

A WORD THAT NEEDS TO DIE

sam prendergast discusses her most hated piece of terminology.

EVERY TIME SOMEONE USES THE WORD 'BOGAN', A UNICORN DIES. THE UNICORN DOESN'T LIKE INSULTS OR CLASSISM. AND IT KNOWS THAT WHENEVER SOMEONE SAYS THE WORD 'BOGAN' THEY'RE PRETTY MUCH SAYING: "I FEEL SUPERIOR TO A PERSON BECAUSE THEIR APPEARANCE AND/OR MANNER OF SPEAKING SUGGESTS THAT THEIR PARENTS HAD LESS MONEY THAN MINE." IT'S NOT AN ELEGANT STATEMENT, BUT THAT'S NOT REALLY SURPRISING CONSIDERING IT'S BASICALLY A CLASSIST SLUR.

The word 'bogan' slipped into Australia's vocabulary sometime during the 1980s, mostly thanks to dodgy TV producers and journalists who needed a term for people who couldn't afford new stockings. From the beginning it's been an insult. If you were a bogan, you came from a certain type of suburb, worked a certain type of job, or dressed and behaved in a supposedly uncouth way. Basically, you were working class, or totally poor, or both. And then people judged you, assuming that your lack of obvious money and their comparative wealth was all a matter of personality and 'lifestyle choices'. When people rant at their friends about 'that bogan loser, John', they're suggesting that wealth is important, and it's not.

The thing that's particularly hateable about the word is that

we've pretty much let it slide. It's remained acceptable to use for about three decades, even though it's no longer so acceptable to go round saying stuff like, "Look at that low income lady's shitty shoes!" Using the word 'bogan' is convenient because it prevents us from having to out ourselves as snobs.

If the word were dead (and I'd happily kill it), we'd have to be more explicit in our casual classist remarks. Maybe that sounds like a bad thing, but at least we'd all be a bit more honest. Instead of, "Why don't you like him?"/"Because he's a bogan", we'd have, "Why don't you like him?"/"Because I can tell that we've been brought up in different circumstances." Wishful thinking? Probably, yes. But even if we had the uglier: "Because he talks like an uneducated slob", at least everything would be out on the table.

The word particularly annoys me because I grew up in a family that's basically a bogan caricature. In summertime, we would all camp out on a vacant lot near the beach, having a very good time with whisky, fire and makeshift structures, while other families holidayed around us in their beach homes. My uncles would teach me about swear words and sex while the women peeled potatoes for

dinner and then danced frantically around the fire to the classy tones of "Shaddap You Face". A few years in, refusing to succumb to the pressure to build a house on the land, some of my family decided to almost permanently settle there in a caravan and a tiny shack, with a bunch of frenzied dogs tied up on chains and a fire pit that they regularly used to burn toxic plastics. Noise complaints were common, as were comments about the dogs, the children (where were our shoes?), and the ditch system we dug around our tents when it rained. It was a fun way to grow up, but it left me wanting to chase down everyone who used the word 'bogan' and give them a talking to, Lisa Simpson-style.

It's not just that the word is classist and insulting and lazy, it's also that it's extremely superficial. It's just one word, but we use it to diminish a person's character or a community's culture. And then we whinge and complain when those people do the same to others/us (see for example: 'yuppie', 'hippie', 'hipster') because they don't understand why anyone would drink kombucha. It's a complicated, isolated world, and the word 'bogan' only makes things worse.