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## No Slur without Demur

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# No Slur Without Demur

May 31, 2023

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1707 words

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Offenses of the Month, April–May 2023

A Slurry of Slurs

In this our Age of Sensitive Barbarity, you'd suppose that commandos of the airwaves (if not all of us) would realize that who avers slurs into a microphone bodes distemper, danger, and disaster. This understanding ought by now be patent platitude—if not by the beginning of the Obama presidency, by the end; if not by the beginning of the Trump Interregnum, by its middle; if not by the beginning of the Pandemic, by last year. And if not by then, by now.

Still, the frequent appearance of slur-spouting loudmouths in this blog's Offense of the Month column suggests the ignorance? arrogance? indifference? stupidity? of all too many public figures and others who through their noisy insults have

claimed our attention over the years. These imperturbable spirits seem oblivious to the consequences, as if that mad mantra of my youth, “What Me Worry?” will spare them distress when called out for their jibes and invectives. Yet month after month, their disdain bubbles over, followed by feigned surprise, tiresome but risible, when they learn, each in turn, that these days you can’t slur without demur.

And yet their unavailing after-comments remain the same: “I don’t know where those words came from.” “That’s not me.” “It just slipped out.” “I was talking too fast.” “It was an unintentional mistake.”

I present you with a pair of May malefactors (and summarize at the end a few April worthies) and invite you to consider with me why the outcomes in each case differed.

The Oakland A’s long-time primary play-by-play announcer, Glen Kuiper, was fired for “using the N-word,” as most of the news accounts put it, while discussing in a pre-game telecast in early May a “phenomenal” trip he had just taken to the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City, Missouri. Kuiper evidently meant to voice the word “Negro,” but what people heard was the six-letter racial slur these days most commonly spelled “N-word.”

Later in the program, Kuiper offered this otherwise unelaborated apology, evidently having been alerted to how he had pronounced the word: “I said something that didn’t come out quite the way I wanted it to. And I just wanted to apologize if it sounded different than I meant it to be said.” Kuiper was almost immediately suspended. He then issued this statement: “I could not be more sorry and horrified by what I said. I hope you will accept my sincerest apologies.” Two weeks later Kuiper was fired. He reiterated his apology, denying that he harbored any racist feeling and asserting that his remark was “a terrible but honest mispronunciation” prompted by his excitement at talking about his museum trip.

A few days after the unfortunate collision between Kuiper's mouth and subconscious, West Virginia University varsity basketball coach Bob Huggins, inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame last September, withstood a fierce reaction to a 90-second homophobic radio slurathon. Calling in to a sports program on Cincinnati station WLW, Huggins excoriated Xavier University basketball fans for an incident during a game against the University of Cincinnati, where Huggins had previously coached for 17 years. "It was all those fags, those Catholic fags," he said.

Huggins apologized later that day: "I used a completely insensitive and abhorrent phrase that there is simply no excuse for," he said. WVU Athletics followed up Huggins's apology later that afternoon: "Coach Huggins' remarks today on a Cincinnati radio show were insensitive, offensive and do not represent our University values."

But unlike Kuiper, Huggins did not lose his job. Two days later, WVU announced a three-game suspension at the beginning of the next season, compulsory sensitivity training, and a forfeiture of a quarter of his salary (a \$1 million reduction of his annual \$4.15 million pay, the sum to be used to help fund the university's LGBTQ+ Center, a mental-health facility, and other organizations that "support marginalized communities"). Said WVU President E. Gordon Gee: "We have made it explicitly clear to Coach Huggins that any incidents of similar derogatory and offensive language will result in immediate termination."

Sure, It's a Slur, But . . .

Why the difference in treatment?

Several possibilities occur:

1. It's permissible to slur some groups more than others. (Of course, no one—in our social circles—will admit that.)
2. They're tougher (stricter, harsher, more severe) in Oakland than in Morgantown. (See No. 1, above.)

3. What the two men said was slightly different in intent, at least according to Kuiper. Huggins flat-out voiced the slur. Kuiper, according to Kuiper, just sort of slipped, unintentionally using a malign form of the appropriate word. (Of course, the trouble with this argument is that by its own logic, the harsher punishment went to the lesser offender.)

4. The words are different. Never, ever say the “N-word” no matter what the circumstances; its emotional salience is just too high. The “F-word,” while becoming taboo, isn’t 100% there yet. Sanctions short of beheading attend the latter; defenestration is available for the former. (Is there a science of Comparative Slurring?)

5. Huggins is just more important than Kuiper. Huggins is a winning coach at a state university. Kuiper announces games. I don’t know the facts, but I’m guessing that Huggins’s four-plus-million-dollar salary far exceeds Kuiper’s annual income, so Huggins must be more important. Part of that importance is how thick the soup WVU’s president, Gordon Gee, would be in if he fired the basketball coach. After all, “college athletics has no shame.” Huggins is visible; Kuiper is one among many. (See also Nos. 1 and 2 above.)

6. Huggins was willing to accept his punishment, Kuiper was not. (This explanation is a non-sequitur. The severity of a sanction may be correlated to acceptance of and remorse for wrongdoing but not to the wrongdoer’s assessment of the appropriateness of the punishment otherwise.)

7. The differences in outcome are attributable to those local differences between the various patches of ground we Americans call home. (One man’s holy grail is another man’s *meshuggaas*, so to speak. Sure, but so what?)

8. Something else was going on behind the scenes. (No doubt. It always is. We hope our personnel files never surface. )

9. Shrug. Accept it and move on.

Huggins, for one, accepts it. As he said, “There are consequences for our words and actions, and I will fully accept any coming my way.” To which he added: “I am ashamed and embarrassed and heartbroken for those I have hurt. I must do better, and I will.” (It helps if your post-punishment paycheck is worth north of a quarter-million dollars per month.)

But not everyone does accept it. Glen Kuiper, for one. “Racism,” he said on learning that he’d been axed, “is in no way a part of me.” He charitably described himself as an “honest, caring, kind, honorable, respectful husband and father” who “would never utter a disparaging word about anybody.” Expressing frustration over his termination, he wrote: “I wish the Oakland A’s and NBC Sports would have taken into consideration my 20-year career, my solid reputation, integrity and character, but in this current environment traits like integrity and character are no longer considered.” And: “I will always have a hard time understanding how one mistake in a 20-year broadcasting career is cause for termination.”

That last, a fair question—more than fair, assuming the accuracy of Kuiper’s self-assessment. I can’t provide an adequate answer in this space, perhaps because there is no adequate answer to a cultural enactment that is one part a just response to centuries of verbal abuse and another part a different form of abuse known as a moral panic. You’re likely to conclude, as I do, that, as in so many other like cases, people paid to be in the public eye, especially after 20 years or more (and even more especially these particular past 20 years), ought to possess the skill to speak slur-free to audiences who thrive on the sporting life. The outcome of the remaining cases must rest in the charitable impulse and good will of the bosses—and their bottom lines.

#### April Slurrers Bring May Furors

For the record, here’s a brief roundup of some April slurs, fuller accounts of which you can easily read for yourself by clicking the links.

A California school teacher was caught on video repeatedly pronouncing “the N-word” and trying to force her middle-schoolers to say it with her.

A Long Beach City College professor was placed on leave after saying the N-word aloud several times in a discussion of an acting-class scene that contained it.

Administrators at an Ohio high school were under fire for failing to discipline students for online showcasing of a racist video made off school premises and not posted through school equipment.

A substitute teacher at a junior high school in Las Vegas was fired after being depicted writing the usual slur on a whiteboard in a classroom.

A Black Democratic member of the Alabama House of Representatives refused to apologize to Republican party members for referring to a song, “The Story of O.J.,” by Jay-Z, which repeatedly uses “a form of the N-word,” during a debate with the sole Black Republican representative. The Democratic representative never said the word in any of its forms.

A white Tennessee high school chemistry teacher was suspended for expressing the most virulent form of the N-word in class despite repeated requests that he refrain from doing so. “I don’t care” if it’s racist, he reportedly said; “I can say a word in the English language.” Two weeks later he was fired, despite his claim that he wasn’t labeling anyone; he expressed the word as a word to stop students in the classroom from themselves using it.

Disney fired Kahiau Machado, a Native Hawaiian actor chosen for a major role in a forthcoming live-action remake of the 2002 animated science-fiction film *Lilo and Stitch*, after fans, annoyed that he’d been selected instead of someone with darker skin, outed him as having posted the N-word variant “niggah” in a Spotify playlist.

As it is written: Those who don't learn are  
condemned to burn. I read that somewhere. Fo  
shizzle.