ARE AFRICAN AMERICAN ATHLETES AND CELEBRITIES OBLIGATED NOT TO USE THE N-WORD?

Earl W. Spurgin

John Carroll University, espurgin@jcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://collected.jcu.edu/fac_bib_2018

Part of the Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation

Spurgin, Earl W., "ARE AFRICAN AMERICAN ATHLETES AND CELEBRITIES OBLIGATED NOT TO USE THE N-WORD?" (2018). 2018 Faculty Bibliography. 3.

https://collected.jcu.edu/fac_bib_2018/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Bibliographies Community Homepage at Carroll Collected. It has been accepted for inclusion in 2018 Faculty Bibliography by an authorized administrator of Carroll Collected. For more information, please contact connell@jcu.edu.
ARE AFRICAN AMERICAN ATHLETES AND CELEBRITIES OBLIGATED NOT TO USE THE N-WORD?

Earl Spurgin

In 2014, the leadership of the National Football League instructed the league's game officials to penalize players who use the n-word on the field. The league's action sparked another installment of the long-running public debate over whether African Americans should use the n-word. The parties to the debate often adopt contrasting positions on whether African American athletes and celebrities are obligated morally not to use the term. This paper examines the most significant arguments, revealed by the public debate, in favor of such an obligation. By demonstrating that all of those arguments fail, I conclude that unless there is a sound argument for the obligation that I have overlooked, African American athletes and celebrities have no obligation that prohibits them from using the n-word.

In 2014, the leadership of the National Football League (NFL), the major league of American-style football in the United States, instructed the league's game officials to penalize players who use the n-word on the field. The league's action sparked considerable public debate in the United States for two reasons. First, because of its immense power and popularity, the NFL's action or inaction on many social matters frequently captures the public's attention. Second, the United States often carries out much of its public debate on social matters through sports. When Jackie Robinson broke the "color barrier" in the nation's Major League Baseball in 1947, and when track-athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos gave "Black Power salutes" during their medal ceremony at the 1968 Summer Olympics, considerable discussion of civil rights ensued. More recently, Penn State University's handling of Jerry Sandusky's sexual abuse of children and the NFL's handling of Ray Rice's domestic violence generated widespread discussion of sexual-abuse and domestic-violence issues.
Many, including the Fritz Pollard Alliance (FPA), praise the NFL’s stance on players’ use of the n-word. Named after the first African American coach in the NFL, the FPA comprises active and retired minority coaches, management, and other NFL personnel. Its mission is to “promote diversity and equality of job opportunity in the coaching, front office and scouting staffs of National Football League . . . teams.” The FPA issued a press release supporting the NFL that included quoting Harry Carson, FPA Executive Director, and John Wooten, FPA Chair, as follows:

The Fritz Pollard Alliance commends the National Football League and its Competition Committee on their commitment to ridding the League of racial slurs and other offensive, threatening, and abusive language. . . . Racial slurs . . . are the ugliest words in our language. And whatever arguments people want to make about the “N-Word” being benign, it reeks of hatred and oppression, and no matter the generation or the context, it simply cannot be cleansed of its taint. Others, including many African American players in the NFL, condemn the league’s stance and dispute the position that the n-word is an offensive term even when African Americans use it. As word spread that the NFL might ban the term, sportswriter Peter King interviewed three African American players. He writes: “It’s an atrocious idea,” said Seattle cornerback Richard Sherman. “It’s almost racist, to me. It’s weird they’re targeting one specific word. Why wouldn’t all curse words be banned then?” King also writes: “It’s a common word in so many players’ everyday lives,” said Tennessee cornerback Jason McCourty. “Among African-American players and people, it’s used among friends all the time. . . . It’s a pretty common term in the locker room.”

The contrasting responses to the NFL’s action constitute another installment of the long-running public debate in the United States over whether African Americans should use the n-word.5 The parties to the debate often adopt, either explicitly or implicitly, contrasting positions on whether African American athletes and celebrities are obligated morally not to use the n-word. This paper examines the most significant arguments, revealed by the public debate, in favor of such an obligation. By demonstrating that all of those arguments fail, I conclude that unless there is a sound argument for the obligation that I have overlooked, African American athletes and celebrities have no moral obligation that prohibits them from using the n-word.

I. PRELIMINARY MATTERS

The question that serves as the title of this paper is part of a larger collection of moral matters concerning African Americans, many of which the presented arguments likely bring to readers’ minds. This section situates the question at issue within three of the most significant of those matters.

1.1 A Relevant Power Relation in Sports

The fact that, in the context of their sports, African American athletes typically are subject to predominantly white authorities is relevant to most examinations of moral issues concerning those athletes. The purported obligation with which this paper is concerned is no exception. Although this power relation exists in most sports, professional and amateur alike, the NFL’s action with which this paper begins demonstrates well the issue.

African American players in the NFL who are penalized for using the n-word on the field are subject to predominantly white authorities on multiple levels. Only two of the NFL’s thirty-two teams have majority owners who are persons of color, neither of whom is African American. Those owners employ a white man, Roger Goodell, as the League’s Commissioner. African Americans hold 9.4 percent of the management positions in the League’s Office, none of the teams’ CEO positions, 15.6 percent of the teams’ general manager and head coach positions, 27.7 percent of the assistant coach positions, and 27.4 percent of the game official positions. Given that African Americans account for 69.7 percent of the players in the NFL, the described power relation is evident.

This power relation, in part, produces fertile ground for criticisms of contemporary sports and the roles they play in broader society. Perhaps the most significant is that contemporary sports perpetuate the exploitation and oppression of African Americans. This paper does not examine the many specific matters concerning that issue such as the ways sports perpetuate exploitation and oppression of African Americans. This paper does not examine the many specific matters concerning that issue such as the ways sports perpetuate exploitation and oppression of African Americans. This paper does not examine the many specific matters concerning that issue such as the ways sports perpetuate exploitation and oppression of African Americans. This paper does not examine the many specific matters concerning that issue such as the ways sports perpetuate exploitation and oppression of African Americans.

The parties to the debate often adopt, either explicitly or implicitly, contrasting positions on whether African American athletes and celebrities are obligated morally not to use the n-word. This paper examines the most significant arguments, revealed by the public debate, in favor of such an obligation. By
1.2 Some Complexities of the Debate

For several reasons, both the parties to the debate over whether African Americans should use the n-word, and the debate itself, are more complex than the introductory paragraphs of this paper reveal. First, not only African Americans take positions on African Americans' use of the n-word. Jennifer Granholm, Michigan's white then-governor, made her position public by attending the mock burial of the n-word performed by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) during its annual convention in 2007. Kelly Brewington writes: "Let's say good riddance to this vestige of slavery and racism, and say hello to a society that embraces all its people," said Michigan Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm. Tom Burlington, a white man who was fired from his news-anchor position at Philadelphia's Fox 29 television station for using the n-word in the workplace, took his position on the matter to federal court. He claimed that "he was fired by Fox29 for using the N-word—without malice—during a newsroom meeting, while black employees were not punished for using the same word at the station." Essentially, Burlington stakes out what I term, and argue against, in section 2.1: the "unfairness position." Those who adopt that position typically are white or otherwise are not African American. Burlington lost his case.

Second, among African Americans, the debate is not merely a dispute for academicians, nor is it merely one more cross-generational dispute over taste or etiquette such as those concerning hair and clothing styles, entertainment preferences, and public displays of affection. As later sections of this paper demonstrate, it is a debate over whether African Americans' use of the n-word perpetuates practical, moral wrongs such as harming African Americans, impeding their progress toward equality, and disrespecting iconic African American leaders. The dimensions of the debate are evidenced by what the NAACP sought to achieve through its mock burial of the n-word. Kevin Krollki writes: "Demosntrators marched in a mock and a humorous demonstration, at the NAACP's annual convention, to 'bury the n-word' and to persuade African Americans to stop using it." He adds: "Victoria Lanier... gave a mock obituary.... 'We will bury this offensive usage among all people, including African Americans,' Lanier said." Finally, among African Americans, the positions that the parties to the debate adopt are not a neat function of the parties' generations. Julian Bond was 67 and chair of the NAACP at the time of the mock burial. Brewington provides comments by participants whose ages, at the time of the event, ranged from 17 to 58. She writes of the youngest: "I know people who use it [the N-word] as a term of endearment, with the idea that if you use it yourself, you can ease the pain of the word," said Crystalee Forbes, 17, who participated in the procession. "But in reality, the weight of the word is not gone." Brewington writes of the oldest: "Young people aren't completely to blame, said Kenneth Curry, 58...." Older people haven't been educating younger folks about the power, the negative power, of that word," the Detroit resident said. She writes of another relatively older participant: "Cheryl Banks Boston, 54, was on vacation...in Detroit.... She decided to take part. 'This is such an important statement,' she said. 'I'm so pleasantly surprised to see young people leading this. I'm impressed.' These comments demonstrate that, among African Americans, there is no necessary connection between one's age and whether one believes that African Americans should not use the n-word.

1.3 "-er" and "-a" Variants of the N-Word

In large part because of its two principal forms, the "-er" and "-a" variants, even the n-word itself is more complex than the introductory paragraphs of this paper suggest. Some African Americans use both forms of the term, some use the "-a" variant but not the "-er" variant, while some eschew both variants. This suggests that not all consider the two variants to be on equal moral footing. In fact, some argue that the "-a" variant does not carry with it the same moral baggage as does the "-er" variant. Whereas the "-er" variant has an oppressive history that cannot be ignored, the "-a" variant performs quite different, useful functions for African Americans.

Jacquelyn Rahman summarizes the useful functions many ascribe to the "-a" variant this way: "The form has been productive in its capacity to convey a range of attitudinal stances...including solidarity, censure, and a proactive stance that seeks to bring about positive change." Because many African Americans recognize these useful functions and many whites do not, African Americans and whites often view the "-a" variant quite differently. Rahman writes: "Nigga...for some African Americans, is particularly salient for foregrounding an aspect of identity that casts the speaker, addressee, or referent as a pragmatic and resourceful survivor.... For some African Americans, this meaning overall counters the negative meanings that have historically existed outside the community." Positive attitudes about the "-a" variant, however, are not universal among African Americans. In her mock obituary during the NAACP's burial of the n-word, Lanier provides good reason to believe that many participants in the burial oppose both variants. Krollki writes that Lanier argued that "the racist slur with its roots in American slavery and all its modern variations as used by some blacks and in hip-hop could not be separated." Brewington writes of Lanier's obituary: "To be a nigga was about keeping it real,' Lanier said. 'It made it hard for young NAACP members like myself to fight for justice while being a member of the hip-hop generation.' Those comments at the mock burial are consistent with Jabari Asim's scholarly treatment of the two variants. He writes that those who support African Americans' use of the "-a" variant think "nigga" can be used without malice between blacks. Asim rejects that reasoning because it ignores the "-a" variant's history. He writes:
The logic behind the new spelling breaks down ... when one recalls that racist whites have used "nigga" nearly as often as they've used "nigger." To accept the validity of "nigga," we'd have to forget those lovely "nigga songsters" that used to grace the music parlors of respectable white families in nineteenth-century America. We'd also have to wink at all those segregationist senators—Helms, Thurmond, Stennis, et al.—who used to insist that "Negro" sounded just like "nigga" when pronounced with a Southern accent.28

In what follows, I apply the question this paper seeks to answer to both variants of the n-word. The preceding paragraphs reveal two justifications for doing so. First, although there is considerable disagreement among both laypersons and scholars over whether the two variants are on the same moral footing, it is clear that many of those who argue that African American athletes and celebrities are obligated not to use the n-word intend their arguments to apply to both variants. Thus, I evaluate the significant arguments for the obligation as those persons intend the arguments to apply.

Second, given that I conclude African American athletes and celebrities have no obligation that prohibits them from using the n-word, applying the question to both variants does justice to the correct side, no matter which it is, of the disagreement over the two variants. Any argument for the obligation is stronger, or, at least, just as strong, when applied to the "-er" variant as it is when applied to the "-a" variant. This is because the case for the useful functions of the "-a" variant are stronger, or at least just as strong as, any similar case for useful functions of the "-er" variant. Thus, if my arguments are sound concerning the "-er" variant, then, a fortiori, they are sound concerning the "-a" variant.

2. DISPENSING WITH TWO POSITIONS

In large part because of the n-word's oppressive history, African Americans' use of the term has evoked a variety of positions over the years. This section addresses two common positions that divert attention away from the considerations relevant to determining whether African American athletes and celebrities are obligated not to use the n-word.

2.1 Unfairness Position

African Americans who defend their use of the n-word generally agree with those who oppose them on one important matter: It is unacceptable for whites to use the term. The earlier quotation from McCourty's defense, for example, reveals only part of his position. Again quoting him, King also writes: "But once a white person says it, it's a derogatory term."29 Likewise, Patricia Wilson, an African American television producer says about whites using the term, "It's not okay, and I don't think it will ever be okay. Because when others use it, it's more dehumanizing, and they don't take on the historical responsibility."30

This leads some to argue that African Americans who defend their use of the n-word adopt a position that is unfair to—and thus, discriminatory against—those who are not African American. They reason that, if African Americans are free to use the term, others also ought to be free to use it. If not, then we make a distinction in the moral rights of persons based on race. Those who are not African American are denied a moral right solely on the basis of their race. Such distinctions are precisely what many have been fighting against for years. Granting one racial group the freedom to use a particular term while denying other racial groups the same freedom is in opposition to the goal of equality that many have long sought.

 Claiming that African Americans who believe they are free to use the n-word while whites are not impede progress toward the goal of equality is unhelpful in this context for several reasons. First, because we are so far from achieving that goal, whether only African Americans should be free to use the n-word is a peripheral matter of little significance at this stage of our societal development. Given the plethora of unfair situations various racial groups face, whether whites and others are treated unfairly by those who hold that only African Americans can use the n-word is an issue that can wait until society resolves other, more pressing, unfair situations.

Moreover, even if it is unfair that others are not free to use the n-word while African Americans are, it is reasonable to hold that the unfairness is a necessary step toward the goal of equality. After all, it is others' use of the n-word that produced its oppressive history. Those others used the term to reinforce stereotypes of, promote violence against, and justify denying rights to African Americans. Denying others the right to use the term today is an obvious step toward changing attitudes about African Americans. Changing those attitudes, in turn, is necessary in order to move closer to the goal of equality.

Perhaps the most important reason that raising the fairness issue in this context is unhelpful, however, is that, no matter how we resolve the issue, it gets us no closer to determining whether African American athletes and celebrities are obligated not to use the n-word. Suppose, on the one hand, we determine that because many African American athletes and celebrities use the n-word, fairness demands that others also are free to use the term. This tells us nothing about whether those athletes and celebrities should use the term in the first place. They may well be wrong to use it, and it is only through their error that others also are free to use it. If so, the correct inference is that African American athletes and celebrities misguidedly and unintentionally produce the conditions that grant others the freedom to use the n-word. Suppose, on the other hand, we determine that fairness does not demand that others also are free to use the n-word. Again, this tells us nothing about whether African American athletes and celebrities should use the term. It tells us only that if those persons are free to use the term, it does not follow that others also are free to use it. There may be a sound argument, unrelated to fairness, for why African American athletes and celebrities are obligated not to use the term.
2.2 Benign-Intent Position

Many African American athletes and celebrities defend their use of the n-word by claiming they do not mean anything negative when they use the term. While racists use the term to further oppression, African Americans use it to express endearment or affection for other African Americans. Moreover, as Asim explains, many argue that, actually, they are doing something positive by using the term: changing its meaning. By using the term to express endearment or affection, African Americans strip the term of its power to oppress. They take control of the term and infuse it with a new meaning that they provide. Once they have fully co-opted the term, it will be considerably more difficult for racists to use it for oppressive purposes.

Asim, however, argues that the attempt to co-opt the term is not as clean as many suggest. He writes: "I'm not at all suggesting that such change is impossible, but in this instance it is a romantic conclusion at best. . . . The N word doesn't appear to have lost much of its 'sting in the general culture.' . . . Outside hip-hop's boundaries, it remains an underground word." Asim concludes that using the term in public is unacceptable. He writes: "Out in public is where we depend on polite speech. . . . In a public space . . . I should not expect . . . tacit permission to assault [others] with 'nigger'-laden speech any more than I should expect . . . acceptance of my shouting into a cell phone."32

The concerns Asim raises demonstrate that, like other moral questions, there are additional relevant considerations besides actors' intent that we must examine. Typically, benign intent alone does not insulate us from possible obligations. Consider a spousal relationship between A and B. Suppose A innocently uses a particular phrase, X, in interactions with B.33 A's intent when using the phrase not only is perfectly benign, but A actually intends X to be an expression of affection for B. Moreover, others outside A and B's relationship also recognize X as an expression of affection and welcome hearing their loved ones use it. Upon hearing X, however, B does not feel affection from A. Because of a particular history with the phrase, B becomes sad and depressed. B explains the history to A and asks A not to use X. A responds that B's request is unreasonable because A means only to express affection. In such a case, A's benign intent alone does not determine whether A is free to continue using X when interacting with B.

We must examine B's history with X in order to make that determination. Suppose we find that B was kidnapped as child, held hostage for many months, and tormented by a captor who used X repeatedly in his sadistic torture of B. In such a case, we likely would conclude that A is obligated not to use X in interactions with B. On the other hand, if B's history with X were significantly different, we might conclude that A has no such obligation. The point is that we must examine B's history with X in order to draw a justified conclusion. A's benign intent alone does not tell us everything we need to know. Likewise, n-word users' benign intent does not tell us everything we need to know in order to draw a justified conclusion regarding whether African American athletes and celebrities are obligated not to use the term.

3. Significant Arguments in Favor of the Obligation

The public debate reveals several relevant considerations that form the bases for arguments that conclude African American athletes and celebrities are obligated not to use the n-word. This section examines the most significant of those arguments.

3.1 The Term Is Offensive

Many believe African American athletes and celebrities should not use the n-word because it is offensive no matter who uses it. These words in the previously cited FPA press release suggests this view: "Whatever arguments people want to make about the 'N-Word' being benign, it reeks of hatred and oppression, and no matter the generation or the context, it simply cannot be cleansed of its taint." Likewise, Angelou claims that just as a poison is poisonous no matter its container, the n-word is offensive no matter who uses it.

It is tempting to reason in this fashion: If important African Americans, such as those in the FPA and Angelou, think other African Americans should not use the n-word, the matter must be settled in favor of athletes and celebrities having an obligation not to use the term. Despite the temptation, however, drawing that conclusion is unwarranted for two reasons. First, we are not justified in concluding that the n-word, in fact, is offensive when African Americans use it. Although many influential African Americans hold views similar to those of the FPA and of Angelou, various quotations presented thus far demonstrate that many influential African Americans hold opposing views. Those opposing views include both the weaker claim that it actually is empowering when African Americans use it. When it comes to forming the basis of a moral obligation, it is problematic to argue that one set of influential African Americans' views are more justified than are some other set's views. Concluding that African American athletes and celebrities are obligated not to use the term because the FPA, Angelou, and others believe the term is offensive no matter who uses it would be to privilege one side of the debate without good reason. We are no more justified in privileging the views of the FPA and Angelou, and similar views, than we are in privileging the opposing views.

Suppose, however, that there actually is some good reason for us to privilege the positions of the FPA and Angelou. We still should not draw the further conclusion, from that fact alone, that African American athletes and celebrities are obligated not to use the n-word. Because African Americans' uses of the term
are instances of expression, perhaps the best way to demonstrate why we should not draw that further conclusion is through John Stuart Mill's views on freedom of expression. Mill argues that society ought not censor the expression of deviant views. That, however, is exactly what drawing the conclusion at issue does. It censors African American athletes and celebrities by ascribing to them an obligation not to express themselves as they wish because their chosen expression deviates from what is acceptable.

As Mill explains, society pays one of two costs if it censors a deviant view. If the deviant view is true or partially true, society loses access to the truth, something of obvious value. If the deviant view is false, society loses the value gained by confronting false ideas with the truth. That value lies in maintaining the "living" nature of the truth and preventing it from lapsing into mere dogma. The costs Mill identifies apply if society censors African American athletes and celebrities by ascribing to them an obligation not to use the n-word. If African Americans who defend their use of the n-word are correct, then society loses either the minimal value of a harmless term of affection, or the significant value of co-opting from racists a term they use to further oppression. If, as we have been assuming for this argument, those African Americans who defend their use of the n-word are incorrect, then society loses the significant value of confronting its history of racism through experiences with those who use the term. Many of us cringe when we hear the term in a song or through a microphone that is placed too close to the action in a sports field or arena. Our discomfort, however, is of great value. It forces us to consider why we cringe. In so doing, we confront society's racism, both past and present, thereby insuring that it remains a "living" aspect of our history that we must overcome, rather than relegating it to the status of a historical concern that few care to understand and confront.

3.2 Using the Term Harms African Americans

The public debate suggests a related argument according to which African Americans' use of the n-word harms all African Americans through reinforcing stereotypes and segregation. Reinforcing stereotypes and segregation causes a plethora of possible harms, both physical and psychological. The possible physical harms include, but are not limited to, promoting racist violence against African Americans and impeding African Americans' ability to satisfy their basic needs. The possible psychological harms include, but are not limited to, producing feelings of despair and inferiority among African Americans. This argument is implied by these words in the previously cited FPA press release: "reeks of hatred and oppression." Part of the previously presented quotation from Angelou suggests the argument more directly: "The n-word was created to divest people of their humanity." Sheinin and Thompson develop the idea further when they write that the n-word "obtain[ed] its awful power during the era of slavery, [and] retain[ed]

that power through a century of lynchings and Jim Crow segregation." They add: "The word is visible almost anywhere there is racial conflict: the lawless realm of social media, the vast landscape of pop culture or the streets of Ferguson, Mo."

The driving spirit of this argument is the view that eradicating stereotypes and segregation would produce a more desirable state of affairs than is the current state. Since few would deny that, I take as a given that our society without stereotypes and segregation would be more desirable, ceteris paribus, than it is now. Despite considerable agreement regarding that desirability, using it to argue that African American athletes and celebrities are obligated not to use the n-word is problematic.

Unsurprisingly, this argument is subject to a debate similar to that involving the first argument. There is simply no consensus, even among influential African Americans, regarding whether African Americans' use of the n-word contributes to the harm at issue. Undoubtedly, the FPA, Angelou, and others believe that it reinforces stereotypes and segregation. On the other hand, undoubtedly, those who claim that their use of the term either is a harmless expression of affection or actually co-opt the term from racists believe that it does not contribute to the harm at issue. As was the case with the first argument, concluding that African American athletes and celebrities are obligated not to use the term because the FPA, Angelou, and others believe the term harms African Americans as a group, privileges, without good reason, one side of the debate.

Similarly to the first argument, however, even if African Americans' use of the n-word, in fact, harms African Americans as a group, it does not ground successfully an obligation that prohibits African American athletes and celebrities from using the term. Attempting to ground the obligation at issue on that group harm encounters two significant problems. First, it is not clear that the group harm is a type of harm that one is obligated not to produce. Harms come in a plethora of forms. Of those forms, some are such that individuals clearly are obligated not to cause them. Others are such that individuals clearly are not obligated to avoid causing them. Still others are such that it is quite complicated to sort out whether individuals are obligated not to cause them. The group harm in question does not fall into the first category as it has little in common with other harms in that category. It is most closely akin to the harms in the second category.

The salient feature of harms that fall into the first category is that they generally are direct harms persons cause to other persons' bodies, property, or interests. Under typical circumstances, Joe is obligated not to assault Tom and he is obligated not to steal Mary's car because the former causes a direct harm to Tom's body and the latter causes a direct harm to Mary's property. Likewise, Sally is obligated not to defeat Ann in an athletic competition by nefarious cheating because it causes a direct harm to Jane's interests.
The group harm African Americans purportedly cause when they use the n-word does not share the salient feature of the harms in the first category. The concern that underlies the argument at issue is that African Americans’ use of the term reinforces stereotypes and segregation. Reinforcing those things is not a direct harm to persons’ bodies, property, or interests caused by those who use the n-word for two reasons. First, it is not a direct harm at all. Reinforcing stereotypes and segregation contributes indirectly to such harms, but does not cause those harms directly. Second, other people cause the countless harms that stem from stereotypes or segregation, not the African Americans who use the n-word. Stereotypes and segregation might motivate racists to do bodily harm to African Americans, to damage their property, or otherwise to harm their interests, but it is the racists who actually cause those harms. Even if African Americans reinforce stereotypes and segregation by using the n-word, racists still choose to cause the harms at issue.

The group harm at issue is more akin to the harms that fall into the second category. The salient feature of harms that fall into that category is that they generally are harms persons cause to other persons’ interests through morally justified activities. If Sally defeats Ann in the athletic competition through fair play, she violates no obligation even though she harms Ann’s interests. If Sally is admitted to law school over Sue because her activities produced a better application than did Sue’s activities, she violates no obligation even though she harms Sue’s interests. In neither case is there anything to which one can point that is nefarious or unfair on Sally’s part. Although Sally’s successes harm Ann’s and Sue’s interests, the harm was caused by Sally’s morally justified activities.

Likewise, African American athletes and celebrities typically are engaging in morally justified activities when they use the n-word. Often, they are producing art, such as music or films, or they are interacting with people with whom they have special bonds, such as teammates or opponents during athletic competitions. Those situations have more in common with the situations associated with the harms in the second category than they do with the situations associated with the harms in the first category. After all, the harms in the first category involve assaults, thefts, and other nefarious activities.

An earlier point suggests the second problem with this argument: the harm from reinforcing stereotypes and segregation is not caused by African Americans who use the n-word, but, rather, by racists who cause harms in the name of those stereotypes and segregation. Instead of asking who causes the harm, however, one can push the question further back and ask who actually reinforces stereotypes and segregation. Similarly to the question of who causes the harm, the reinforcement of stereotypes and segregation is not perpetrated by African Americans who use the n-word, but, rather, by racists who point to African Americans’ use of the term as an excuse to retain stereotypes and avoid integrating. There is no good reason why African Americans’ use of the n-word should further stereotypes. If I see a video of an offensive, anti-immigration diatribe by a person from Texas wearing a gun and riding a horse, I am not justified in drawing any conclusions about what all people from Texas, or all people who own guns, or all people who ride horses think about immigration. If I see a video of a Muslim inciting violence against the United States and Europe, I am not justified in drawing any conclusions about what all Muslims think of such violent acts. If I draw such conclusions in either case, the error is mine. Likewise, if one draws conclusions about all African Americans because some use the n-word, then one makes a similar error. We should not place the burden of eradicating that error on African Americans who use the n-word. It should rest on the persons who make the error.

3.3 Those Who Use the Term Are Bad Role Models

Many believe African American athletes and celebrities should not use the n-word because doing so makes them bad role models. Again, this argument is implied by these words quoted in the previously presented FPA press release: “‘NFL players are among the hardest working young men in this country, courageously trying to win for their teams and millions of fans. However, there is no value in using these disgusting words. It just diminishes the game and everyone involved.’” Although the press release does not state this directly, it implies that the players who use the term are bad role models because they do not present themselves to fans and the league for which they play in an appropriate manner. Patricia Wilson also implies that there is a role-model element to African Americans’ use of the n-word. An expansion of Sheinin and Thompson’s previously presented quotation of Wilson reads as follows:

One should have a lot of responsibility when using the word... When [non-black] people say, “Well, you hear it in rap music... Is it okay for others to use?” And the answer is hell no. It’s not okay, and I don’t think it will ever be okay. Because when others use it, it’s more dehumanizing, and they don’t take on the historical responsibility. Anybody can be checked at any time, [and told], “Look, that’s not cool. You can’t use it like that. I don’t give a damn what you hear on the radio.”

Wilson’s words join those who worry that African Americans who use the n-word are bad role models whose examples cause others to use the term. Many worry that those examples cause whites, a group that almost all believe should not use the n-word, to think they are free to use the term. Sheinin and Thompson state the concern directly when they write: “It isn’t difficult to imagine how a white teenager, perhaps lacking a deep understanding of the United States’ racial history, could be left wondering whether it is okay to use the word—when it is a constant presence in his generation’s music and in the hallways of his school.”

Since people often mimic their favorite athletes’ and celebrities’ behavior, both in and out of competition, it is unsurprising that many attempt to use athletes’ and
celebrities' role-model status to ground an obligation that prohibits those athletes and celebrities from using the n-word. Doing so, however, encounters difficulties both in the assumption that those persons have role-model status and obligations, and in the assumption that using the n-word is a role-model failure.

Assume for the time being that athletes and celebrities have role-model status and obligations. Even granting that, we are not justified in concluding that African American athletes and celebrities violate their role-model obligations by using the n-word. To justifiably claim that a person has violated a role-model obligation, we must point to some wrong that person has committed. We cannot do this without begging the question, however, since we have not yet found a successful argument concluding that African American athletes' and celebrities' use of the n-word actually is wrong. In fact, this argument has the matter backward. It attempts to demonstrate that African American athletes' and celebrities' use of the n-word is wrong because using the term is a role-model failure. One needs to approach the matter in the reverse direction. One needs to demonstrate that African American athletes and celebrities are role-model failures when they use the n-word because using the term is wrong. So far, however, we have not identified a successful argument for that position.

Perhaps, however, I am uncharitable to this argument by claiming that it begs the question. That claim is based on the fact that we have not yet identified some moral wrong African American athletes and celebrities commit by using the n-word. One might object that in order for a person to fail as a role model, that person need not commit a moral wrong. Since being a role model involves demonstrating to some set of others how to live well, or, at least, how to live well some particular aspect of life, being a good role model involves more than doing what is morally right and avoiding doing what is morally wrong. It also involves doing morally neutral things that contribute to living well, while avoiding morally neutral things that detract from so living. Using the n-word is one of the latter things.

Although I do not believe those in the public debate have demonstrated successfully that using the n-word detracts from living well, I will not quibble with them on that matter at this point. There is something to be said for the claim that using a term that makes many people feel badly speaks negatively about how one lives even if one does not intend to make those others feel badly. Prima facie, any behavior that makes many people feel bad provides a reason to judge negatively that aspect of how one lives even if that behavior is not immoral. Thus, I will accept for the time being that, ceteris paribus, one lives better if one does not use the term.

Even granting that point, however, the argument at issue still fails. Using African American athletes' and celebrities' role-model status to argue that they should not use the n-word encounters two difficulties. The first is in the assumption that they have role-model status. Proponents of this argument typically ascribe role-model status to athletes and celebrities too readily, and extend that status too far into those athletes' and celebrities' lives beyond the particular fields, such as football or music, for which the public knows them.

I argue elsewhere that academicians and laypeople alike are prone to this mistake, especially when they evaluate athletes' and celebrities' behavior. Too often, they ascribe a generalized role-model status to well-known individuals that extends into aspects of those individuals' lives beyond their chosen fields. I do not repeat here the arguments for my position except to note that ascriptions of generalized role-model status often unreasonably violate individuals' privacy and freedom to conduct their lives as they choose.

To counter that mistake, I argue for an account of role models that ascribes generalized role-model status to individuals less frequently and typically does not extend it as far into individuals' lives beyond their chosen fields. I describe my position this way:

One adopts role-model status either by taking on roles that make one a role model or by holding oneself out to be a role model. Individuals do the former by freely accepting roles that carry with them an understood role-model status such as becoming a parent, priest, professor, doctor, judge, or police officer. Holding oneself out to be a role model is the more controversial and complex of the two ways one can become a role model. Although some actually proclaim that they are, or desire to be, role models, they typically hold themselves out to be role models more indirectly by using positions of fame, authority, or power to proclaim what is best or how people should live. If this position is sound, unless athletes and celebrities hold themselves out to be role models in a generalized sense, one is justified in ascribing role-model status to them only with respect to matters that are associated with success in their fields, such as skills, efforts, and motivations. Since their role-model status does not extend further into their lives, by not living well outside their fields, they might violate other sorts of obligations they owe to various people, but they violate no obligation to model for people generally how to live well.

Like athletes and celebrities as a whole, some African American athletes and celebrities hold themselves out to be role models in a generalized sense beyond their chosen fields. Colin Kaepernick, African American former quarterback for the NFL's San Francisco 49ers, holds himself out to be a role model in a more generalized sense by kneeling during the playing of the national anthem prior to the start of games. He does so to protest, and raise awareness of, oppressive treatment of persons of color. Steve Wyche writes: "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color," Kaepernick told NFL Media ... after the game. ... "I am not looking for approval. I have to stand up for people that are oppressed." By taking this stance, Kaepernick holds himself out to be a role model in a sense that is generalized beyond his chosen field. More of his behavior is open to evaluation from a
role-model perspective than is the behavior of other athletes and celebrities who
do not similarly hold themselves out to be role models. This is why one can ask
reasonably whether Kaepernick failed as role model by not voting in the 2016
election,48 while one cannot ask reasonably the same question of other nonvoting
athletes and celebrities who do not hold themselves out to be role models.49

Also like athletes and celebrities as a whole, those who hold themselves out to be role models in a generalized sense are a relatively small minority. Nevertheless, if those who hold themselves as such also use the n-word, proponents of this argument can ask whether their use of the term violates a role-model obligation. Even if proponents successfully demonstrate such a violation in a particular case or set of cases, however, it does not provide what proponents want. Proponents argue that all African American athletes and celebrities are obligated not to use the n-word, not just those relatively few who hold themselves out to be role models in a generalized sense.

Suppose my position is mistaken, and athletes and celebrities have a generalized role-model status. There still is a second problem with using African American athletes' and celebrities' role-model status to argue that they should not use the n-word. That problem lies in determining for whom they are bad role models when they use the term.

The most obvious group for whom African American athletes and celebrities are role models is young African Americans. With respect to that group, it is hard to understand how using the n-word violates a role-model obligation. Remember that proponents of the argument have not demonstrated successfully that it is morally wrong for African Americans to use the term, and I simply have granted thus far that, ceteris paribus, one lives better if one does not use the term. For the present purposes, I no longer grant that point because the ceteris paribus clause does not hold for this group. Since the n-word already is ensconced in the lives of many young African Americans, it is unclear how athletes' and celebrities' use of the n-word affects how those young people live. It is unlikely that young African Americans follow athletes' and celebrities' lead when they use the term. It is more likely that African American athletes and celebrities use terms such as the n-word as adults because they began using them when they were young. If that is true, one is not justified in claiming that African American athletes and celebrities who use the n-word are role-model failures with respect to young African Americans.

As the quotations in the first paragraph of this subsection indicate, however, those who raise the role-model issue often are not concerned with young African Americans following the leads of athletes and celebrities. Frequently, they are concerned with another group for whom those athletes and celebrities might be role models: young whites. Given that almost everyone agrees that whites ought not use the term, it is clear that, ceteris paribus, whites live better when

they do not use the n-word. Thus, with respect to young whites, many question whether African American athletes and celebrities who use the n-word model living well.

Using young whites to argue that African American athletes and celebrities who use the n-word are role-model failures, however, is extremely problematic. Since white oppressors created the n-word, it is negatively ironic to use young whites to argue that African Americans are obligated not to use the term. Whites should not use the n-word because of the history of white racists using the term to further oppression of another racial group. The burden of making that clear to young whites should not rest with African American athletes and celebrities. That burden should rest with whites such as parents, teachers, and clergy. Holding that African American athletes and celebrities have a role-model obligation not to use the n-word because young whites might follow their lead and use the term saddles them with a burden they do not deserve. The last people who should bear the burden of demonstrating to young whites that they should not use the n-word are African Americans who are, or whose ancestors were, oppressed by racist whites who used(d) the term as a tool of that oppression. Many African Americans freely take on that burden and contribute greatly to teaching young whites about the oppressive history of the n-word. Freely taking on such a burden, though, is quite different from having the burden thrust upon them through a moral obligation.

3.4 Using the Term Dishonors Those Who Fought for Equality

The public debate reveals a fourth argument in favor of the obligation at issue that perhaps is the most powerful. That argument is based on the view that African American athletes and celebrities who use the n-word dishonor those, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Jackie Robinson, and Muhammad Ali, who fought for equality. Peter King raises this position directly when he writes about Bill Willis, one of the early African American players in the NFL who, because of then-legal segregation, could not join his team for a road game in Miami. He writes: "'For someone who uses the n-word,' said Carson, 'it dishonors Bill Willis, and it dishonors the sacrifices he and others have made for others in the future. I find it disheartening players can justify using the word in any form today, in 2014.'"50 Even some African Americans who defend their use of the term readily acknowledge the suffering of, and the sacrifices made by, earlier generations of African Americans. Sheinin and Thompson write: “I'm empathetic to the older generation because they lived it,' said [Donte] Stallworth, the former NFL wide receiver. 'I'm not saying let the emotions go or let what happened [in the past] go... I'm not downplaying the significance of it.'”51

The moving nature of this argument is undeniable. Few, if any, find it comfortable to be saddled with the label of dishonoring those who fought for equality.
Likewise, most, if not all, African Americans desire to honor earlier generations of African Americans who suffered and sacrificed much in their quest for equality. Nevertheless, the argument encounters difficulties. The first difficulty is that there is no reason to conclude that African Americans who use the n-word believe they are dishonoring anyone. This is because there is no reason to think that, compared to African Americans who eschew the term, athletes and celebrities who use it hold in any less esteem those who fought for equality. Since it is an empirical matter, absent empirical evidence to the contrary, there is no reason to conclude that Sherman and Jay-Z have any less reverence for the iconic figures who suffered and sacrificed much for equality than do Carson and Angelou. For all we know, if asked about their views of those iconic figures, Sherman, Jay-Z, Carson, and Angelou would respond with similar language.52

Proponents of this argument, however, might claim that how much esteem African Americans who use the n-word have for those iconic figures is irrelevant. The relevant fact is that their behavior dishonors those who suffered and sacrificed for equality even if they do not intend such dishonor. By using the n-word they, in fact, dishonor those who suffered and sacrificed, even if they hold those persons in high esteem.

Although it is true that one’s behavior can dishonor another person whom one actually holds in high esteem, the objection is unconvincing. It unjustifiably applies a standard of behavior across generations. Although we often are justified in applying standards of behavior across generations, such as when we expect every generation of individuals not to violate the persons and property of others, we often are unjustified in applying one generation’s standards to future generations. Some standards of behavior, such as aesthetic standards, simply do not carry the weight necessary to justify applying them across generations. Those who expected young people in the 1960s and 1970s to wear their hair in the dominant fashions of the 1950s were unjustified in applying their aesthetic standards to future generations. Likewise, those who expect contemporary artists to produce music similar to the music they enjoyed decades ago also are unjustified. The position captured by the objection is more akin to the latter applications across generations of aesthetic standards than it is to the former application across generations of the expectation that individuals not violate the persons and property of others.

Consider a different context in which one might expect future generations to behave similarly to one’s own generation. I have deceased relatives who came of age in Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. Quite naturally, later in their lives, they had striking emotions and reactions to reading John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*. Since the novel concerns life as they knew it when they were young, those relatives would be justified in expecting me to be moved by the novel’s depiction of the sorts of struggles and hardships they endured. They would not be justified, however, in expecting me to be moved, and behave because of being moved, in exactly similar ways as they were. I simply lack the personal history with the time and the events that is necessary for me to be moved and react in exactly similar ways. In the likely event that I read the novel and am moved and react in ways different from how they were moved and react, they would be unjustified in arguing that I dishonor them.

Those who think all African Americans must behave in similar ways in order to honor those who suffered and sacrificed for equality are similarly unjustified. Carson and Angelou are justified in expecting Sherman and Jay-Z to honor those who suffered and sacrificed for equality, but they are not justified in expecting Sherman and Jay-Z to demonstrate that honor in exactly similar ways as do they. Sherman and Jay-Z came of age during a different time and lack the personal history with the time and events that helped to shape Carson’s and Angelou’s identities. Those identities produce the ways in which Carson and Angelou honor those who suffered and sacrificed for equality. Because a different time and different events helped to shape Sherman’s and Jay-Z’s identities, we should not expect them to honor those who suffered and sacrificed for equality in exactly similar ways as do Carson and Angelou.

4. CONCLUSION

Because of its oppressive history, it is common for people to cringe when they hear the n-word. Those who cringe comprise African Americans, whites, and persons of other races. For many of those who recoil at utterances of the n-word, their shock is intensified when they hear African American athletes and celebrities use the term. This is not surprising since those figures’ use of the term finds its way into various media, such as the internet, television, and radio, to which most people have easy and frequent access. It is one thing to overhear someone use the n-word while walking on the street, and quite another to hear it repeatedly in music, during sporting events, and the like. For those who cringe when they hear the term, the former is bad, but the latter, because of its frequency and how difficult it is to avoid, is much worse. All this makes it unsurprising that many wish African American athletes and celebrities would not use the n-word. It also is unsurprising that many go so far as to argue that those athletes and celebrities are obligated not to use the term.

Despite being an idea with which it is easy for many to sympathize, the position that African American athletes and celebrities are obligated not to use the n-word is unjustified. The public debate on the matter reveals several significant arguments in favor of such an obligation, all of which are based on compelling concerns. If my arguments are sound, however, all those arguments in favor of the obligation fail. Unless there is a sound argument for the obligation that I have overlooked, African American athletes and celebrities have no obligation that prohibits them from using the n-word.

John Carroll University
NOTES

1. Fritz Pollard Alliance, "Mission Statement."
2. Harry Carson and John Wooten quoted in Fritz Pollard Alliance, “FPA Commends NFL.”
4. Ibid.
5. For a history of the debate, see Asim (N Word, Part V).
6. Sheinin and Thompson, “Redefining the Word.”
7. Ibid.
8. I thank an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments that inspired me to write this section and to revise other parts of this paper.
10. Ibid., 26–35.
11. Ibid., 25.
12. For a thorough and powerful treatment of the numerous ways sports in predominantly white colleges and universities perpetuate such exploitation and oppression, see Hawkins (New Plantation).
13. NAACP, “‘N’ Word Is Laid to Rest.”
15. Wood, “Suit Over Fired Fox Anchor’s Use.”
16. Thompson, “Fox Anchor’s ‘N-Word’ Case.”
18. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
23. African Americans’ and whites’ often-differing attitudes about the “-a” variant are part of a larger set of differing attitudes that result from whites frequently not understanding the functions of various aspects of African American culture. Morgan (Real Hiphop) and Curry (“I’m Too Real for Yah”) examine those functions through analyses of hip-hop.
27. Asim, N Word, 224.
28. Ibid.
30. Wilson, quoted in Sheinin and Thompson, “Redefining the Word.”
32. Ibid., 230.
33. Although this example involves language, I do not claim that the language A uses to communicate to B is analogous to African Americans' use of the n-word in either of its variants. The two cases differ in many respects, most notably that the language A uses does not involve the centuries of oppression in broader society that the n-word involves. Because I recognize that and other ways the two cases differ, I claim merely that the example demonstrates that moral questions concerning acts are not answered by considering only actors' intent.
34. Fritz Pollard Alliance, “FPA Commends NFL.”
36. Fritz Pollard Alliance, “FPA Commends NFL.”
37. Sheinin and Thompson, “Redefining the Word.”
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Producing exhaustive accounts of the kinds of harms that fall into the three categories is beyond the purposes of this paper. I believe that identifying the salient features of the harms that fall into the three categories is sufficient to demonstrate that the group harm at issue does not successfully ground an obligation that prohibits African American athletes and celebrities from using the n-word.
41. Fritz Pollard Alliance, “FPA Commends NFL.”
42. Sheinin and Thompson, “Redefining the Word.”
43. Ibid.
44. Spurgin, “Hey, How Did I Become a Role Model?”
45. “The freedom to conduct their lives as they choose” includes the proviso that they do not harm, or significantly increase the risk of harm to, others.
47. Wyche, “Colin Kaepernick Explains.”
49. I do not introduce this question in order to argue for what I hold to be the correct answer. I introduce it only to demonstrate that Kaepernick is subject to questions about whether he fails as a role model—questions to which athletes and celebrities who have not similarly held themselves out to be role models are not subject.
51. Sheinin and Thompson, “Redefining the Word.”
52. Although I am unaware of empirical evidence that demonstrates African American athletes and celebrities who use the n-word hold iconic figures in as high esteem as do those who eschew the term, anecdotal evidence suggests they do. For example, the hip-hop artist Common includes the n-word in his lyrics, yet he honors Martin Luther King, Jr., in his "I Have a Dream" song. See Mapes ("10 Songs"). Also, in a striking move, he uses both a poem recited by Maya Angelou and the n-word in his "Dreamer" song. See Cooper ("Maya Angelou Criticizes Common's Use").

REFERENCES


