

From Jezebel to Ho: An Analysis of Creative and Imaginative Shared Representations of African-American Women

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Previous studies have affirmed popular culture represents African-American women in narrowly defined stereotypical roles that are long lasting, dichotomous and often degrading (e.g. Boylorn, 2008; Collins, 2004; Entman & Rojecki, 1993; hooks, 1992; Wallace, 1979; Lubiano, 1992; Maas and Holbrook, 2001). However, not as common are studies that look at creative and imaginative shared portrayals of the group. This rhetorical analysis attempts to fill this void by applying symbolic convergence theory (SCT) with its critical method, fantasy theme analysis (FTA) to study Don Imus's 2007 statements about black, female basketball players.

Symbolic convergence theory (SCT) helps explain how groups co-create meanings, emotions, values through rhetoric to help make sense out of a common experience. Such studies are important, as popular culture is an essential source of ideas that can shape people's perceptions of themselves and other people. The concept is a particularly attractive method to help scholars analyze how complex content converges into shared meaning. Rhetoric traced in fantasies may illustrate sexist, racist viewpoints cloaked in themes that Bormann, Cragan, and Shields (1994) call "modal societal fantasy themes," which are fundamental beliefs and values that comprise society's symbolic reality (p. 260).

Although, the Imus faux pas occurred several years ago, this essay is important for several reasons. First, many of the same stereotypes continue to resurface in media portrayals of African-American women. For example, demonstrating these portrayals have made their way into social media, dozens of Facebook hate groups target Michelle Obama, using both racist and sexist language that questions her personality, femininity and beauty (Moody, 2011).

Secondly, previous studies addressing the Don Imus case focus primarily on freedom of speech issues, Federal Communications Commission laws governing racist and sexist language, perceptions of his firing and media framing of his comments. For instance, Steiner's (2009) analysis of religious language concluded journalists used spiritual lingo in contradictory ways, questioning whether he deserved to be condemned as a sinner and challenging his expressions of penance as insincere. Conversely, Calvert (2007) addressed whether the FCC should expand its regulatory power to include racist and sexist language. Tying the issue to race and culture, Ladson-Billings (2009) explored how negative constructions of black women in popular culture find their way into the education system, which in turn holds black teachers and mothers to a different set of standards than their Anglo counterparts. Finally, Awkward (2009) looked at how the handling of the incident affected race relations.

While these scholarly works hold immense value, and offer a strong foundation for future research on the topic, they fail to provide a feminist communication/critical race perspective, which is important to address with issues dealing with sex and race. Additionally, they only focus on Imus's role in the incident and not the contributions of his co-hosts.

Finally, this analysis provides a fresh illustration of hegemony and gatekeeper functions by applying it to the Imus incident. Hegemonic consent is evident in the normalization of stereotypical, one-dimensional representations found in Imus's comments that under other circumstances would seem inappropriate. This evaluation of mass media portrayals might raise community awareness and foster sensitivity to race, culture and gender issues, leading to better portrayals of marginalized groups.

Review of the Literature

Lippmann (1922) defined “stereotype” as a form of perception that imposes ways of seeing. Stereotypes often target race, gender, age, disabilities and sexuality. Members of the dominant group or cultural elite often use stereotypes to dehumanize other cultural groups that differ in values, beliefs or physical characteristics to maintain its own political power and social control (Lassiter, 1999).

Early analyses found media deeply implicated in the patterns of discrimination operating against black people. For instance, historically, portrayals of African-American men and women in cinema were extremely negative with Blackface representations dominating pop culture. Terms such as “Jungle bunny” or “porch monkey” encompass references to laziness, dark skin, African culture, coarse hair and animal-like qualities, particularly those of monkeys and apes. Other common derogatory terms include “tar baby,” “pickaninny” and “jigaboo” all of which have exaggerated facial features such as eyes, noses, teeth, meant to give the impression that they are half-human and half-animal (Origins of Racist Terms, 2011). People of color depicted in such roles often appear savage-like and not particularly smart or essential to society. In addition to overemphasizing and ridiculing their facial features, such portrayals also feature them eating certain foods such as watermelon, fried chicken and chitterlings (Counihan & Van Esterik, 1997).

The civil rights era presented some different portrayals. During this period, African Americans were often associated with racialized issues such as bussing and segregation—topics that might fuel racial prejudice by Whites. In the 1980s and 90s stereotypes of black people shifted and the primary images were of drug lords, crack victims, the underclass, the homeless and subway muggers (Drummond, 1995).

Representations are noteworthy because stereotyping can be a social control tool to build group solidarity and create an “us versus them” mentality. People attach negative qualities depicted in the media to groups and use them to justify their oppression (Collins, 2004). Moreover, many negative stereotypes spill over into news media portrayals of minorities. Numerous scholars have observed that news stereotypes of people of color are pervasive with African Americans more likely than Whites to appear as perpetrators in drug and violent crime stories on network news (e.g. Dates & Barlow, 1993; Martindale, 1990; Collins, 2004; Poindexter, Smith, & Heider, 2003; Entman & Rojecki, 2000).

In the end, stereotypes persist because “they fulfill important identity needs for the dominant culture” thereby maintaining the status quo and preserving hegemony (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005, p. 112).

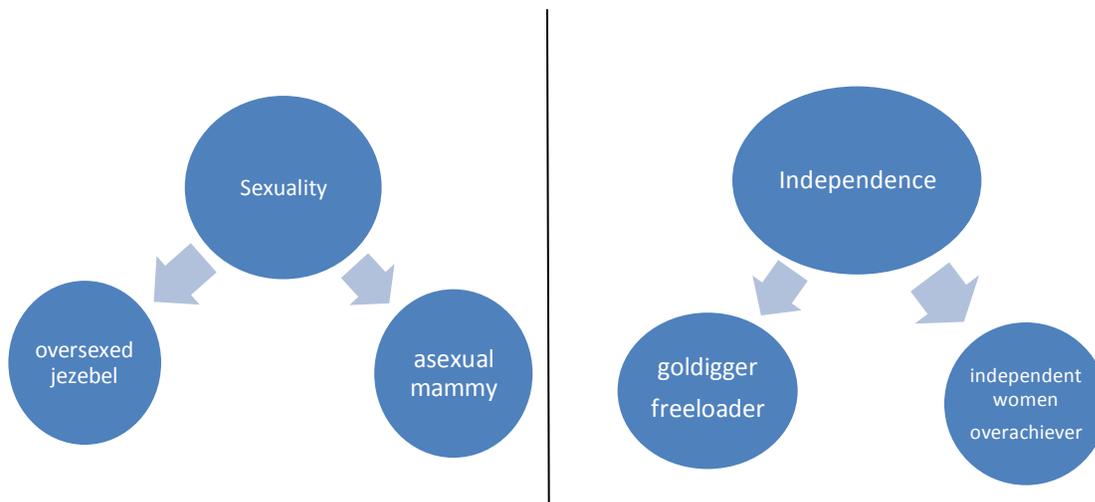
Feminist theory

To understand the cultural narratives Imus and his co-hosts used in their fantasy vision, it is important to study the tenets of feminist theory in general. Feminist theorists agree mass media serve as instruments to transmit stereotypical, patriarchal and hegemonic values about women, which in turn make hierarchical and distorted sex-role stereotypes appear normal (e.g. Carter and Steiner, 2004; Hartmann, 1981; Vavrus (2009). Van Zoonen (1994) summarized this transmission model as a media reflection on society’s dominant social values that symbolically belittle women, either by not showing them at all, or by depicting them in stereotypical roles (p. 17). As a result, their expression is muted (e.g. Orbe, 1998; Collins, 2000). Muted group theory sees language as excluding and demeaning women based on several factors, including words to describe them. For example, “stud,” and “playboy” are popular words to depict promiscuous

men. Conversely, people use less appealing words, such as “slut,” “hooker” and “whore,” to describe promiscuous women.

Studies have shown that while media are unjust to both black and white women, they marginalize black women to a greater extent (e.g. Benedict, 1997; hooks, 1992; Squires, 2009 & 2011; Schell, 1999). West (2001) asserts that the “ideal of female beauty in this country puts a premium on lightness and softness mythically associated with white women and

Diagram 1: Common dichotomous cultural narratives and stereotypes of black women



rich stylistic manners associated with black women” (p. 130). Echoing West, Roy Peter Clark said when it comes to police stories, “There is this perverted, racist view of the world. White is good; black is bad. Blonde is good; dark is bad. Young is good; old is bad” (Memmot, 2005; Robinson, 2005).

Additionally, studies indicate stereotypes of black women center on dichotomous representations depicting them as either oversexed or asexual, unintelligent or extremely

educated, ambitious or listless, attractive or unattractive (e.g. Boylorn, 2008; Collins, 2004; Entman & Rojecki, 2000 and hooks, 1992). For instance, the sexually promiscuous black woman, also known as the “oversexed-black-Jezebel,” is an extreme opposite of the “mammy.” Similarly, the “welfare cheat,” who lives lavishly off public assistance, is the opposite of the overachieving, independent black woman (diagram 1).

Even positive representations have negative undertones. For instance, the “independent black woman” is depicted as overachieving and financially successful, on one hand; and narcissistic and overbearing on the other. As a result, media often portray her as emasculating black males. Perhaps the most popular stereotype is that of the “angry black woman” who media depict as upset and irate, consequently she is often deemed a “bitch” (Collins, 2004, p. 123; Springer, 2007; Childs, 2005). Her character is a spinoff of Sapphire, who is an undesirable depiction in which black women berate black males in their lives with cruel words and exaggerated body language (Yarborough & Bennett, 2000).

Johnson (2005) asserts that such stories fit a convenient narrative pattern that storytellers have used for more than a century, a pattern that incorporates negative viewpoints of black women and their perceived roles in society. Historically, the myth of the black superwoman essentially consisted of stereotypes deeply rooted in slavery. According to Wallace (1979), the idea that although “lazy,” black women are able to do more physical labor than the average woman while consistently sacrificing themselves for others, have no emotion and are really just men.

In her analysis of local television coverage of the Freaknik Festival, Meyers (2004) indicated violence against women became newsworthy when a camera located in the area of the violence taped it. In one instance, “by positioning the harassment of these women against the

gyrations of a woman who appears to be welcoming and encouraging male attention and desire, the story suggested that violence against black women is the result of female provocation” (p.106). Meyers (2004) also argues coverage reinforced race and class stereotypes by representing locals as underclass troublemakers, prone to crime. On the other hand, the media portrayed students as law-abiding people with middle-class values and norms.

Similarly, Benedict’s (1997) study explained the prevalence of the virgin or vamp dichotomy in the media coverage of sex crimes. Benedict (1997) found the habits of coverage to be not only racist, class-oriented, and sexist, but also inaccurate. The most commonly covered rape story contained the scenario of a Caucasian female victim with an African American male perpetrator. These stories, which proved statistically inaccurate, reflected and perpetuated the attitude that Caucasian women are more valuable than African-American women (cited in Benedict, 1997, p. 118).

There is also a growing body of research regarding the stereotyping of sports participants. Women, in general, have traditionally been portrayed participating in sports such as ballet, swimming and gymnastics, which contain elements of grace and beauty (Cratty, 1983). The scholar suggests sports that emphasize “the beauty of line” are considered more acceptable for females, while sports with high contact such as basketball, football and ice hockey are “male sports” (p. 172). Portrayals disseminate the overarching idea that males are superior athletes, which augments the idea that male superiority is “natural” and sporting events tend to support White, corporate, male-dominant ideologies (e.g. Cole, 2001).

Other studies focus on how media outlets frame black, female athletes as both racially and sexually different/deviant. Depictions often imply black female athletes do not meet white American standards of beauty and are defeminized. Scholars have also concluded U.S. sports

media often give women of color considerably less coverage than they give their white female counterparts (Blinde and McCallister, 1999; Maas and Holbrook, 2001). However, when depicted, media portrayed them in team sports considered more masculine than individual sports.

The absence of minority women supports the traditional belief that sports are solely for white, heterosexual, non-disabled women. Such portrayals are of concern because they play a role in how people treat black women. For example, Ruggiero & Lattin (2008) concluded female intercollegiate coaches, like their male counterparts, often believe they can arbitrarily use the power granted to them within the sport organization to perpetuate racial and gender stereotypes.

Methods

Content analysis is useful for measuring the frequency of specific types of subject matter such as race or gender themes in articles, but it does not contribute to an understanding of the messages conveyed by the work as a whole. Scholars can use a fantasy theme analysis as a script to explain and evaluate news stories and bring them into line with the values of certain groups.

There is not a cookie-cutter method of FTA, in fact, Bormann (1985) invited scholars to use the method in new ways to refine and reinvigorate it. Symbolic cues, such as restatements, references to movie plots, metaphors and inside jokes flowing from different communicators are evidence that a fantasy has chained and people have converged symbolically to a shared reality (Bormann, Cragan and Shields, 1994). When content of these dramatizing messages is reiterated, they become “fantasy themes.” Fantasy themes enable group members to comprehend the chaotic world of experience and to define their reality.

Discovery of fantasy themes proceeds by first identifying evidence related to the manifest content of the communication (Bormann, 1972). Next, the critic discovers and describes the narrative and dramatic materials that have chained out (p. 401). At some point, storytellers must

converge or come to hold a common image as they share fantasy themes. These methods offer the ability to explore and understand meanings constructed by shared group fantasy, which made FTA appropriate to guide this study.

Following the FTA methodology, I first read the text to identify fantasy themes, and then I identified the overarching cultural narratives they contributed. These methods gave me the ability to explore and understand meanings constructed by the men's shared group fantasy, which makes FTA appropriate to guide this study. The following questions guided my analysis:

- 1) What shared portrayals and stereotypes of African-American women often appear in popular culture?
- 2) How are they demonstrated in fantasy themes found in Imus's 2007 comments about black women?
- 3) What social realities does this case study relay about the perpetuation of stereotypes?
- 4) What are implications and solutions?

Findings and Discussion

Don Imus Background

On April 4, 2007, shock jock Don Imus and two co-hosts provided their analysis of the NCAA Basketball Finals, a competition during which a predominantly African-American, female basketball team played a predominantly Anglo-American, female basketball team. Imus shared the spotlight with the show's executive producer, Bernard McGuirk, and former announcer, Sid Rosenberg. McGuirk, who is noted for his urban humor in which he often mocks people of color. Rosenberg's inappropriate comments often focus on female athletes. At the time, Imus was one of the most recognizable voices on radio, speaking to nearly 15 million listeners across 100 stations (Carter & Steinberg, 2007).

Establishment of a group identity usually involves division between the “we” of the group and outsiders. When people share their perceptions of reality with others, they may converge and create a common view of reality (Bormann, Cragan, & Shields, 1994). This collective reality is advanced through dramatizing messages that may consist of word play such as puns, anecdotes, parables and narratives.

Based on repeated readings of the Imus text, it appears several themes emerged to convey ideas such as black women are unattractive, rough and masculine (Table 1). For example, Imus stated, “That’s some rough girls from Rutgers. Man, they got tattoos...” to which McGuirk chimed in, “Some hard-core hos.” Then Imus continued, “That’s some nappy-headed hos there. I’m gonna tell you that now, man, that’s some -- woo. And the girls from Tennessee, they all look cute, you know, so, like -- kinda like -- I don’t know.”

Table 1: Fantasy Theme Analysis of schema constructed from Imus’s transcript

Overarching Fantasy Vision	Male athletes are superior to female athletes Anglo women are superior to African-American women
Dramatis personae Refers to the heroic and villainous characters that are given life within the drama (vision)	Villains: black women in general Damsels: white women
Righteous Master Analogue - differentiates between right and wrong, moral and immoral, just and unjust.	Fantasy Theme One: members of the mostly black Rutgers’ basketball team are unattractive and unchaste
	Fantasy Theme Two: Characterizations: lighter skinned black women are closer to white women, which makes them better.
	Fantasy Theme Three: female athletes are rough and masculine.

To provide proof that members of the Rutgers team were rough and unchaste, the broadcaster described them as having nappy hair and tattoos, which one must place into historical context. By associating the women with tattoos, he simultaneously implied they were not clean cut. Similarly, he used the term “nappy” in a derogatory manner, building on cultural narratives in which some members of society deem straight hair more valuable and attractive than “nappy hair,” which, conversely, is viewed rough, unkempt and undesirable. Both ideas were based on common perceptions introduced several decades ago when tattoos, for example, were a symbol of rebellion.

While his references to tattoos and nappy hair might take on a different connotation depending on the historical period under consideration, the term, “ho,” is always negative. It is a vernacular term for “whore,” which is synonymous with a morally loose, sexually overactive woman. Similar terms include “prostitute,” “hooker,” “tramp,” and “slut,” all negative terms to describe a woman. His verbal attacks against black young women conjure images of black women as sexually promiscuous or “oversexed-black-Jezebels.”

Chaining out

While numerous dramatizing messages may emerge during a conversation, at least one may “chain out” in a “symbolic explosion” (p. 82). This “chaining” process generates shared group fantasies. The process of chaining out can take place between a speaker and audience in small groups, or on television, radio and other forms of media. Reality links are the here-and-now phenomena that add credibility to the plotline. They serve to make the vision more believable and thus make symbolic participation within the vision more acceptable. Illustrating the “chaining out” of his viewpoints by other males on his show, McGuirk added a here-and-now

link by referring to the Spike Lee movie *School Daze*, which McCord mislabeled as *Do the Right Thing*.

In Lee's movie, the women divided into two camps, the dark-skinned "jigaboos" and the fair-skinned "wannabes," who taunted each other with names such as "pickaninny" and "tar baby." Referring back to the literature, a jigaboo is a depiction of a black person with stereotypical black features such as dark skin, a wide nose and rough-textured hair. Conversely, wannabes have light skin, straighter hair and desiring to be white. In this case, Imus and co-hosts characterized the Rutgers team as unattractive "jigaboos," while the Tennessee team took on the role of "wannabes," whom mainstream society often deem more attractive.

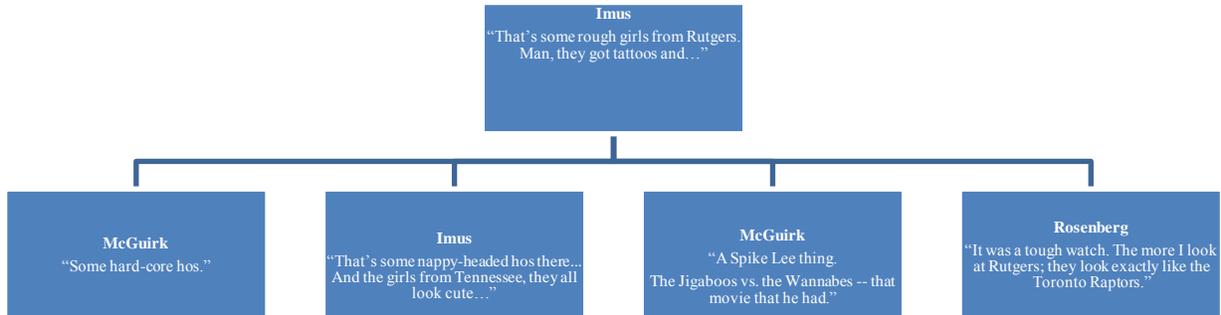
The three men concluded their plotline with the idea that superior female athletes do not fit the stereotype of mainstream beauty. The transcript included this excerpt from Rosenberg: "It was a tough watch. The more I look at Rutgers; they look exactly like the Toronto Raptors." In focusing on physical appearance instead of the players' capability on the basketball court, Imus and his co-hosts helped characterize members of the mostly black basketball team as unappealing and masculine. This portrayal relegated the team to familiar negative stereotypes—instead of talented athletes and black females.

Imus dismissed this conversation as only meant to be humorous. However, his use of racial slurs and a derogatory description of women immediately ignited a public debate, as civil rights and women's groups widely denounced him. After outrage from the initial repeated reports, Imus issued a statement of apology on his morning show (Imus, 2007):

I want to take a moment to apologize for an insensitive and ill-conceived remark we made the other morning regarding the Rutgers women's basketball team, which lost to Tennessee in the NCAA championship game on Tuesday. It was completely

inappropriate and we can understand why people were offended. Our characterization was thoughtless and stupid, and we are sorry.

Diagram 1: Fantasy Themes contributed by Imus, McGuirk and Rosenberg to create a shared group fantasy



While Imus’s faux pas received a huge public outcry, stereotyping of black women is still prevalent today. For example, negative cultural narratives were used in the framing of Michelle Obama during the 2008 election. *Mrs. Grievance* was the caption on the cover of a July 2008 issue of *National Review*, which featured a photo of Michelle with a scowl on her face. The magazine’s online edition titled an essay about her stump speech “America’s Unhappiest Millionaire.” Similarly, Cal Thomas stated on Fox News that black women on television “are usually angry about something,” and singled out Mrs. Obama as an example (Washington, 2008). Michelle Malkin, a popular conservative blogger, dubbed Mrs. Obama “Obama’s bitter half.”

Facebook hate groups also build on similar cultural narratives to frame Obama negatively. Users often depict Mrs. Obama as “evil,” or discuss her looks and perceived masculinity. Facebook group titles include, “Is it me or does Michelle Obama look like James

Brown?” “Michelle Obama is Creepy,” “Michelle Obama’s face scares me” and “Michelle Obama looks like a man” and “I would paint a mustache on Michelle Obama’s Face, but Wait She Already has one.”

Group members post comments suggesting the first lady eats chitterlings and watermelon, looks like a man and may be pregnant. To support such claims, they post unflattering photos of her adorned with mustaches, fake eyebrows while next to aliens and male celebrities such as James Brown (Illustration 1). Such posts indicate that historical blackface stereotypes mentioned in the review of the literature have resurfaced in new media representations of black women. In other words, Facebook offers a new platform for racist and sexist messages such as those highlighted in Imus’s 2007 transcript to thrive.

Illustration 1: Racist and sexist Facebook hate groups targeting Michelle Obama

Conclusions

This essay applies symbolic convergence theory (SCT) with its critical method, fantasy theme analysis (FTA), to explore Don Imus and his co-hosts’ use of stereotypes in their depiction of members of the Rutgers basketball team. While the shock jock started the dialogue, his ideas “chained out,” and all three men added important elements that created an overarching fantasy type that framed the mostly black team negatively. Resorting to stereotypes deeply entrenched in cultural narratives of black women; they focused on the basketball players’ looks, sexuality and femininity.

The final and highest level, the rhetorical vision, is the summation of fantasy themes that construct a broader viewpoint of a group, or an overall interpretive framework. Findings indicate Imus was extremely effective in persuading his co-hosts to participate in his fantasy plot. While the shock jock started the dialogue, his ideas chained out and each disc jockey added an important element that focused on superficial elements such as the basketball players' looks, sexual behavior and masculinity.

Study findings provide crucial insights regarding the ideas and positions some men are likely to embrace about black women. They also demonstrate that historical representations of black women are still strong and have an impact on modern portrayals of the group. This extension of critical race literature might raise community awareness and foster sensitivity to race, culture and gender issues, leading to better portrayals. Alternative portrayals can help change such misconceptions. Feminist theorists can seek to de-center the patriarchal voice by providing alternative feminist discourses to help supplant the traditional views of women, race and sports. Otherwise, negative historical stereotypes will continually be introduced and perhaps embraced by new generations of audiences.

Finally, while censorship is undesired, it is important for audiences to have critical tools needed to decipher messages they receive. Free expression allows even the most abhorrent speech in the marketplace of ideas to ensure a democratic society. Scholars must continually challenge such portrayals with alternative visions in a meaningful, consistent fashion. Gatekeepers and citizens must work together to identify, control and moderate hate within the context of mass media. Parents and educators must be proactive in discussing gender and race stereotypes and online portrayals. Finally, audiences must identify and seek positive, accurate messages in mass media.

Without alternate perspectives, negative stereotypes targeting people of color retain their accepted place in American culture. Negative historical stereotypes will continue to be introduced and perhaps embraced by new generations of audiences, robbing women of their dignity. As eloquently stated by Essence Carson, the captain of the Rutgers women's basketball team, "Don Imus has stolen a moment of pure grace from us" (CNN, 2007).

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