

On Don Imus and the Rutgers Women's Basketball Team
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This is yet another manifestation of what Martin Luther King Jr called the congenital deformity of the United States. In an essay entitled "Racism and the White Backlash"¹ published in his 1967 book "Where Do We Go from Here? Chaos or Community," King says the United States is a nation torn between two selves: "a self in which she proudly professed the great principles of democracy and a self in which she sadly practiced the antithesis of democracy" (320). The United States is both attracted to and repelled by African-Americans; it both loves and fears its black citizens.

The United States loves Oprah Winfrey and Tiger Woods and Will Smith and Barack Obama and others. It fears the countless ordinary black people who still live in dangerous ghettos, who still attend inferior schools and who are still subject to unjust incarceration. This is the negative side of the two-sided character of the United States.

King warned that it is a mistake to see racism as a problem of one ill-informed individual. King writes: "for the good of America, it is necessary to refute the idea that the dominant ideology in our country even today is freedom and equality while racism is just an occasional departure from the norm on the part of a few bigoted 'extremists'."

Racism is a sense that there are superior and inferior races, that certain groups of people are either less or more, that one group ought to be kept at a distance and another group kept pure (321). It is the idea that one group is in its essence subnormal, deficient or defective in physical, intellectual, or moral capacities. King says further: "Racism is total estrangement. It separates not only mind and spirits. Inevitably it descends to inflicting spiritual and physical homicide upon the out-group" (322).

Racism and its ideological iteration, white supremacy, were born as rationalizations for slavery. Thus, white supremacy became a necessary ideology for a political economy based on the uncompensated labor of human beings. White supremacy became an ideology that allowed the nation to see itself as good and decent while it prospered on the evil and the indecency of slavery. White supremacy infected religion, science, philosophy, and history. King writes: "It became a structural part of the culture" (325).

¹Martin Luther King Jr, "Racism and the White Backlash", Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing, ed. Gary Colombo, Robert Cullen, and Bonnie Lisle (Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1992) 319.

Moreover, this idea of Black inferiority is not only a congenital deformity of the United States, but it is also deeply rooted in European Enlightenment thought, especially the idea that Black people are ugly, unhappy and morally defective by definition. The 1798 Encyclopedia Britannica defines the “Negro” in these terms: “ugliness and irregularity of shape, characterize their external appearance. . . Vices the most notorious seen to be the portion of this unhappy race. . . . They are strangers to every sentiment of compassion, and are an awful example of the corruption of man when left to himself.”²

When Don Imus made his ugly remarks – calling the young women of the Rutgers’ basketball team “hard core” and “nappy-headed ho-s” -- knowingly or unknowingly, he not only demonstrated the negative aspect of the two-sided character of the United States when it comes to race, he also demonstrated the lingering effects of European Enlightenment definitions of Black people. (Hard-core indicating violence and nappy-headed indicating ugliness.) He was operating from within that side of the United States culture that has attempted for more than 200 years to assassinate the sense of self worth of its dark-skinned citizens. When Imus insulted the young women of the Rutgers Women’s basketball team, he reinforced the racist notion that dark-skinned Black women are not beautiful, that their athletic and scholarly achievements are still somehow defective, that no matter what they do they can never be considered with respect within this culture.

He demonstrated that he did not have a relationship with these young women that allowed him to see them as equal human beings, but only as objects for his entertainment and objects of a joke.

And African-American people and others who suffer disrespect – women, homosexuals, undocumented workers, poor people – look at this with a weary blues and see another generation of humanity forced to endure such stupidity.

Again, this is deeper than Don Imus and the Rutgers Women’s Basketball team. This is about the soul of the United States. King wrote his observations more than 40 years ago, and while this nation has made great progress in this time, in some ways, it has made very little. This is a moment to take positive steps toward healing America’s most death-dealing birth defect. This is a moment for the nation to take steps toward resolving its internal contradictions of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia and all the other ways that we disrespect each other both in custom and in law.

² “Negro”, The Portable Enlightenment Reader, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin Books, 1995) 669.