

The CEA Forum

Winter/Spring 2007: 36.1

SPECIAL SECTION: EMPATHY AND ETHICS

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIES AND ETHICS:

STORIES FROM THE "OTHER" SIDE

[Anne Bratach Matthews](#)

“That’s some rough girls from Rutgers. Man, they got tattoos . . . That’s some nappy-headed hos there.”

—Don Imus, former radio show host (Poniewozik)

“I’m a woman, and I’m someone’s child. I achieve a lot. And unless they’ve given this name, a ‘ho,’ a new definition, then that is not what I am.”

—Kia Vaughn, Scarlet Knight (“April 10, 2007 Press Conference Transcribe”)

“[A]ll of our accomplishments were lost. . . . Our moment was taken away—our moment to celebrate our success, our moment to realize how far we came on and off the court as young women; we were stripped of this moment by the degrading comments by Mr. Imus last Wednesday.”

—Heather Zurich, Scarlet Knight (“April 10, 2007”)

“[Imus] has flourished in a culture that permits a certain level of objectionable expression that hurts and demeans a wide range of people.”

—Leslie Moonves, CBS Corporation Chief Executive (“Rutgers Team Accepts Imus’ Apology”)

“[Imus’s] comments are indicative of greater ills in our culture. It is not just Mr. Imus, and we hope that this will be

and serve as a catalyst for change. Let us continue to work hard together to make this world a better place.”

—C. Vivian Stringer, Scarlet Knight Coach (“Rutgers Team”)

In the spring of 2007, more than 40 years after the advances made by the civil rights movement, and more than 50 years after the U.S. Supreme Court *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* decision, white radio talk-show host Don Imus taught us a lesson about racism—but it was not the lesson he thought he was teaching us. His “lesson”—that black women better mind their place—backfired. It told us in no uncertain terms that racism is still business as usual in the United States. While most of my white students would argue passionately that racism is a thing of the past, that it's time to move on, Imus reminded us that just the opposite is true; that he could represent the Scarlet Knights, the Rutgers women's basketball team, as “nappy-headed hos”; that his listeners expected him to say things like that; that—until the young women spoke out against it—advertisers and radio stations paid him to say things like that. At their press conference these young women looked as if they were at a funeral, and in a way they were, for their jubilation over their NCAA tournament performance had died. When Heather Zurich said that she and her teammates had been “stripped of this moment,” she could not have chosen a better word to convey the defilement that no doubt titillated a good part of Imus's audience. Indeed, the hate mail that the team received would suggest that that audience was outraged that it could no longer laugh at jokes about young black women (“Rutgers Team”).

But there is more to the lesson. It is not often that television executives, scholar-athletes, sociologists, and composition theorists agree about the systemic nature of American racism, but such is the case with the “imess” (“Out of the Mouths of Blackness” 73). Perhaps neither CBS Chief Executive Moonves nor Scarlet Knight Coach Stringer would be surprised to find themselves in the company of sociologist Allan G. Johnson, who points out that we “cling to the idea that racism . . . is just a problem with a few bad whites, rather than seeing how it is connected to a much larger matrix of privilege and oppression” (138). Moonves and Stringer might also agree with composition theorist Carmen Kynard, who argues that racism is not the problem of certain intractable individuals but of an entire social system (377; Omi and Winant 10). Imus's remarks were made in the context of a racism so normative that it could have gone unnoticed, had not the Scarlet Knights responded. As Scarlet Knight Essence Carson put it, “You don't get too many opportunities to stand up for what you know is right” (“April 10, 2007”).

Within the vagaries of American racial discourse, the changing boundaries of what the public and the marketplace will and won't allow, these young women had found a moment in which to *talk back*. They asserted a hard-won identity, a subjecthood that people in Imus's position have denied them. This is, in Mary Louise Pratt's phrase, an “art of the contact zone.” In her essay of that name, Pratt describes the practice of autoethnography:

[I]f ethnographic texts are those in which European [or white American] metropolitan subjects represent to themselves their others (usually their conquered others), autoethnographic texts are representations that the so-defined others construct *in response to* or in dialogue with those texts. (5-6; italics in original)

With his job on the line—which he ultimately lost—Imus spoke face to face with the “nappy-headed hos,” to find out what *they* had to say about who they were. As his wife Deirdre put it, “They gave us the opportunity to listen to what they had to say and why they're hurting and how awful this is” (“Rutgers Team”). One hopes Imus listened carefully, for this was a chance to construct a dialogue—a chance for the “others,” having been defined by someone else's story, to speak as themselves.

As a white teacher invested in my African American students' academic success, I work toward racial justice in

my first-year writing classes by assigning an autoethnography, which invites students to position themselves as subjects rather than as objects. By articulating their identities—by telling their own stories—my African American students challenge the normative racial discourse and assert their moral agency and autonomy. My aim in having students write autoethnographies is explicitly political: to change power relations between those who have historically told the story and those who have historically *been told* by someone else's story; sometimes the story someone else tells is also what one tells oneself. And my aim is ethical: to provide a space where students can explore themselves both as already-defined “others” and as morally autonomous subjects responding to someone else's claims.

Autoethnographer and autoethnography theorist Carolyn Ellis points out the personal, ethical, and political dimensions of my and my students' work (I write and rewrite my own autoethnography right alongside of them). “Increased self-understanding,” Ellis writes, “may provide a quicker and more successful route to social change than changing laws or other macro-political structures” (402). This self-understanding is achieved by recognizing the ways in which one's identity has been written down—or spoken on the air—by someone else—how, as Heather Zurich put it, one has been “stripped.” It is also achieved by looking at how one may allow oneself to be what someone else has written down or spoken. And it is achieved by responding as oneself, as one chooses, even if this begins quietly and tentatively. As Ellis goes on to say, “[L]arge scale social change is accomplished in face-to-face relations, at the level of personal identity and consciousness, in the household and the neighborhood [and in private meetings with radio show hosts], whether or not such change is enunciated in public policy and macro-level power relations” (402). “Self-understanding” is precisely what one hopes Imus came to at his meeting with the Scarlet Knights.

Again, we might have missed the Imus story—it might never even have become a story—because it is such a normative part of the story American culture tells itself about African American women. Hadn't I just read, in their autoethnographies, the same story told by my own African American students? This is what W.E.B. Du Bois meant when he wrote about “looking at one's self through the eyes of others . . . measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (45). Does the measuring tape—the absolute—belong to the Imuses of our culture? Are their representations the defining ones? Does white America still hold the tape that measures one's very soul? How can one measure oneself otherwise, especially when people like Imus have an incredibly powerful popular medium providing them a platform from which they can tell their version of the American narrative—and when audiences have participated in “passive oppression” for decades, “making it possible for oppression to happen simply by doing nothing to stop it” (Johnson 106)? When we refuse to acknowledge the defilement, the violation of identity committed by America's Imuses, our “silence and not looking and not asking are *in effect* just as racist *because oppression depends on this in order to continue*” (Johnson 106; italics in original). Someone had to put a stop to it, to fight back, to “attack[] something—an issue that we know isn't right,” as Essence Carson said in the Scarlet Knights' press conference (“April 10, 2007”).

Ideally, in my classroom, I can create an alternative space where my students can fight back, can speak truth to power. I have sometimes used an assignment taken from the web page of Professor Tracy Duckart, Acting Director of Composition at Humboldt State University. It asks students to engage with the ways in which they have been perceived or defined (Duckart). One African American student, Ryan, wrote an autoethnography entitled “Overcoming the World”—life as a struggle against others' measurements. He begins: “Do I want to grow up and be a drug dealer, gang member, high school dropout, a woman-beater and a cheater, to have kids and not be the father in their life, and a thief?” The male equivalent of “nappy-headed hos,” these representations constitute a co-opting of identity, of moral autonomy. This is the story American culture tells itself about Ryan, though, tragically, it might also be the story that Ryan tells himself about himself. But it is not Ryan's story. Ryan's story actually goes like this:

My determination to make the system fail only made me achieve a lot of my goals. In sports, I have been rated one of the best basketball players in the state of Illinois. I was selected three times all area for the *Daily Herald*, *Elgin Courier*, and the *Northwest Herald*. I led our school to its first conference title and it was best team ever in

basketball. I was the first player in our area to score over 1000 points and have more than over 2500 total yards in football. I hold the state record in three pointers without a miss, which are 8 in a row in one game. I have the most three pointers made in school history. But the biggest accomplishment for me was to graduate from high school and go to college, because there hasn't been a male Harris to go to college in about 3 decades. It was the best feeling in life to lead the way for my younger cousins in my family, because they want to grow up to be like me. It's a huge burden on my shoulders, but it is worth it, in every way to me.

Ryan's pride in his achievements, the repetitive, insistent "I," is an enactment of selfhood, a declaration of subjecthood that, by its very definition, is impossible for an "other" to achieve. The act of writing itself is an assertion of agency, an agency that is easier for those in positions of privilege to take for granted—not least because they construct the normative ideas and attitudes—than for those who have been constructed by such normative ideas and attitudes to challenge.

Just as important as his assertion of his identity, however, is Ryan's recognition of the systemic nature of racism. Denied privilege by being defined as "other," Ryan comes to the same conclusion that the Scarlet Knights and the "experts" do. As Allan Johnson puts it,

Privilege is created and maintained through social systems that are dominated by, centered on, and identified with privileged groups. A racist society, for example, is white-dominated, white-centered, and white-identified. Since privilege is rooted primarily in systems—such as families, schools, and workplaces—change isn't simply a matter of changing people. The solution also has to include entire systems whose paths of least resistance shape how people feel, think, and behave as individuals, how they see themselves and one another. (128)

While Ellis rightly suggests that individuals can effect social change, Johnson also rightly suggests that individuals—particularly white individuals—cannot eradicate racism until they recognize the network of power and privilege that benefits them, whether they like it or not, or whether they feel privileged or not. Imus said what he said—he has been saying stuff like this for years—because his position in a "white-dominated, white-centered, and white-identified" culture has allowed him to, and because we—white America—have let him get away with it.

Until now. Until these young African American women—arguably the group of Americans who historically has had the least amount of power and privilege—stood up and said, "enough." And until they were finally joined by enough powerful white people—the advertisers who dropped Imus's stations and the media executives who saw the damage to their bottom line—that the call for "enough" was heeded. Even if they were motivated by "enlightened" self-interest, the corporate boards recognized the moral authority of the scholar-athletes, and Americans, black and white, stopped and listened—really listened. In a rare display of cross-racial solidarity, MSNBC and CBS broke ranks with one of their own and acknowledged what could not be ignored: the racism that still poisons American life (Carter and Story A1). The Scarlet Knights spoke truth to power and, for once, truth won out.

Tanitra, another African American student, also used her autoethnography to speak truth to power. Taking Duckart's prompt about ways in which one is othered—even, sometimes, within one's own community—Tanitra looked at her "othering" head-on. And she embraced it. She embraced both the label the white world would slap on her—"other"—and she embraced the label the black world tagged her with—"sellout." Walking the tightrope between white racism and black misunderstanding, Tanitra maintains her balance, her equilibrium, and makes it to the other side, the side of self-confidence and personal power. She writes:

My other. What is my other, you may ask? My other is all things that people have used to set me apart from them because they did not possess it. My other ranges from being black to being smart. I have hated my other for years, but I have found a way to love my other. . .

Here I am, a young black female in a white society trying to make the best out of myself and either group does not accept me. I found myself asking this question . . . , "What must I do to become accepted?" The answer to my question was not so clear but later in life I would find out the truth. The truth was that I needed to love my other and understand my other before I became ashamed of it. I learned that your other could either make you or break you. Once you learn to embrace that, other negativity behind it is gone. Before I realized I needed to love my other I had shunned it away. I was making excuses for my other instead of standing behind it. . .

I realized that if I did not love my other I was a sellout to myself

. . . I am willing to call myself a sellout, only because I am selling out for myself. I am standing up for myself and I do not care how anyone else feels about it. I can no longer go through being ashamed of my other. I am willing to stand up for my other any day. I know many people are afraid of their other, but that is not the case with me. I guess you can say my other and I are buddies.

"Buddies." I love that word, buddies, which suggests an intimacy, a self-love that Tanitra knows she has and that frees her to be herself. "Buddies" also takes the sting out of "sellout"; Tanitra talks back to the black community as defiantly as she talks back to the white. By reclaiming her identity from both blacks and whites who would tell her story, Tanitra reminds us that the first, the primary, ethical act is simply to be who we are. If articulating our identities on our own terms is our first ethical act, perhaps speaking truth to power is our highest. In telling about their lives and their struggles, Ryan and Tanitra were "intervening" (Pratt) in representations of themselves, representations made (mainly) by the powerful for the powerful. By talking back, by writing "in response to" those who sought to define them, Ryan and Tanitra were putting those people on notice that enough was enough, that they would be heard, that their voices counted, that they could and would take back their identities and shape them in their own ways, and, finally, that they, too, could now begin to expect that their accomplishments would be greeted with celebration rather than contempt. Moreover, insofar as autoethnographies position writers as subjects—invite them to claim subjecthood where none had been allowed—they interrogate the system that privileges white subjectivity and apports power and agency accordingly.

Ryan, Tanitra, Kia Vaughn, Heather Zurich, Essence Carson, the rest of the Scarlet Knight team: all of these young people are delivering the real lesson about race—and gender—in America, and it is a lesson about the hypocrisy that persists even as we continue to pay lip service to justice and equality. Imus, Carson said, "has brought us to the harsh reality that behind the faces of networks that have worked to convey a message of empowerment to young adults, that somehow . . . somehow . . . the door has been left open to attack your leaders of tomorrow" ("April 10, 2007"). This astute—and accurate—assessment of what some people really think about African Americans and women contains a serious charge, a charge about the abuse of power by the privileged. Noting at the press conference that Imus was "a broadcaster that gets his show across to so many people because he's in the nation's biggest media market in New York," and that "he reaches so many people," Carson asked, "can you imagine how many people may have really did think there might be truth behind his joke" ("April 10, 2007")? How many people, indeed? And how will we answer her charge? "Where were" the media, Carson wanted to know, "when the youth were making history for a prestigious university" ("April 10, 2007")? It was about time, Carson clearly implied, that we started telling a different story.

There is hope, tempered by realism, that that new story is already being written, and that, because of these new storytellers, with their pride and courage, the balance of power may already be shifting, as Carson recognized:

I believe that there are a lot of positives that can come from this. One thing is that we finally speak up for women, not only African-American women, but all women. That's just going to be a major step forward in society, just to finally understand that there isn't that equality that we all wish was there. It's something we all hope for, but until we make those great strides to achieve that, we're going to continue to fall short. I'm glad we're speaking up. I feel like we can achieve that [equality]. ("April 10, 2007")

Carson's challenge to us is unmistakable, and we ignore it at our peril. As Ryan says in the conclusion to his autoethnography, "I have made bad choices, . . . but I learned from my mistakes, which made me a wiser person in life." If Ryan, like the Scarlet Knights, could meet Don Imus, he might teach him this lesson, offer him this gift of wisdom. What would Imus do?

Works Cited

"April 10, 2007 Press Conference Transcribe." *Rutgers Athletic News* . 10 April 2007. 23 July 2007 <<http://www.scarletknights.com>>.

Carter, Bill, and Louise Story. "NBC News Drops Imus Show Over Racial Remark." *New York Times* 12 Apr. 2007, National ed.: A1+.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. New York: Signet, 1995.

Duckart, Tracy. The Cache: Tracy Duckart's Instructional Website at Humboldt State University. 28 Aug. 2005 <<http://www.humboldt.edu/~tdd2/Autoethnography.htm>>.

Ellis, Carolyn. "Being Real: Moving Inward Toward Social Change." *Qualitative Studies in Education* 15 (2002): 399-406.

Johnson, Allan G. *Privilege, Power, and Difference*. 2nd ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2006.

Kynard, Carmen. "'I Want to Be African': In Search of a Black Radical Tradition/African-American-Vernacularized Paradigm for 'Students' Right to Their Own Language,' Critical Literacy, and 'Class Politics.'" *College English* 69 (2007): 360-390.

Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 1994.

"Out of the Mouths of Blackness." *Ebony* July 2007: 71-79.

Poniewozik, James. "The Imus Fallout: Who Can Say What?" Time in Partnership with CNN . 12 Apr. 2007. 23 July 2007 <<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1609490,00.html>>.

Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Professing in the Contact Zone: Bringing Theory and Practice Together*. Ed. Janice M. Wolff. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2002. 1-18.

"Rutgers Team Accepts Imus' Apology." FOXNews.com . 13 Apr. 2007. 23 July 2007 <<http://www.FOXNews.com>>

Wolff, Janice, ed. *Professing in the Contact Zone: Bringing Theory and Practice Together*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2002.

Anne Bratach Matthews (ammatthews@mail.millikin.edu), who received her Ph.D. from Indiana University-Bloomington, is an Assistant Professor of English at Millikin University in Decatur, Illinois. She teaches first-year composition, African American literature, and multicultural literature. She is currently on sabbatical, working on research in autoethnography, ethics, and personal identity.

Return to [Table of Contents](#)