***Warning:*** ***Contains very strong language.*** Controversy Club, as the name suggests, deals with controversial debates about language, the kind of language which may cause offense to some. The founders of Controversy Club believe that, if we are to have productive and mature discussions about these topics, we must confront these controversial words and not make futile attempts to censor them. To try and conceal the words discussed might suggest some sort of embarrassment or improperness about the meeting itself, which was in fact conducted seriously, and respectfully. The words discussed here are obviously very offensive, but their use in a serious, mature discussion is nothing to be ashamed of. For this reason, the expletives in question, which I will on this occasion only transcribe as “c\*\*\*” and “n\*\*\*\*\*”, have been printed in full in the rest of this article. Please do not read on if you do not wish to see these words in their uncensored forms.

Sometime last year, Khalilah Scott and I found ourselves asking questions about the words “cunt” and “nigger”, following discussions about the power of language in our English Language lessons. Our questions included: “Is ‘nigger’ always offensive?”; “What exactly is it that makes ‘cunt’ offensive?”; “Why do some people regard ‘cunt’ as more offensive than ‘nigger’?”; and “Will these words always be offensive?”. We saw no obvious answers to these questions, and in fact found that discussing them generated even more questions. When we referred our questions to Mr Belas, our English Language teacher, he suggested that no easy answers would be forthcoming but promised to set up a “Controversy Club” to help us discuss these complicated words with the help of others in the Sixth Form.

So, Controversy Club was born. Well, almost. We procrastinated for months, until, at last, the first meeting was held on Monday 17th December. Room 135 was filled with about thirty people. This group, usefully for a club like this, included representatives for both biological sexes and a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Also in attendance were Mr Bagan, History teacher, and Mr Doolan, head of the English department. The first question discussed was “Is ‘nigger’ inherently racist?”, which inspired a range of interesting – though sometimes incompatible – viewpoints.

Mica McFarlane argued that “nigger” is always implicitly racist, regardless of the speaker or the “target” of the word; even “jokey” uses of the word should be discouraged, as they suggest that it is acceptable to casually use a word which has historically functioned as a racial pejorative. Jade Azim questioned whether it is right for black people who use the word “nigger” to be reprimanded for it, claiming it is their prerogative to use the word as they wish, and that attempts to restrict black individuals’ use of “nigger” are simply discrimination and oppression in another form.

We also discussed whether it is possible to imagine a future world where “nigger” is not controversial. Could “nigger” ever go through amelioration (the process by which words lose their negative connotations and come to carry different meanings)? There does seem to be a precedent for this: citing “queer theory,” Mr. Belas suggested that the word “queer”, though historically used to insult gay people, may, to some extent, have been “re-claimed” by its former victims. “Queer” is now something of a neutral/positive term used by the LGBT rights activists to advance their campaigns. The use of “nigger” in non-discriminatory contexts such as in Jay-Z and Kanye West’s “Niggas in Paris” might serve as evidence that “nigger” is shedding its offensive meaning, or at least developing a new, more positive definition. This might be cause for optimism, as it suggests that, just maybe, the word is being redefined by the very individuals it would once have oppressed. If this redefinition truly is happening, perhaps the word “nigger” will eventually be drained of its power to offend, and racists and bigots will no longer be able to use the word to abuse and oppress black people in the way they regrettably can today. If humanity could forget that “nigger” was ever offensive, then the word wouldn’t be able to offend anyone. Surely that’s something to hope for?

Having spent a large amount of the lunchtime discussing “nigger”, we decided to dedicate the remaining twenty minutes to “cunt”. It is my opinion that “cunt” is only offensive to us because we, as children, students, and members of society, are told to find it offensive; unlike “nigger”, “cunt” is not offensive as a result of a shocking socio-political history. I asked the group “what, really, makes “cunt” offensive?”.

Adam Hanrahan speculated one reason for the offensiveness of “cunt” is the harsh way it sounds. But if the way “cunt” sounds is what makes it so offensive, then surely phonetically similar words like “blunt” and “count” should also offend?

A more compelling argument came from Mr Bagan, who argued that, since “cunt” originally described female genitalia, the word’s capacity to offend derives from its connotations of gender, sex, and sexuality. To Mr Bagan, “cunt” does have a more sinister, discriminatory past; it is a symptom of misogyny. This disease has blighted humanity far longer than any form of racism has, simply because men and women have always interacted with each other, while confrontations between different ethnic groups were brought about by technologies and cultural practices which took time to develop. Women have been marginalised for centuries, simultaneously objectified for their bodies and punished for sexual behaviour which, in men, would not elicit any disapproval. Our asymmetrical concepts of masculinity and femininity obviously show serious sexual inequalities in society, and it may be that “cunt” is just another manifestation of these inequalities. I still think “cunt” has evolved a new meaning, separate from its original vaginal definition. In my opinion, “cunt” is not inherently sexist – at least not in the way that “nigger” is always in some way racist or racial.

One word I certainly do think is sexist is “slut”, which I believe is used to condemn women for behaviour that should not be condemned, and, ultimately, to enforce a double-standard of values which perpetuates social and cultural misogyny. The word “slut”, along with other words relating to sex and sexuality, will be up for discussion at the next Controversy Club meeting, to be held sometime in the spring term. We can expect this second debate to be as interesting as the first, and perhaps even more controversial.