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Section: PERSPECTIVE

Insulting black women is not new: MORALIST

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It's the Ugly Woman Contest all over again: demeaning humor by white men at the expense of African-American university women. Regrettably, there are few legal or moral boundaries.

The Rutgers University women's basketball team made it to the NCAA Division I Women's Basketball championship game, losing 59-46 to the Tennessee Lady Vols on April 3. The game threw a spotlight on Rutgers' outstanding lineup of mostly freshman African-American players. But racial slurs aimed at the Rutgers team upstaged the excellence of the game, and every athletically gifted and academically high-achieving player on the court.

Morning-after-the-match chat went way too far. Don Imus and his "Imus in the Morning" radio show buddies were recollecting the game. Short on insight into basketball and going for the big, easy chuckle, the men turned to the looks of the players. Imus described the Rutgers women as "nappy-headed (w)ho(re)s." Bernard McGuirk heartily agreed, calling the team "hard-core" whores. So far as "Imus in the Morning" was concerned, the NCAA finals came down to a battle between the Tennessee "Wannabes" and the Rutgers "Jigaboos."

CBS on Friday fired Imus after MSNBC earlier announced it would end its cable television simulcast of "Imus in the Morning." Imus had apologized to the black race at the feet of Al Sharpton on "The Al Sharpton Show." Rutgers women's basketball team captain Essence Carson graciously granted Imus' request to meet with her team to deliver a personal apology. Imus assured his radio audience that he is a "good person" despite his egregious mistake. A man past 60, he has now "learned" that "you can't make fun of everybody, because some people don't deserve it." And, sure, Imus is a liberal who donates money to poor African-American children and has African-American friends.

What is the impact on college students of having racist and sexist insults thrown into their faces? Getting to college at all can be a special struggle for African-American women in New Jersey. Black women are on the lower end of the socio-economic measuring stick. To be turned into an object of ridicule even when you are succeeding can undermine the confidence of hard-working young scholars. There is only so much that role models with beauty and skills like Oprah Winfrey, Tyra Banks, Condoleezza Rice and Venus Williams can do if the overwhelming cultural message about people who look like you is "nappy-headed" whore.

Dealing with gratuitous racism is a pressure young black women bucking stereotypes of

ugliness, hypersexuality and social dependency can do without. I suspect most African-American women are losing patience, as I am, with having to laugh along with other people laughing at us, just to get along. It's a shame that when the Rutgers team should be celebrating a fantastic season and getting back to the books, it has Imus to deal with.

The Imus affair brings to mind a clash of some years back that dragged down the spirits of a group of university women, south of here. On April 4, 1991, the George Mason University chapter of Sigma Chi fraternity put on a pageant. They called it "The Ugly Woman Contest." Fraternity men dressed up like "unattractive" women and competed for the "ugliest woman" crown. Proceeds of the event went to charity. For extra laughs, a white male student competed in the guise of an "ugly" black woman. As described by Judge James M. Sprouse, who wrote the majority opinion for the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals in the highly publicized lawsuit that resulted from the incident: "He was painted black and wore stringy, black hair decorated with curlers, and his outfit was stuffed with pillows to exaggerate a woman's breasts and buttocks. He spoke in slang to parody African-Americans."

Fellow students complained to university officials, calling the display racist and sexist in violation of university standards. The university agreed and suspended the fraternity from most activities for two years, making an exception for "philanthropic events with an educational purpose directly related to gender discrimination and cultural diversity."

Aided by civil libertarians, the unhappy fraternity sued the university in federal court to block enforcement of its punishment and ultimately won. The Fourth Circuit held on appeal that the same First Amendment that protects freedom of speech, religion and press, also protects "mindless fraternity fun, devoid of any artistic expression."

Ideally, university administrators would be encouraged to advance undergraduate teaching objectives linked to the nation's modern civil rights priorities. Less than 25 years before the Ugly Woman Contest, Virginia still banned interracial marriages and resisted desegregation of its schools. The Fourth Circuit slapped down a university trying to overcome a shameful past, disapproving the use of discipline to teach young adults a hard lesson about the importance of respectful speech and conduct.

To no avail, George Mason University had argued in court that "perpetuating derogatory racial and sexual stereotypes, tends to isolate minority students, and creates a hostile and distracting learning environment." The "Ugly Woman Contest" was "incompatible with, and destructive to, the University's mission of promoting diversity within its student body."

Academic freedom, sometimes interpreted as a freedom of universities to direct their scholarly missions by their own lights, is afforded judicial protection under the First Amendment. But punishing campus speech is rarely allowed under any theory. The overall tenor of First Amendment law implicitly instructs students at public universities to grow very thick skin and tough it out.

African-American women attending public universities put up with the rude, distracting and deeply wounding antics of peers still learning the meaning of respect for others. Hopefully, minority women at Rutgers today experience few such insults. Whatever African-American women face on campus pales in comparison, though, to what they encounter in the world at large.

Contemporary American popular culture is proudly edgy, irreverent and especially fond of its stereotypes of African-American women as sex-crazed prostitutes, drug addicts and baby-mamas. Turn on the radio, turn on the television, rent a movie, buy a CD and see for yourself. Many artists and entertainers put down black women the way Imus did and

get away with it. Complicated "moral" rules that allow certain people to say certain offensive things at certain times help promote and sustain negative images of African-American women.

That the African-American women of Rutgers have recently had to put up with disparaging remarks on a nationally syndicated radio show is demoralizingly par for the course. Imus got one thing almost right: You can't -you shouldn't - make fun of everybody, because some people don't deserve it.

---- INDEX REFERENCES ----