ON THE IMUS CONTROVERSY

By Travis Washington

In April, well-known white radio shock-jock Don Imus was publicly criticized for making racist, sexist comments on his radio show, Imus in the Morning. Mr. Imus referred to the Rutgers Women's basketball team as "nappy-headed hoes." After the resulting public outcry, Mr. Imus issued a perfunctory public apology stating that while his comment was inappropriate, he is not a racist or a sexist and that his comment should be interpreted within its comic context.

As a result of the public outcry led by Reverend Al Sharpton and other high-profile members of the African-American community, many advertisers and future guest stars distanced themselves from Imus, and CBS eventually fired him and canceled his radio show.

Certainly, comments such as those uttered by Mr. Imus are inappropriate and should not be tolerated. As a nation still struggling with race relations and sexism, we cannot afford to turn a blind eye to such incidents that threaten to turn back the clock and offset what social gains that have been made on these issues. But while corrective action taken against Mr. Imus was indeed merited, does censorship really address the root of the problem?

Days after the Imus comment, Don Imus met with the Rutgers Women's basketball team to personally apologize and discuss the issue. The women of Rutgers stated that they were curious to know how an individual with fifty years of experience on national radio could make such a negative and irresponsible comment, especially in reference to women whom he did not even know.

Indeed, this is a very good question. How exactly could an experienced radio announcer so casually make such a remark on national airwaves? Mr. Imus plainly stated that he had harmless intentions and that the comment was made in a comic context. This brings up the question of how Mr. Imus could have possibly expected his remark to be viewed by African-Americans, women, and specifically the women of Rutgers as harmless, let alone comical. What social conditions presently exist that could possibly lend Mr. Imus the impression that making such a degrading remark would be acceptable in any context?

During his apologetic tour following the incident, Mr. Imus stated that he was merely using the language that many Black males in African-American and popular culture have popularized and used to refer to their own women.

Again, there is no justification for Imus' comments and he has suffered the consequences. However, many people would like to treat this as an isolated incident, place a period behind it, and turn the page. But the Imus incident deserves a comma, and we as a nation need to look honestly into the social conditions that have created and continue to perpetuate the issue if our objective is to reach real understanding and real solutions.

For centuries, minorities and women (especially African-American women) in this country have been overtly and even legally oppressed, enslaved, and disenfranchised by the rulers of this white male-dominated patriarchal system. Not only were African-Americans and women viewed as inferior, but it was legislated that both were mere property— the white man's property —to be used and abused as the white man saw fit. And it is in these historical social conditions that we find the roots of racist and sexist ideas in this country, out of which inevitably arise racist and sexist terminology. That is to say, words are merely the clothing of our thoughts and ideas so, in a racist and sexist world built upon racist and sexist ideas, words— the clothing of our thoughts —will reflect that underlying bigotry.

However, of great importance is the fact that for hundreds of years, African-Americans and women struggled and spilled blood in an effort to throw off the yoke of bondage. They fought for recognition of their rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and demanded recognition of their right to be treated as human beings and not to be referred to as niggas, bitches, hoes, or second class citizens. It wasn't until the 1920s that the women's suffrage movement achieved full voting rights and in the 1960s, African-Americans still struggled to be served in white-owned eating establishments.

Fast-forward to 2007. While one can conclude that some social gains have been made after centuries of struggle, the recent controversy surrounding Mr. Imus' comments clearly illustrates that we are still struggling with racist and sexist ideas in this self-proclaimed Land of the Free.

But ironically, what has made Imus' comment so controversial is the argument that within the past twenty-five years a predominantly African-American subculture (hip-hop) has taken terminology historically and commonly understood to be derogatory, racist, and sexist, and has supposedly re-defined it, transferring it into cool, hip terms of endearment— but only in a certain

context.

Apparently, due to the historically-oppressive use of such terms as nigga, bitch and hoe by the dominant culture to degrade and dehumanize African-Americans and women, this subculture has re-defined and "taken ownership" of these and other terms in an attempt to neutralize them. Further, this supposedly re-vamped terminology has been taken mainstream, popularized, and even made fashionable through certain forms of hip-hop music and other mediums.

It is around this issue that the current controversy really revolves because in "taking ownership" of this language, a double-standard has been created; for, when used within certain parameters within and approved by this subculture, this language is understood as benevolent. However, when and if used outside of this context, especially when used by white folk, it takes on a different meaning and is interpreted as having the traditional, degrading, racist and sexist connotations. This has created a rift, not only between hip-hop and the white majority, but between hip-hop and many African-Americans.

Can you say "divide and conquer"?

Before going further, return to Mr. Imus. While he certainly crossed the line with his reference to the beautiful, dignified sisters of the Rutgers basketball team as "nappy-headed hoes," this language was certainly not his invention, nor did it appear in a vacuum. And extending the benefit of the doubt to Mr. Imus, one can even accept that he did not intend to offend the women of Rutgers or African-Americans. No, it may well be that a sixty-six year-old white shock-jock with fifty years' experience on radio may have actually attempted to come off as "hip" or "in the know" with regard to the lingo of popular African-American and/or hip-hop culture.

This is an important distinction for several reasons. First, in breaking down the phrase he used, the term "nappy-headed" did not apply to any of the women; all of them have straightened or processed hair. And as none of the women were high-profile celebrities and Mr. Imus did not personally know them, he could not have seriously intended to make a judgment regarding their sexual activity or promiscuity when he referred to them as "hoes."

Secondly, it has become unusually common to hear women in general being referred to as 'hoes' by both men and other women in mainstream mediums.

Third and finally, Mr. Imus is a shock-jock who has been pushing the boundaries of acceptable speech on radio for many, many years and in any media, especially talk radio, it is necessary to be current in order to be successful. Conversely, in shock radio it is a necessity to be both current and comical, while carefully treading the ever-wavering line of responsible, acceptable speech.

So after years of pushing at the boundaries and not being checked due to the economic success of his show, Mr. Imus, believing he had his finger on the pulse of popular culture and trying to appear "hip," jacked his slacks and once again waded out into unpredictable waters. However this time as a result of the subsequent public outcry, many of Mr. Imus' supporters, including the networks who carried his show for all these years, felt compelled to distance themselves from him for economic reasons. Consequently, Mr. Imus proved to have waded out too far and was left with the proverbial slacks that he had jacked pulled down around his ankles.

But again, Don Imus did not appear in a vacuum. His censorship does not even begin to solve the problem. This nation has once again been divided over this issue of racist and sexist terms; this is not the first time debates centered around the First Amendment— who can say what, and where —have arisen to national levels. And it certainly is not the first time hip-hop music came under fire. Just two years ago, Bill Cosby spoke out against both the negative influences of hip-hop as well as the defeatist attitude within much of the African-American community. Although many within the African-American community largely agreed with Mr. Cosby's assessment, it was divided along class lines on several issues. Many living in poverty-stricken inner-cities felt Mr. Cosby, a millionaire living in the suburbs, was out of touch with the realities to which many African-Americans in this country endure on a daily basis. Moreover, a cross-section of the community criticized Mr. Cosby for publicly advancing his "pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps" philosophy. Ultimately, whatever merits there were in what Mr. Cosby had to say— as well as the opportunity to address the real, core issues —were essentially lost in the ensuing debate over <u>where</u> he said what he said.

But once again we have been presented with another opportunity to address the root causes of racism and sexism in this country. And instead of focusing on solutions to the real, pathological disease eating away at this country, we have once again conveniently chosen to concentrate and even attribute accountability to its symptoms.

Because Mr. Imus stated that he used language that was not his invention and that he merely

repeated terms many African-American men use in reference to women— terms popularized through hip-hop music —national attention again turned to hip-hop music and culture. African-Americans in general responded to this and correctly asserted that there was no justification for the degrading remarks. However, it was collectively agreed upon that the issue of hip-hop music and its influence seriously needed to be addressed.

The Oprah Winfrey show was turned into a public forum in which many Black intellectuals as well as some high-profile representatives of the hip-hop music industry took the stage and expressed their views on the issue. Led by Oprah, the main charge leveled against the hip-hop industry was its promotion and glorification of violence, its misogynistic and degrading representations of women, and its overall negative contribution to the image of Black folk in general through its lyrics and videos.

Fully conscious of the oppressive forces historically arrayed against African-Americans, much of the message spilling out of hip-hop music is irresponsible, shameful, and counterproductive to overcoming the real obstacles facing us today, especially when these negative images are promoted mainstream across racial and cultural lines. A day does not go by where Black folk do not refer to one another as niggas. Never does the sun set without young Black women being referred to by Black men or other Black women as 'hoes' or 'bitches.' What's more, the greeting, "What's up, my nigga," is casually used across racial lines. And unfortunately, many such "greetings" and conversations take place in the classroom, the work place, the local mall— right out in public for all to see and hear.

Just twenty-five years ago, that was unheard of.

But somehow, in 2007, it has become cool to be viewed as and to identify oneself with such self-effacing terms as "gangsta," "thug," "nigga," "bitch," and "hoe." I say self-effacing because these terms have oppressive, degrading, and de-humanizing historical connotations. And contrary to those who contend that in this day and age such terminology can only be interpreted in context, at the root of such terminology lies hate and degradation, irrespective of context.

That being said, hip-hop music as an invention of African-Americans definitely plays its part in making this kind of language fashionable. And while hip-hop culture crosses racial lines, it is still a subculture that is part of the African-American subculture, in relation to the dominant culture. So keeping in mind the social context in which we live, Black folk must evaluate and re-evaluate the messages and images that we are sending across racial and cultural lines. This is necessary because, ultimately, the messages effect and reflect back on us all.

Frederick Douglass once said, "Power concedes nothing without demand. It never has and it never will." But before you can demand power, you must command respect; before you demand respect from others, you must respect yourself.

For the iconic rappers, moguls, and producers of hip-hop music that have elevated themselves into positions of influence, with much power comes much responsibility. And the beautiful, ebony women must not allow themselves to be degraded or disrepected, and they should demand the respect deserving of the queens that they are. And finally, the brothers and sisters of the resilient Black community must not disrespect one another. We must not condone nor support any disrespect directed at us, and we must hold those in positions of influence over our children to the same standard; all of this while we direct our collective focus and energies toward the real problem facing us today.

In response to Oprah Winfrey's criticism of hip-hop music, Russell Simmons hit the nail on the head when he asserted that hip-hop music, like all music, is merely a reflection of the socio-economic conditions in which millions of people across this country live every day. And when you consider hip-hop in its socio-economic context, when you consider hip-hop not as the primary source of the problem, not as a root cause but as a symptom of a larger problem, the Oprah Winfreys and Bill Cosbys no longer want to continue the debate. It seems no one has a problem pointing the finger at hip-hop to mitigate the blame placed upon Don Imus, but no one wants an honest and straightforward discussion of the social and political forces that have created hip-hop. When you point that finger beyond hip-hop at the larger problem, the Oprah Winfreys and Bill Cosbys want you to put that finger back in your empty pocket before you threaten the contents of theirs.

The larger problem is the exploitive system of capital.

The system of capital operates upon the basis of the capitalist, the owner of the means of production— the factory, the land, gaining profit from taking a portion of the consumer's payment that otherwise belongs rightfully to the worker. In other words, "profit" is "robbery"

of the worker. The larger the profit, the more exploited the worker becomes; the logical and extreme extension, then, of this capitalist logic is outright slavery where the capitalist takes everything owed to the worker and pays nothing.

The profit-driven system of capital led in this way ultimately to slavery in the U.S.— an economic system of profit. But even when the slaves were freed after the Civil War, so-called "freed" slaves were free to compete with established capitalists, industrialists, bankers, and corporations that already owned the means of production and had already established a status quo that excluded, among others, those same freed slaves who had gotten the capitalists and bankers and corporations wealthy. As a result, freedom became another form of slavery, of exploitation and injustice in new ways. Freed slaves were still only free to do as they were told, bossed by the wealthy and powerful.

So, again, the system of capital was at the basis of the problem.

After decades of pseudo-integrationism, in the 1960s the Black Panther Party emerged and recognized the system of capital as the central problem. The Black Panthers proposed an alternative to capitalism, one that required a revolution, the violent overthrow of the existing order, in order to be instituted. This violence, this revolutionary violence, would be necessitated by the capitalist oppressor's refusal to surrender his privileged position under any other circumstances.

So as a result of this awakening, the U.S. government engaged in a Dirty War, committing genocide against the Black revolutionary, neutralizing conscious Blacks with bullets and prisons and illegal, state-sponsored, domestic terrorism (FBI COINTELPRO). And, ultimately, the government's repressive response was in defense of itself as a tool of the capitalist and, indirectly, in defense of the system of capital that the Black revolutionary recognized as the principle enemy.

In the wake of this Dirty War, with the revolutionary core of the oppressed Black community decimated, a new generation directed its rage at the symptoms of capitalism— poverty and oppression and hopelessness, and they channeled that rage into music, into rap, into art. But with the absence of the revolutionaries, in the absence of those who were murdered and imprisoned for challenging the status quo, many in the current generation, seeing the futility of struggling against the system, have taken on the values of the capitalist.

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

That is, gangsta rappers have taken on the values of the bourgeoisie, the ruling elite, the exploiter and oppressor. At its basis, the gangsta mentality is one built upon the desire to live in extravagance and luxury even at the expense of others, at the cost of exploiting others, commidifying them, using others as if they are objects for personal, material gain. In this fundamental way, the gangsta rapper differs little from WalMart or Coca-Cola. The gangsta rapper is the ghetto version of Donald Trump or Bill Gates or Bill Walton or Rupert Murdoch with bling.

Gangsta rappers amidst poverty and violence and drugs and atomization of an oppressed people have taken on the value system of the bourgeoisie and they reflect the shallow cruelty and the ascendance of material wealth as the end-all, a view so prevalent in this capitalist morality that has influenced the thinking of the lumpenproletariat— the underclass.

Again, much to the consternation of Oprah Winfrey and Bill Cosby, the problem is the system of capital.

The solution, then, cannot be to point the finger at hip-hop for creating a denigrating subculture, but to point the finger at the system of capital which creates the larger superculture. The system of capital creates the conditions that create hip-hop; it is the enemy that maintains vast wealth in the hands of a select few while children go hungry. The international capitalists, enslaving and oppressing the people of the entire world, are the true gangstas, the true pimps.

In this context, blaming and castigating gangsta rap, the spokespeople of the self-loathing lumpenproletariat who have been tricked into adopting the values of the oppressor, the international pimp, solves nothing. Rather, the gangsta rapper and the lumpenproletariat as a whole need to be shown their true enemy, need to be converted and persuaded from materialist self-hatred and collective self-destruction. They need to be offered a new, valid direction so that their rage and pain can be channeled and transformed from atomized commidification and misogyny into a powerful tool for consciousness-raising, for revolutionary organization, and ultimately for the collective re-appropriation of the means of production from the hands of the oppressor.

We do not need to get rid of Don Imus. We do not need to get rid of gangsta rap. We need to get rid of the system of capital which creates ghettos and poverty and divisions based upon class and race.

Capitalism is the enemy.

So. Chi. ABC Zine Distro
Publisher & Distributor
P.O. Box 721
Homewood, IL 60430

ABOUT THE WRITER: Travis Washington is a 24 year-old self-educated Black man who has been incarcerated for seventeen and a half years.