

Gregory Kane on the 'N' Word

Written by Gregory Kane ID1757
Friday, 05 August 2005 05:37 -

Think of Yourself as the N-Word, and You'll Never Be More Than That.

It may be time to take another look at the "Stop Snitching" DVD.

For those of you who've never heard of the DVD, allow me to give a brief synopsis. "Stop Snitching" was filmed in various Baltimore locations. It was produced by Rodney Bethea, a local entrepreneur, and Skinny Suge, who appears in the video.

Featuring a genuine rogue's gallery of Baltimore's street criminals, the video shows various drug dealers and gangsta types making threats against "snitches" and "rats." It was made famous when some viewer discovered that Denver Nuggets forward Carmelo Anthony, a Baltimore native, made a brief appearance in the video in which he chatted with some neighborhood friends about a rapper named Black who'd dissed Anthony in one of his songs.

Baltimore police have already arrested some of those who appeared in the DVD. The city's state's attorney's office used it to push for stronger witness intimidation legislation.

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“Stop Snitching” is widely regarded as a downright scandalous portrayal of Baltimore (I’ve noticed the term “inaccurate” has never been used to describe the DVD.), which is why I was shocked when one of the teaching assistants in a writing course I teach at Johns Hopkins University selected it to show to the class.

She was a white woman in her early 20s, raised and educated in a suburb somewhere in Connecticut. I looked in her eyes when she made the request to see if she was joking.

She wasn’t.

So it was on a Wednesday night this past spring that some 20-odd Hopkins students got their first glimpse into Baltimore’s criminal underbelly.

“I’ll be in the back of the room slashing my wrists as you watch this,” I told the class.

It was my second time enduring the video. I watched it the first time late last year, when I wrote a story about it BlackAmericaWeb.com. But what struck me the second time around was the number of times the N-word was used.

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Repeatedly. Ad nauseam. And that was just in the first 10 minutes.

All of the criminals in the video were young black men. They're probably undereducated and unskilled. They may be among the 75 percent of black males who drop out of Baltimore's high schools citywide.

I wondered if any of them made a connection to their calling themselves and other black men "niggas" and their condition at the bottom rung of Baltimore's -- and America's -- socio-economic ladder.

Let me put it another way: those black men who think of themselves as "niggas" and act like "niggas" will never be more than "niggas" -- with all the negative baggage that name carries.

The late black writer James Baldwin -- black America's warrior with words when he was alive -- put it far more eloquently than I ever could. In a letter to his nephew from his book "The Fire Next Time," Baldwin wrote that "You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger."

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That perfectly describes the black men in “Stop Snitching.” They’re destroying themselves and the “snitches” and “rats” they excoriate. Baltimore has the body count to prove it. In fact, some of the guys in the video call Baltimore “Bodymore, Murderland.”

Most of those bodies are of young black men. Most of the murderers are young black men. All of them think of themselves and the black men they kill as “niggas.” If they read a little James Baldwin, maybe they could make the connection to that body count, their pathetic lives and referring to themselves as “niggas.”

But who in black America’s hip-hop generation reads Baldwin these days?

Black America’s hip-hop generation? Heck, who in black America’s baby boomer generation reads Baldwin these days?

The young men in “Stop Snitching” are the sons, grandsons, nephews and cousins of black America’s baby boomer generation. We’re the ones who supposedly read Baldwin’s “The Fire Next Time” when it was released in the early 1960s. We’re the ones who dug Malcolm, praised the Black Panther Party, started the Afro craze and truly (but erroneously) believed we were “blacker” than previous generations.

If anyone should get the blame for our young men calling themselves “niggas” while they gleefully slaughter each other on the streets of our nation’s cities, it’s black America’s baby boomers.

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