

CIVIL RIGHTS CIVIL WRONGS

What is it that makes a word—a random assortment of vowels and consonants—a weapon? How can brandishing a word carry enough power to harm a child, terrorize a community, and dehumanize a people? And how can words, galvanized by hatred and steeped in blood, become, for some, acceptable, words that some even casually pass off as terms of ‘endearment’ in everyday “civil” conversation?

The African-American Civil Rights Movement, a period of protest, civil disobedience, and social unrest, was known for some of its most famous leaders, e.g. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, but characterized by broad participation from local organizers, scholars, students and entertainers. The movement was met with massive resistance through governmental institutions, business practices, and day-to-day indignities. Words were among the weapons used by resisters of the Movement.

Language evolves. Words that were once forbidden can become an accepted part of informal speech, even mainstream. But some words cannot. When a word’s etymology is the very definition of prejudice and hatred, its meaning cannot be repurposed nor its edges blunted. As an example, while the **“N”** word has become a part of the contemporary hip-hop lexicon, those artists cannot own this word. It’s not theirs for the taking. Too many people have sacrificed their safety, and even their lives, to stand against this word and the hatred it represents. We should honor these proud and brave Americans, and people of all races and religions seeking freedom from oppression, by embracing a culture of freedom—which includes freedom from the words and weapons of oppression.

With this project I endeavor to visually explore the Civil Rights era through images of individuals who played a role, and the words used to suppress and harass a people. The Civil ‘Rights’ story cannot be visualized (or visually represented) without also considering the myriad ‘wrongs’ that were committed against Americans.

My intention is to challenge the viewer with a juxtaposition of epithets and images of strength: men and women from the civil rights era, both celebrated and infamous, well and lesser known. Some of these people dedicated their lives to the causes of equality and freedom; others made their mark with actions intended to suppress and intimidate the movement’s activists and followers. Some images eliminate the hurtful connotation of the words and hint at new word associations of beauty, strength and resilience.

This exhibit is an attempt to nullify the language of hate and fear, causing it to give way to understanding, compassion, love, and honor. The words (or their acronyms) are here, but it is my hope that they become a transformative way of viewing compelling human subjects.

When I listen to Nina Simone, I can feel her pain even as I sense the enduring love she had for the Black people of Mississippi and elsewhere. That’s why, for me, the **“N”** word is **“NINA”**.