the city became the scenery of social unrest and violence, and black people became the protagonists of crime and moral decay. This kind of 'made-in-Hollywood' aesthetics certainly contributed to some sensationalist and racist comments in real life. As a result, violence in cinema was believed to be something inherent in black people, and whites were left out: 'Las representaciones de la violencia se describen en gran medida a través de formas de codificación racistas que sugieren que la violencia es un problema negro, un problema ajeno a la Norteamérica suburbana blanca' (Guiroux, 2003: 228).

Unfortunately, the pre-conception of black people in the USA prior to the civil rights act (1964) together with the stereotypes that appeared in films, did nothing but contribute in a negative way to the stereotyping of people's life and/or attitude. Consequently, it resulted in a strengthening of racism since black people were represented as 'the criminals' exonerating white people from any responsibility for violence.

This aside, there were important contributions to trying to change this imaginary and, during the 1960s in Hollywood, there were serious attempts to *cure* racism by introducing black characters in leading roles: directors, script-writers, and producers gave a few black actors prestigious parts to prove that black

people were as good as anybody else. An example of this is the actor Sidney Poitier, who – as Belton (1994: 284) notes – was elevated to the category of journalist in *The Bedford Incident* (1965), a doctor in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), an engineer/teacher in *To Sir, With Love* (1967), and a homicide detective *In the Heat of the Night* (1967). The causes for racism thus did not seem to be colour but class, and it was this classificatory category, which appeared to command the most concern.

In relation to Tarantino, extreme (verbal) and physical violence remains the central element in his films, and the prime reason as to why he has been subject to criticism. Tarantino declared in an interview for the BBC that he does not need to explain why all his films contain abusive language and explicit violence, and compares his way of making films with other renowned directors. He explicitly expresses his position towards this subject and responds that, from his point of view, cinema cannot be understood without (verbal) violence: 'I can't imagine telling a story that has rules, you can't do this, you can't do that' (James, 2008). As regards the controversy generated around the usage of the N-word in his films, the filmmaker argues that it is an essential term to use in certain conditions, and that nothing else should be read instead but a term whose purpose is to reproduce real situations. Tarantino's rationale is as follows: (1) his family background[5], which led him to use the word amongst friends. Tarantino thinks the way he was brought up entitles him to use this utterance; and (2) because he wants his characters to sound like people living in the real world where not everybody employs the language of political correctness as the director himself declares:

> (...) that's the way my characters talk in the movies I've made so far. I also feel that the word 'nigger' is one of the most volatile

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5 Tarantino went to a school where a large percentage of children were black and he used to go out with them instead of with the other white people. Additionally, his mother's best friend, Jackie, was a black woman who brought him up, and she was like a second mother to him.

words in the English language and any time anyone gives a word that much power, I think everybody should be shouting it from the rooftops to take the power away. I grew up around blacks and have no fear of it. I grew up saying it as an expression (Peary, 1998).

Nevertheless, and despite his argumentation, the filmmaker has still been harshly condemned for using the N-word by some sectors of the black community. Atlanta born Shelton Jackson, Spike Lee (e.g *She's Gotta Have it*, 1986; *Do the Right Thing*, 1989; *Jungle Fever*, 1991; *Malcolm* X, 1992; or *Red Hook Summer*, 2012) has accused Tarantino on many occasions of overusing the N-word, and Tarantino's second-to-last film *Django Unchained* (2013) was no exception due to controversy raised by its language. Lee believes that Tarantino has no right to employ the word by pleading the colour of his skin as a justification. In contrast, Tarantino refuses to acknowledge that the N-word is irrefutably linked to white dominant groups and thus that such term is considered objectionable for him to use (Guiroux, 2003). His response to Lee, then, relies on the fact that he is just transferring and projecting in his films the way black people talk in real life –e.g. Samuel L. Jackson speaks like a black person would speak in certain areas of the United States playing a specific role. In addition, and paradoxically, Lee himself has been accused by other members of the black community of using the N-word in some of his films but his defence is that: 'as an African American, I have more right to use that word' (Merida, 1998). For instance, Lee has employed the word 'nigger' 16 times in *Jungle Fever* (1991): 'I didn't raise you to be with no nigger! I'd rather you be a murderer (…)'; 'You goin' on with that fuckin' nigger'. He used it 8 times in *Do the right thing* (1989): 'I'm sick of niggers, it's a bad neighbourhood. I don't like being around them, they're animals'. And 17 times in *Malcolm X* (1992) where he combines it with the word 'negro' employed 37 times in the same film: 'That red nigger of yours is dead and so are your bastard children!'; 'Mr. X is a demagogue. He has no place to go, so he exaggerates. He's a disservice to

every good law-abiding Negro in the country'. These are only a few examples of the usage of the N-word in Lee's films; however, the meaning and purpose of the N-word in them do not seem to differ from the usage given by Tarantino in his films that Lee claims to dislike so much.

Hence, Lee believes he is entitled to employ the word because of being black, and considers it a right that white people do not possess. Under the circumstances, Lee's position against Tarantino's usage of the N-word is, in the words of Mars-Jones (2013), 'about entitlement, territoriality almost, and doesn't seem helpful'. Besides, Lee's intention might not have been at all disinterested given that, by launching accusations against the director from Tennessee, he is raising his public profile alongside that of Tarantino. In other words, Lee's commentaries might have generated curiosity among the spectators, on the one hand, since they feel the need to judge for themselves the amount of 'racist epithets' used in Tarantino's work; potential proof of this is that *Django Unchained* is Tarantino's highest grossing film so far. On the other hand, by creating controversy and discomfort, Lee is standing in the spotlight of press and cinemagoers once again.

In response to the appropriateness of employing the N-word by a white person launched by Lee, Harvard law professor Randall Kennedy states that the director of *Do the right thing* (1989) is based on the distinction that when employed by black people, the N-word is used 'in some positive fashion' (Kennedy, 1999-2000: 92) whilst, when said by nonblack people, it is used 'in some negative fashion' (Kennedy, 1999-2000: 92). However, he states that: 'There is no compelling justification for presuming that black usage of *nigger* is permissible while white usage is objectionable' (Kennedy, 1999-2000: 92). Kennedy believes that the 'use of the words (*nigger/nigga*) as a term of affection by some young African Americans and some whites will gradually reduce its power'. He agrees that '(…) used derogatorily, nigger is a socially destructive epithet –no more or less evil than the wide variety of racial epithets that dot the American language.' (Ken-

nedy, 1999-2000: 87). However, some other scholars disagree with his statement, as Columbia Law School professor Patricia Williams, who argues that

> that word is a bit like fire – you can warm your hands with the kind of upside-down camaraderie that it gives, or you can burn a cross with it. But in any case it depends on the context and the users' intention, and seeing it floating abstractly on a book shelf in a world that is still as polarized as ours makes me cringe (New York Times, 1st December, 2001 cit. in Allan and Burridge, 2006: 84).

Put succinctly, the word *nigger* is a term whose objective has been to depersonalize the targeted listener for years, a word that presented persecution, discrimination, repression and segregation; but, at the same time, it is a word that has been used as a term of endearment among people of the same ethnic background[6]:

> Although the word is primarily associated with its malicious origins and offensive nature, the context and speaker largely determine both the intended meaning of the term and its reception. Additionally, the word's spelling and pronunciation is altered as the usage and meaning changes both over time and between cultural contexts (Grogan, 2011).

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6 'In many contemporary works by African American artists, such as comedians and musicians (most noticeably, perhaps, musicians from the rap and hip-hop scenes, the term 'nigger' is most frequently used as a term that expresses brotherhood and a history of shared experienced'(see http://www.studentpulse.com/articles/357/3/the-n-word-the-use-and-development-of-the-term-nigger-in-african-american-culture-as-depicted-in-the-plays-of-august-wilson). A good example of this is the case of the rap group N.W.A. (Niggaz with Attitudes), they made the term popular in their music by challenging racism (Green, 2013: 506) and, thus, neutralized their meaning through music, which 'is widely considered the most important medium for the articulation of black identities' (Green, 2013: 507). See, also, the recent biopic made with group's endorsement http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1398426/

Nevertheless, the (re-)signification of derogatory terms by subaltern groups is, of course, not restricted to Afro American communities and is not just connected to racial issues but also to ethnicity. This is evident, for example, by the use of 'queer' by homosexual groups or even collectives; also among other minority groups in the USA such as Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and other Latin groups and their descendants –the appropriateness of the usage based on how dark they are: the darker, the better– prevailing ethnicity upon race because ethnicity 'unlike the concept of race, which pertains to specific physical traits, (…) connotes cultural group membership' (Reyes Torres, 2008: 85).

The question of, to what extent, especially in a highly mediated global economy, such processes of appropriation are necessarily progressive is of course open to debate – a recent controversial example in the UK has been the success of the ostensibly documentary television series *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* (Channel 4) in which 'real' gypsies or travellers employ not only the diction traditionally used to insult them, but also flaunt some actions and attitudes for which they have been subject to opprobrium. In other words, we need not only to keep in mind Gayatri Spivak's (1994) famous question, 'can the subaltern speak?' but also engage seriously with its mirror(ed) reflection: 'who can speak of, and for, the subaltern?'

5. Conclusion

Almost all Tarantino's characters carry around a predisposition for swearing, and they are given a series of common patterns as a mark of identity which has been consciously introduced by the cinema director in his films. For Tarantino, it is a way of signing his oeuvre and making sure that people can identify these features through the specific vocabulary meticulously selected by him. However, among the many categories of insults employed in his films (e.g. sex-related, religious, etc.), the one that has caused more controversy is the use of the N-word in his fil-

mography for being considered linguistically obscene due to its racial content and, thus, out of the moral rules of society.

This is because the taboo generated against the N-word is still highly dominant even though the bases for pronouncing the term are not always race- or racist-related. The reasons for this are threefold. The N-word still carries gross connotations based on negative prejudices against African Americans since (1) it was originally created to be purely disdainful; (2) it synthesises aspects of the American history –slavery and oppression – which have been relegated to oblivion; (3) and, it was believed that the general and original usage of the utterance – even when employed in an inoffensive sense – could be reinvigorated in a negative manner. Subsequently, as explored throughout this article, when the N-word is used among African Americans, it could be sometimes considered a sign of identity and camaraderie, but when a white person uses it, it could be considered a racist attack against the black community. Although the latter is not always the speaker's intention, changing deep-rooted stereotypes is utterly complicated and so, the reflection of a white person using this word might be considered a sign of prevailing racism and, thus, difficult to eradicate. This stream of thinking is what has made Tarantino subject to criticism and prohibitions since being a non-black person using – what is believed to be – a black person's term has created a situation that has been conceived to be neither innocent nor incidental. Despite this, Tarantino has continued utilizing this shocking and – for certain groups – aggressive word, sometimes as a means of communication and elsewhere out of contempt. More specifically, the film director employs a liberal use of the N-word: firstly, to give his black characters a sense of authenticity, in which case, the N-word would be considered a term of endearment and it would be used functionally; and secondly, it will be used contemptuously in the speech/discourse of some of the white characters of his films in a small number of occasions –e.g. *Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction, Inglorious Basterds* and *Django Unchained.* In any of the abovemen-

tioned contexts, the filmmaker's usage of the N-word would be interpreted by some critics and by a sensitive audience as inadequate and inappropriate. However, according to Butler (1997: 2)

> one is not simply fixed by the name that one is called. In being called an injurious name, one is derogated and demeaned. But the name holds out another possibility as well: by being called a name, one is also, paradoxically, given a certain possibility for social existence, initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate that call.

Therefore, although it is agreed that it is an offensive and despicable term, the N-word belongs to a specific way of talking in a particular context and, if we accept the aforementioned statement that the (re-)signification of dyslogistic words is not restricted to Afro American individuals, the employment of the term by Quentin Tarantino would be justified and supported by the fact that it is utilized to reproduce scenes and dialogues from real life –e.g. to build fiction. Tarantino 're-signifies' and 'neutralizes' (Green, 2013: 514) the N-word by using it being 'white' and, breaking taboos by doing that. Adopting the premise that Tarantino's intention is purely to imitate and not to harm, it could be stated that the bowdlerization of the N-word from his films – grounded only on the colour of the director's skin– would be unjustified and would create a distorted view of reality if erased from his work. The American director does not look for political correctness in his films neither linguistically nor as an element of performance, as has been many times demonstrated, but to reflect society the way he understands it, regardless of whether he belongs to a specific gender or a specific ethnic group. On these grounds, let us reflect on the following question: if Tarantino cannot use the N-word in this films because of not being black, does that mean that he cannot introduce women's characters who use four-letter words among equals because he is not a woman either?

In sum, linguistic taboos remain and have become stronger during recent years especially in ethnic and racial insults, since language is one of the main factors which conform racism. There is a tendency to feel hostility against those who do not speak respecting the rules of morality because one may feel threatened, intimidated and scared. However, what is evident is that individuals, regardless of their social background, swear. A different matter would be the issue of double moral standard which consists of 'do what I say not what I do' as it is the case of many detractors who consider the manifestation of the reflection of society in words, as Tarantino expresses, an obscene and reprehensible act of speech.

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