

It's Not About the Game: Don Imus, Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Media

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Using intersectionality and hegemony theory, we critically analyze mainstream print news media's response to Don Imus' exchange on the 2007 NCAA women's basketball championship game. Content and textual analysis reveals the following media frames: "invisibility and silence"; "controlling images versus women's self-definitions"; and, "outside the frame: social issues in sport and society." The paper situates these media frames within a broader societal context wherein 1) women's sports are silenced, trivialized and sexualized, 2) media representations of African-American women in the U. S. have historically reproduced racism and sexism, and 3) race and class relations differentially shape dominant understandings of African-American women's participation in sport. We conclude that news media reproduced monolithic understandings of social inequality, which lacked insight into the intersecting nature of oppression for women, both in sport and in the United States.

En utilisant les théories de l'intersectionnalité et de l'hégémonie, nous apportons une analyse critique de la réponse de la presse écrite à Don Imus et ses échanges au sujet de la finale du championnat de basketball féminin universitaire américain en

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2007. L'analyse de contenu révèle les thèmes suivants : « invisibilité et silence », « le contrôle des images versus les autodéfinitions des sportives » et « hors cadre : les questions sociales en sport et en société ». L'article situe ces cadres médiatiques au sein d'un contexte social plus large qui 1) bâillonne, sexualise et rend trivial le sport féminin ; 2) contient des représentations médiatiques des femmes africaines-américaines qui ont historiquement reproduit le racisme et le sexisme ; et 3) contient des relations raciales et de classe qui marquent les compréhensions dominantes de la participation sportive des femmes africaines-américaines. Nous concluons que les médias ont reproduit des compréhensions monolithiques de l'inégalité sociale ; compréhensions qui ne permettent pas de voir les intersections de l'oppression (race, genre, classe) des femmes en sport et aux États-Unis.

On Tuesday, April 3, 2007, the Rutgers University Scarlet Knights women's basketball team squared off in the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) championship game against a perennial powerhouse, the University of Tennessee Volunteers. The following day, in a dialogue on *Imus in the Morning*, Don Imus, long-time radio talk show host/ "shock jock," referred to the Rutgers University women's basketball team as "nappy headed hos." Later that day, Media Matters for America, an independent media watchdog group, posted the transcript on their website, flagging the commentary due to the blatant racism and sexism in the dialogue ("Imus called women's basketball team 'nappy headed hos,'" accessed October 16, 2007). The following is the full transcript of the segment:

IMUS: So, I watched the basketball game last night between—a little bit of Rutgers and Tennessee, the women's final.

ROSENBERG: Yeah, Tennessee won last night—seventh championship for [Tennessee coach] Pat Summitt, I-Man. They beat Rutgers by 13 points.

IMUS: That's some rough girls from Rutgers. Man, they got tattoos and—

McGUIRK: Some hard-core hos.

IMUS: 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.

McGUIRK: A Spike Lee thing.

IMUS: Yeah.

McGUIRK: The Jigaboos vs. the Wannabes—that movie that he had.

IMUS: Yeah, it was a tough —

McCORD: Do The Right Thing.

McGUIRK: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

IMUS: I don't know if I'd have wanted to beat Rutgers or not, but they did, right?

ROSENBERG: It was a tough watch. The more I look at Rutgers, they look exactly like the Toronto Raptors.

IMUS: Well, I guess, yeah.

RUFFINO: Only tougher.

McGUIRK: The [Memphis] Grizzlies would be more appropriate.

This exchange exploded into a controversial, widely discussed and debated “media event,” the contours of which reveal important insights about sport and the role of mass media in constructing hegemonic notions of race, class, gender and sexuality. Following McDonald and Birrell (1999), we “read” Imus’ remark as a sport “event” wherein mediated ideologies of race, gender, sexuality and class are articulated. First we review the research on gender and race in sport media. A discussion of our theoretical framework and methodology follows. The paper then explores the dominant media frames through a content and textual analysis. We examine these frames to critique hegemonic ideologies embedded in culturally relevant texts. We suggest possible “counter-narratives” of the Imus media event that offer “resistant political possibilities” (McDonald & Birrell, 1999, p. 295). The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of the media framings of the Imus/ Rutgers controversy and asks what role the “sport-media complex” plays in the overall construction of these ideologies (Jhally, 1984).

Gender, Race, Sport and the Media

The Imus dialogue on Rutgers University highlighted the ways in which female athletes continue to struggle to receive respectful, quality coverage of their sport in mainstream news media. Research on the mainstream news media coverage of women’s sport continually shows that representations of the female athlete are, “contested ideological terrain” (Messner, 1988). Sociologists of sport have long noted the lack of coverage of women’s sport in mainstream news media, more importantly the lack of respectful, serious coverage of women’s sport, especially for female athletes of Color (Douglas, 2005; Douglas & Jamieson, 2006; Lansbury, 2001; McKay & Johnson, 2008; Schultz, 2005), in mainstream print media (Bishop, 2003; Christopherson, Janning, McConnell, 2002; Eastman & Billings, 2000; Eastman & Billings, 1999; Pratt, Grappendorf, Grundvig, & LeBlanc, 2008; Vincent, 2004; Vincent & Crossman, 2008; Urquhart & Crossman, 1999) and in mainstream televised media (Daddario & Wigley, 2007; Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988; Messner, Duncan, & Willms, 2006).

Despite attempts to educate the U. S. mainstream news media regarding stereotypical coverage of women’s sport, there are consistent patterns that persist over time. As longitudinal research on the televised news media coverage demonstrates, women’s sport is consistently ignored (Messner, Duncan & Willms, 2006; Messner, Duncan & Cooky, 2003). Research has found that the amount of coverage in local news and national sports highlight programs, approximately 3–8% of the coverage is on women’s sport (Messner, Duncan & Willms, 2006). Even when the media do cover women’s sport, the coverage often trivializes women’s athleticism and

hetero-sexualizes female athletes (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; Christopherson, et al., 2002; Messner, 2002). Research on newspaper coverage of the Wimbledon championships in 2000 found that while the amount of coverage of the men's and women's events was relatively equal, the quality of coverage differed: the mostly male journalists who covered the tournaments devalued the athletic accomplishments of female tennis players by using cultural and racial stereotypes, trivialization, and sexual innuendo (Vincent, 2004). These trends in the coverage of women's sport, and specifically of African-American female athletes, are not new to the post-Title IX generation. In her analysis of the print news media coverage of Alice Coachman and Althea Gibson, Lansbury (2001) found white newspapers trivialized African-American women's participation in sport, either by failing to cover the accomplishments of the athletes or by framing the athletes as masculine.

Research on contemporary media representations of African-American female athletes has focused on African-American women's participation in individual sport like tennis, especially mediated representations of Venus and Serena Williams (Douglas 2005; Schultz, 2005; Spencer, 2004). Indeed this is logical given the American public's fascination with female athletes in individual sports, and their feminine beauty not athletic skill (Banet-Weiser, 1999a). This fascination is constructed, in part, by the media coverage of women's sport. However, when athletes are nonwhite, race in media representations also becomes salient. Douglas' (2005) analysis of the media coverage of the 2001 Indian Wells tennis tournament and the 2003 French Open, found that the media's "raceless" explanations for the hostile reception of the Williams' sisters rendered race and white privilege invisible and upheld the marking of tennis as a "white" sport. Schultz (2005) argues the popular media's representations of Serena Williams during the 2002 U. S. Open were, "located within racialized discourses" (p.338) albeit through the oppositional rhetoric that position Serena Williams against other white athletes on the tour. For Schultz (2005), blackness in the media coverage of the 2002 U.S. Open is "constructed in contrast with discussions of normalized, white female tennis athletes" (p. 339). More recently, McKay and Johnson (2008) examine mainstream media coverage of Venus and Serena Williams and show how, in the past, sport media has "othered" women as "objects of ridicule, inferiority and weakness...but currently is searching for new ways to disparage the powerful and therefore 'uppity' African-American sportswomen" (p. 492). They argue that despite the Williams sisters' unprecedented success in professional tennis, the mainstream sport media discursively positioned their bodies as simultaneously sexually grotesque and pornographically erotic.

Female athletes in basketball, and presumably other team sports, have to negotiate a "contradictory set of cultural images" (Banet-Weiser, 1999a). As scholars have long noted, women's participation in sport, and in particular team sport, is frequently accompanied by a questioning of the (hetero)sexuality of athletes (Cahn, 1994; Griffin, 1998). This is in part due to the fact that, unlike individual sports such as tennis and gymnastics, participation in a team contact sport like basketball is viewed in U. S. culture as a "masculine" endeavor (Banet-Weiser, 1999a). Thus, female athletes are often confronted with cultural assumptions regarding their lack of femininity, and thus their lack of heterosexuality (Banet-Weiser, 1999a). These cultural assumptions regarding women's sport participation contribute to particular mediated representations of female athletes. For example, the WNBA's marketing

strategy revolved around highlighting the heterosexual, emphasized femininity of WNBA players, as models, mothers or the girl-next-door (Banet-Weiser, 1999a; McPherson, 2000). In her analysis of the WNBA web site, McPherson (2000) found that the players' familial relationships, ties, and responsibilities were highlighted. She argues this is not simply about rearticulating female athleticism within the domestic context; rather it produces racialized narratives of black femininity. Thus, the negotiation of the contradictions in women's sport participation differs qualitatively for African-American female athletes given the ways in which African-American women have long been portrayed in the media, and specifically sports media, as both hyper-sexualized and less feminine. As a result, African-American female athletes are subject to particular "controlling images" in the media (Cahn, 1994; Collins, 1990).

As critical media scholars argue, basketball is a cultural site wherein blackness is both invisible and hyper-visible (Banet-Weiser, 1999a; McPherson, 2000). Given the popularity of women's basketball and the fact that African-American female athletes are overrepresented in basketball at the collegiate level (Smith, 1992), this study provides an analysis of media representations of female athletes in team sport contexts. As noted above, previous research reveals the agency of the media in shaping discourses of sport and female athletes in ways that are implicitly about race, gender, and sexuality. Building upon this research (Banet-Weiser, 1999a; Douglas & Jamieson, 2006; McDonald & Birrell, 1999; Schultz, 2005), we argue that media representations of female athletes of Color cannot be analyzed outside of a consideration of the simultaneous, interlocking forms of oppression (gender, race, sexuality, class). This study differs from prior research in that we examine not only the framing or representation of a predominantly African-American female team (here the Rutgers University women's basketball team) but also the media's framing of other key figures and the ways in which the media contextualized the "nappy headed hos" dialogue, a comment that is simultaneously raced, gendered, and sexualized. Therefore, we explore not only the media's representation, or framing, of African-American female athletes (as the Rutgers team became racialized as "Black" through the dialogue, despite the racial identities of individual players, of whom several were white), but also whose voices were heard in the mainstream news media's framing of the event. Thus, Collins' (1990) concept of representations of Black women, "controlling images," and her theory of intersectionality shed light on how multiple identities (race, gender, class, sexuality), privilege, and oppression converge in the media event (McDonald & Thomas, in press; Wingfield 2008).

Theoretical Framework

According to Gramsci (1971), social order is maintained through a dynamic process of coercion and consent whereby dominant groups produce dominant cultural beliefs, called hegemonic ideologies, and subordinated groups to consent to structural conditions that may be oppressive given the power of hegemonic ideologies. For Gramsci, consent is secured through the "cultural leadership of the dominant grouping" (Curran, 2006 p. 132). In the United States, the media operate as a part of this cultural leadership, particularly when the lines between the corporate elite and the media elite are increasingly blurred (Curran, 2006). Ideologies thus become "naturalized" or a part of common sense, taken-for-granted understandings.

However, Gramsci also recognized that subordinated groups can choose to oppose hegemonic dominance by creating alternative understandings of society that connect to people's social experiences and identities (Curran, 2006).

Patricia Hill Collins' theoretical framework was informed by Gramscian theories on the dynamics of domination and power in societies. Building upon Gramsci's hegemony theory, Collins (1990) argued that dominant groups control social institutions in society, such as schools, the media and popular culture, which produce controlling images that are rife with stereotypes about subordinated groups. These controlling images are not passively accepted by marginalized groups, as there are cultures of resistance within subordinated communities. Collins (1990) explained: "Subjugated knowledges...develop in cultural contexts controlled by oppressed groups. Dominant groups aim to replace subjugated knowledges with their own specialized thought because they realize that gaining control over this dimension of subordinate groups' lives amplifies control" (p. 228). At the same time, Collins recognized there are segments of subordinated communities that internalize and perpetuate dominant ideologies. Thus, the processes of domination and oppression are complex. The result is, "African-American women find themselves in a web of cross-cutting relationships, each presenting varying combinations of controlling images and women's self-definitions" (Collins, 1990 p. 96).

The concept of intersectionality (Collins, 1990) refers to this "web of cross-cutting relationships" taking into account how various forms of oppression (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality) interlock with one another. As such, "both/and perspectives," rather than "either/or perspectives," of social locations are used to understand the ways in which individuals (and social institutions) are situated within interlocking forms of privilege/dominance and oppression/ subordination.

Therefore, we analyzed the Imus/Rutgers University controversy and the subsequent media framings to explore the tensions between the "controlling images" of African-American women as "nappy-headed hos" and "women's self definitions," of "young ladies of class." The Rutgers coach, players, and women's groups provided counter-hegemonic discourses on African-American women. Collins' theoretical framework allows consideration of how subordinate groups assert agency, despite a lack of institutional access or power, to also shape the media frames of the event. Thus, this study critically analyzes the construction of media events by mainstream news print media to understand the "complex interrelated and fluid character of power relations" as they are constructed along axes of difference (McDonald & Birrell, 1999, p. 284).

Methods

Following Hall (2000), we acknowledge media frames are both constructed within raced, classed, and gendered hierarchical relations of power and are read within those very same systems of domination. Also building upon Gramscian theories of hegemony, Hall (2000) developed theoretical and methodological frameworks for understanding how meanings are produced and consumed. As Hall notes, meanings are constructed through and within hierarchical structures of power wherein the preferred meanings, or the meanings intended by the producer, "have institutional, political and ideological power imprinted in them, and themselves

become institutionalized” (Hall 2000, p. 57). As such, preferred readings often limit the possible meanings encoded in texts by producers and thus limit the possible readings decoded by audiences (Hall, 2000; Hunt, 1999). Through a textual analysis, researchers can uncover both the denotative and connotative meanings of texts (Hall, 2000). From this methodological perspective, the media are viewed as creating and recreating narratives that can be linked to dominant ideas, or ideologies, that circulate in wider society.

Content analysis involves a systematic, quantitative analysis of content, usually texts, images, or other symbolic matter (Krippendorff, 2004). According to Payne and Payne (2004), “content analysis seeks to demonstrate the meaning of written or visual sources by systematically allocating their content to pre-determined, detailed categories and then both quantifying and interpreting the outcomes” (p. 51). It generally involves the researcher determining the presence, meanings, and relationships of certain words or concepts within the text. We used content analysis to systematically locate the preferred meanings of the text. Stokes’ (2003) discussion of media methodologies recognizes that scholars can successfully combine content analysis with other interpretivist methods such as textual analysis.

We analyzed the major and regional newspaper coverage of the Don Imus/Rutgers University Women’s Basketball controversy. Four of the top five national papers, based on circulation rates (Audit Bureau Circulation, 2006), were selected: *USA Today*, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post*. Eight regional papers were selected from different regions of the U.S. (Northeast, Midwest, South and West) from the top 25 list, also based on circulation rates (Audit Bureau Circulation, 2006). Regional newspapers included: *Chicago Tribune*, *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Denver Post*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Boston Globe*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Seattle Times*. *The Star Ledger*, New Jersey’s major newspaper, was also selected based on the location of Rutgers University to provide an understanding of “local” coverage of the story.

Articles were retrieved using Lexis-Nexis database, from April 4, 2007 (the day the comment aired) to April 19, 2007, using the search terms, Imus and Rutgers University. This search yielded a total of 188 feature articles. We selected April 19, 2007 as the end date due to the shift in media coverage after the Virginia Tech Shootings (a student went on a shooting spree killing 33 people, including himself, and wounding 15 others), which became the new “media event” that dominated the newspapers and televised news programs.

The first and second author conducted a qualitative analysis of all articles to uncover the various media frames of the event. Thus, the frames we subsequently analyzed in the content analysis were derived from this inductive approach. The initial qualitative analysis revealed eight emergent themes regarding media framing of the controversy, three of which we discuss in this paper (due to space limitations). Emergent themes were discovered using open coding of data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). First, we read the articles to determine who and what was left outside or marginalized in dominant news frames. Here, we focused on who and what was rendered invisible and silenced. Second, the frames for the Rutgers team were analyzed. Finally, we examined how the statement, “nappy headed hos,” was framed by the media. From these emergent themes, we created subthemes that we then quantitatively analyzed. For example, an emergent theme was what we labeled, “voices in the article.” Upon our initial textual analysis we noted which voices

(as determined by direct quotes in the article) were included in the coverage (e.g., coach, black leaders, women's leaders, players, politicians and others). In the content analysis, we were then able to code whether an article mentioned and/or included quotes from specific individuals/groups. We then compiled descriptive statistics on the content of the subthemes. In the final step, we conducted a textual analysis (Hall, 2000), analyzing in depth the quantitative results from the content analysis.

Explanation of Events¹

In 2007, Rutgers University had their first ever NCAA national championship appearance for women's basketball. The 2007 Rutgers squad, ranked number 19 and 21, according to the Associated Press and the ESPN/USA Today polls respectively, had struggled at the beginning of the season but won the Big East conference title against another powerhouse, the University of Connecticut. This was their first conference title in the history of the program (Rutgers Women's Basketball History, accessed 7/7/09). Rutgers continued its winning streak defeating both Duke and Louisiana State University during the NCAA tournament. Rutgers' performance was surprising to many because Duke, a number one ranked team and top seed, had beaten Rutgers earlier in the season by 40 points. Rutgers' "Cinderella" season would end at the NCAA championship game when they would face off against the University of Tennessee women's basketball team, a number one seed. Coached by Pat Summit, her 33rd season, Tennessee won their seventh NCAA National Championship. The match-up should have provided a compelling story for journalists given that Tennessee has been compared with other long-standing sport dynasties including Duke University's men's basketball program and Major League Baseball's New York Yankees (Tennessee is 5-0 Against Rutgers in NCAA Tournament Play, accessed 7/11/09).

At the time Imus' radio show, *Imus in the Morning*, was broadcast on WFAN, a CBS owned radio station serving the New York City market with an average of 358,000 listeners daily (Carr, 2007, p. 7). In addition, millions watched a simulcast of the show on MSNBC. As noted in the introduction, the exchange on Imus' show on April 4, 2007 and its subsequent posting on Media Matters for America captured the attention of the mainstream news media given the controversial nature of the dialogue.

Historically, the adjective "nappy" has served as a derogatory, racist stereotype to describe the hair texture of women of color. The term "ho" is a shortened, slang version of the word "whore" which is an adjective to describe a sexually promiscuous or immoral woman (Merriam-Webster's dictionary, accessed July, 11 2009). In the U. S. the word "ho" is part of pop culture vernacular, commonly heard in certain forms of rap and hip hop music, on daytime talk shows such as *Jerry Springer*, and is often used to refer to women who sexually manipulate men for economic compensation. In addition, the epithet "ho" typically evokes a woman of lower socioeconomic standing, whereas "escort" has higher socioeconomic connotations. According to pop culture usage, a "ho" can also refer to a woman who "steals" another woman's boyfriend/husband. The dialogue precipitated a series of events, which we outline below.

On Thursday April 5, 2007, MSNBC issued a statement distancing itself from Imus calling his comments "deplorable," while Imus claimed on his radio show

that people should not be offended by, “some idiot comment meant to be amusing.” (Carr, 2007, p. 7). The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People called the remark “racist” and “unacceptable.” On Friday April 6, 2007 the National Association for Black Journalists issued a news release condemning Imus’ remarks and called for his firing. NCAA President Myles Brand and Rutgers University President Richard L. McCormick also issued a joint statement strongly condemning Imus’ remark:

The NCAA and Rutgers University are offended by the insults on MSNBC’s Don Imus program towards the ten young women on the Rutgers basketball team. It is unconscionable that anyone would use the airways to utter such disregard for the dignity of human beings who have accomplished much and deserve credit. It is appropriate that Mr. Imus and MSNBC have apologized. (Carr, 2007, p. 7)

Imus apologized on his radio show saying,

We 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. It was completely inappropriate and we can understand why people were offended. Our characterization was thoughtless and stupid, and we are sorry. (de Moraes, 2007, p. C01)

WFAN and CBS also issued apologies. CBS issued the following statement, “We are disappointed by Imus’ actions earlier this week which we find completely inappropriate. We fully agree that a sincere apology was called for and will continue to monitor the program’s content going forward” (Carr, 2007, p. 7).

On Monday April 9, 2007 Don Imus appeared on Reverend Al Sharpton’s radio talk show. Rev. Sharpton, considered by the mainstream news media as a voice for “the African-American community,” has spoken out frequently on racial issues in the past. On the show, Imus apologized once again for his remark. Sharpton accepted Imus’ apology but called for his resignation. Moreover, the National Organization for Women mobilized its constituents to pressure the media networks to fire Imus. The Women’s Sport Foundation posted a copy of the transcript on their website asking their members to write or e-mail CBS and NBC to “do the right thing and not support bigotry on the airwaves.” (Protest Don Imus’ Inappropriate Remarks Regarding Rutgers Basketball Team, accessed July 11, 2009)

In Chicago, Reverend Jesse Jackson, also considered a voice for “the African-American community” and a key leader in contemporary racial concerns, protested outside NBC’s offices in Chicago. Claiming pressure from the mainstream news media and the organizational efforts of key figures like Sharpton and Jackson, as well as letters in protest from their own employees including Al Roker, weather anchor for the *Today* show on NBC (who wrote on his *Today* show blog that Imus’ comment was “vile and disgusting”), CBS Radio and MSNBC announced they were suspending Imus for two weeks.

Further adding to Imus’ predicament, on Tuesday April 10, 2007 the Rutgers team held a nationally televised news conference. Coach C. Vivian Stringer and the Rutgers athletes publicly accepted Imus’ apology. However, Coach Stringer referred to Imus’ comments as “racist and sexist remarks that are deplorable, despicable and

unconscionable” (Horn & Gold, 2007, p. 11). Team captain Essence Carson put the controversy in perspective noting, “It’s more than about the Rutgers women’s basketball team. As a society, we’re trying to grow and get to the point where we don’t classify women as hos and we don’t classify women as nappy-headed hos” (Roberts, 2007, p. 1).

That same day, Alpha Kappa Alpha, a national sorority and a significant African-American cultural institution with over 200,000 active members, issued a press release condemning Imus’ comment and called for the firing of both Imus and his producer Bernard McGuirk (Imus Press Release, accessed August 1, 2009). Moreover, the President of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, Barbara A. McKinzie, urged members and their families to divest of any stock holdings in CBS, NBC and their parent companies including Microsoft and Westinghouse, and called on the members to boycott rap and hip hop artists. McKinzie noted that the call for the boycott was a way for Alpha Kappa Alpha members to honor the legacy of another Alpha Kappa Alpha member, C. Delores Tucker, a politician and social activist who was one of the first women of color to call for a boycott of misogynist music and artists (Coach Stringer is also a member of the sorority). Also on Tuesday April 10, 2007 key corporate sponsors of Imus’ program pulled their support, including Procter & Gamble, Co., Staples, Inc. and Bigelow Tea. General Motors, GlaxoSmithKline, American Express, and Sprint would follow the next day (Wednesday April 11, 2007) leading MSNBC to cancel the simulcast of Imus’ show, *Imus in the Morning*.

On Thursday April 12, 2007 CBS fired Imus. Several days later the Women’s Sport Foundation issued another press release supporting CBS and MSNBC for their decision to fire Imus (Women’s Sport Foundation responds to CBS and MSNBC’s firing, accessed August, 1 2009).

Silence and Invisibility

The explanation of events outlines the myriad voices that could have been included in the media frames. A key aspect of media frames is the legitimization of some voices in a controversy and the exclusion of others that are silenced, rendered illegitimate or “outside the frame” (Dworkin & Wachs, 1998; 2009; Messner & Solomon, 1993). Thus, we analyzed media coverage in terms of which individuals and groups were rendered visible or invisible. While “key players,” whether they are inside or outside the media frame, exercised agency in speaking out on the issue, who is named and who is unnamed yields important insights regarding the hegemony of the media to shape ideologies and cultural understandings of the event.

As shown in Table 1, although the Rutgers team was named in the majority of articles (87.2%) the majority of articles did not name the coach, C. Vivian Stringer (78.2%) or specific players of the team such as Essence Carson or Matee Ajavon (87.8%). Although the story is about an insult directed at the Rutgers team and its players, the coach and the athletes were infrequently named or quoted. In other words, the mainstream media silenced their voices and perspectives. While it may appear that Rutgers was inside the frame, given that nearly 90% of the articles mentioned the Rutgers team, in most cases the team was only mentioned once to provide context for the story. In a typical example, an article begins, “Radio’s Don

Imus continued his public mea culpa Monday for calling female Rutgers basketball players ‘nappy-headed hos’ ” (Johnson, 2007, p. 1D). The opening line was typically the first and only time the team was mentioned, discussed or quoted. Very few articles discussed the team’s accomplishments, statistics, or history and background of the team, including Rutgers’ “Cinderella” season. The “Cinderella” narrative typically dominates the sport media frames, especially during the NCAA Men’s Final Four tournament. The absence of this narrative in the framing of the Rutgers team highlights the mainstream news media’s continuing silence of women’s sport (Messner, Duncan, & Willms, 2006).

Also nearly invisible in the media frame are the leaders of “women’s groups” (for example, President of the National Organization for Women, Kim Gandy; President of the Feminist Majority, Eleanor Smeal; the then-President of the Women’s Sports Foundation, Aimee Mullins; and Alpha Kappa Alpha President, Barbara McKinzie); 92.6% of articles did not name one women leader or group (Table 1). When women’s groups were named, in most cases it was the National Organization for Women, an organization that has been criticized in the past for its lack of inclusion of the voices and concerns of women of color.

While only 7.4% of articles mentioned a women’s leader or group by name, 46.3% of articles included the name/s of Black leaders or groups (defined as such by the media; Table 1). In other words, the mention of Black leaders or groups was over 6 times that of women’s leaders or groups. Moreover, in the overwhelming majority that named or quoted “Black leaders,” the leaders were Black men, while the “women’s leaders” mentioned were white women. A few articles did mention C. Dolores Tucker, the first female African-American woman to serve as Secretary of State and a Civil Rights leader who lead a movement against misogyny in rap lyrics. She passed away in 2005 and thus could not be quoted in the articles, but others individuals who were quoted referenced Tucker’s movement to end misogyny in rap and hip-hop.

Table 1 Invisibility

Key Figures/ Groups Not Named	Percent (# of articles) <i>n</i> = 188*
Imus not named (search term)	0% (0)
Stringer not named	78.2% (147)
Players not named	87.8% (165)
Rutgers team not named	12.8% (24)
Black Leaders not named	53.7% (101)
Women’s Leaders not named	92.6% (174)
Politicians not named	67.6% (127)

* In all tables the number of articles/percentages may not add to 100% or 188 because not all articles included the frames analyzed.

Further adding to this missed opportunity to frame the story on the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, the mainstream news media largely ignored the organized protests that occurred at the Rutgers University Women's Center. There were a few articles, particularly in *The Star Ledger*, the newspaper whose market includes Rutgers University that mentioned the protests. Several included quotes from a letter written by Carolyn A. Brown, a Black female history professor at Rutgers University (Wentworth and Patterson, 2007). Alpha Kappa Alpha, as discussed earlier, also called for a boycott of Imus. Yet, despite the diversity of voices, the articles framed Reverends Sharpton and Jackson almost exclusively as representatives or legitimate spokespeople. This positioning of Sharpton and Jackson, a routine part of mainstream media's packaging of "race stories," constructs a unitary Black community that shares a specific frame. Although these two leaders have been embroiled in past controversies, the media's uncritical positioning of Sharpton and Jackson as the primary spokespeople racialized the controversy. Moreover, this frame silenced intersectional ways of knowing given that the quotations from Black leaders featured in the articles focused only the racial/racist aspects of the controversy, while neglecting themes on race, gender, and sexuality in sport.

In addition to whom was mentioned in the news articles, we analyzed whether these same individuals or groups were quoted (Table 2). Black leaders were most frequently quoted (19.1%). There was little difference in the percentages of articles that included quotes from Coach Stringer (14.4%) or from Imus (15.4%). However, the voices of women's organizations (4.3%) and the Rutgers women basketball players (8.5%) were left almost entirely outside of the media frame. None of the articles quoted the Women's Sports Foundation or the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority despite both organizations issuing press releases. President Aimee Mullins of the WSF stated in the press release: "Race and gender bigotry are inexcusable...". Alpha Kappa Alpha President, Barbara McKinzie referred to Imus' comment as "racist and sexist." In short, the voices silenced in the media frames are the same voices that provide a context of intersectionality to Imus' comments. Given that Jackson and Sharpton are quoted in five times the number of articles as women's leaders and organizations further supports our analysis that race is the dominant frame in the mainstream print news media coverage.

Table 2 Silence

Key Figures/ Groups quoted/ paraphrased	Percent (# of articles) <i>n</i> = 188*
Imus quoted	15.4% (29)
Stringer quoted	14.4% (27)
Players quoted	8.5% (16)
NCAA/ Rutgers University Administration	13.2% (25)
Black Leaders quoted	19.1% (36)
Women's Leaders quoted	4.3% (8)
Politicians quoted	11.7% (22)

Media Framing of Female Athletes: Controlling Images Versus Women's Self-Definitions

Imus' insult of the Rutgers University women's basketball team as "nappy-headed hos", suggests they "lack class" given their unwillingness, resistance or inability to accept or adopt white, middle-class standards of emphasized femininity. Most of the mainstream news media articles' quotations of the transcript failed to include the exchange that contrasted the "cute" Tennessee players with the Rutgers players who, in the eyes of Imus and his executive producer, were "like the Toronto Raptors," a men's NBA team known for their tough style of play. One exception was an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that included quotations from a University of California, Berkeley basketball player, Alexis Gray-Lawson, who thought the Tennessee team should have also been offended by the remarks because, "casting them as the pretty team demeans their national title" (Knapp, 2007, B1). In sports such as gymnastics where subjective standards of beauty and "cuteness" become a factor in the evaluation of athletic performances, Chisolm (2001) argues that "cuteness" becomes a "female apologetic" to "minimize the transgressions of (gendered) social norms in sport" (p. 428). Imus' dialogue with his executive producer reproduced the gendered ideologies female athletes historically have had to negotiate in their identities as athletes and as women (Cahn, 1994; Felshin, 1974; Festle, 1996).

The masculinization of female athletes historically has operated to "Other" women of Color (Cahn, 1994; Schultz, 2005), due to the ways that whiteness and white privilege shape standards of beauty and femininity (Banet-Weiser, 1999b). In the sport of basketball wherein athletic performances are based on performance standards separate from physical appearance, Imus' commentary regarding the "cuteness" of the Tennessee team serves to mark the athletes by both gender and race. The Imus incident also illustrates how the standards upon which female athletes are judged are not simply about the dichotomous category of Black/ White; they also reveal the social value attributed to lighter skin. A journalist from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Gwen Knapp, states that the Imus incident was not simply about race because there were as many African-Americans on the Tennessee team as on the Rutgers team. Rather it was about "who could 'pass' as part of mainstream culture" (Knapp, 2007, p. B1).

Given this, we were interested in how the Rutgers University Women's basketball players were framed by the media (Table 3). In most of the articles (64.9%) specific Rutgers players were not mentioned or quoted; that is, they were outside the frame. This finding supports our previous analysis of the invisibility and silence of the Rutgers University players and coach, which represented "subjugated knowledges" (Collins, 1990) on the controversy. However, Rutgers' players and coach appeared inside the media frame after their nationally televised press conference on Tuesday April 10, 2007. Of the 66 articles that discussed the players, over half the articles (51.1%) framed the players as "young ladies of class." Of the articles that mentioned the players, 15% framed the players as "innocent victims" undeserving of Imus' verbal abuse. In this frame, the athletes were positioned as "vulnerable" or "meek" and "defenseless" lacking power in relation to Imus. Consider the following quote: "The Rutgers team had done nothing wrong but excel as history students and music majors, as big sisters and determined players..." (Roberts, 2007, p. D1). In this quote, the Rutgers team is viewed as undeserving of Imus' verbal abuse.

Several articles mentioned how Imus had “robbed them of their moment,” likening the players to victims of a crime (Stanley, 2007, p. E1).

The mainstream news media coconstructed the frame of “young ladies of class” in their descriptions of the team, quoting or paraphrasing Coach Stringer who defended her players citing the educational accomplishments or leadership activities of the team. The following is an example of this frame: “These young ladies are valedictorians of their classes, future doctors, musical prodigies and yes, even Girl Scouts. They are all young ladies of class. They are distinctive, articulate” (Strauss, 2007, p. D3). The co-construction of the frame illustrates the tensions between controlling images of African-American women (“nappy-headed hos”) and women’s self-definitions. Coach Stringer represented the ways in which subordinated groups do not passively accept the controlling images put forth by the mainstream media. Challenging the image of African-American women as “nappy-headed hos,” Coach Stringer mentioned in the press conference that Essence Carson played musical instruments. In addition, she was quoted in several articles: “These young ladies are the best the nation has to offer and we are so very fortunate to have them here at Rutgers. They are ladies of class and distinction; they are articulate, they are brilliant” (Brennan, 2007 p. 12C). The Governor of New Jersey, Jon S. Corzine’s comments on the team also coconstructed this frame: “The Rutgers Scarlet Knights women’s basketball team embodies all that is great about New Jersey: intelligence, toughness, tenacity, leaders and, most of all, class” (Strauss, 2007, p. D3) Robert Mulcahy, the athletic director at Rutgers University echoed the “class” frame. Articles noted how, during the press conference, Mulcahy introduced team captain, Essence Carson, as a “straight-A student, who could walk out of here and play ‘Moonlight Sonata’ on the piano without looking at the notes” (Strauss, 2007, p. D3). In short, the agency of Coach Stringer created counter-hegemonic ideologies regarding female athletes that were then reproduced in the mainstream media’s framing of the team.

A few articles (10.6%) fused the “innocent victims” and “young ladies of class” frames (Table 3). These articles implied that because the players were outstanding citizens in the community and accomplished students and athletes they were undeserving “innocent victims.” For example, a *New York Times* article written by Gwen Ifill, a past target of Imus’ “jokes” states, “For all their grit, hard work and

Table 3 Framing of the Rutgers University Women’s Basketball Team

Framing of the Team	Percent (# of articles) <i>n</i> = 188
Innocent Victims	5.3% (10)
Young Ladies of Class	18.1% (34)
Both	10.6% (20)
Other	1.1% (2)
Article does not mention team	64.9% (122)

courage, the Rutgers girls got branded nappy-headed hos.” In the article Ifill continues, “That game had to be the biggest moment of their lives...they are not old enough, or established enough to have built up the sort of carapace many women I know—black women in particular—develop to guard themselves against casual insult” (Ifill, 2007, p. A21) An article in the *Washington Post* describes the team as “a collection of bright, articulate young women, undeserving of Imus’ attack,” (Hicks, 2007, p. B01) and another *Washington Post* article used the descriptor, “innocent women” to refer to the Rutgers players while later mentioning that “After all, at the heart of this discussion is a group of college-educated African-American women. A valedictorian. A musical prodigy. A budding young lawyer” (Hanretty, 2007).

In their analysis of the media coverage of golfer Nancy Lopez’s farewell tour, Douglas and Jamieson (2006) argued that the “construction of whiteness relied upon discourses of sexuality and gender by maintaining cultural norms and values that were constitutive of dominant discourses of social power” (p. 128). In much the same way, white privilege is maintained and whiteness is constructed through the ideologies of gender and sexuality that position the Rutgers University team as either “innocent victims” or “young ladies of class.” Both frames reflect dominant ideologies, which maintain the cultural norms and values of white, middle-class, emphasized femininity.

Coach Stringer’s description of the Rutgers women as “young ladies of class” deployed valued professional class markers as a way of deflecting the negative confluence of race, gender, and sexuality with lower class life, encoded in the “nappy headed hos” epithet. The “young ladies of class” frame resists the “nappy-headed ho” label by challenging the “lack of class,” “out of control,” “hyper-sexualized” Black female body. However, the largely successful (as seen in Imus’ eventual firing) use of class markers to distance the young women of Rutgers from the Imus’ derision, and the media’s uncritical taking-up of this frame, ignores the ways that “nappy headed hos” implicitly invokes the tropes of gender, race, and (lower) class simultaneously. Working together with the dominant framing of the Imus event as primarily a “race story” and the narrative distancing of the Rutgers women from “hos,” implicitly normalizes this degraded status for women within poor, Black communities.

Although researchers estimate that African-American female athletes come from low-income families, given disproportionate representation of African-Americans among the poor and working classes in the United States (Smith, 1992), the Rutgers team was framed as “young ladies of class” transcending lower socioeconomic class locations. According to Collins’ theory of intersectionality, some aspects of one’s identity are sometimes privileged over others. The frame of “young ladies of class” puts forward the privileged aspects of the team’s identity (in this case, upward class mobility) to counter the way race, class, and gender were disparagingly conflated. In this frame, “lower” class can be transcended for those who lack economic resources, which often confer a higher class status, through assimilation and acceptance of (white) middle-class norms of behavior and values such as playing a classical instrument and appreciating “high art.”

Moreover, we argue that the label “young ladies of class” also implicitly positions women’s basketball as moral (or classy), relative to men’s basketball, which has faced long histories of accusations of a “lack of class” due to the participation of Black males from the urban underclass (Banet-Weiser, 1999a; Boyd, 1997). In

this way, the comment deflects rather than underscores the history of sexualization (e.g., female athletes as “hos”) that is so common in women’s sports media coverage. At the same time, “young ladies of class” counteracts a long history of similarly disparaging frames of African-American women in U.S. media more generally. As has been noted by Collins (1990) rarely are African-American women framed in media outside of “sexualized,” “lascivious,” “wild,” “primitive,” “animal-like,” “unfeminine,” “welfare queens,” or “matriarchal” frames. The Imus dialogue on April 4, 2007 touched on many of these historically racist and sexist frames, by referring to women as not only as “nappy headed,” and “hos,” but also as “grizzlies” who supposedly looked like the muscular, NBA men’s team, the Toronto Raptors.

Although some women internalize the (white, middle-class heterosexual) standards of beauty in the United States, which leads to a devaluation of the skin color and hair textures of many African-Americans, there is a long-standing tradition of a Black women’s culture of resistance (Collins, 1990). This resistance illustrates that “hegemonic dominance is never totalizing or complete” and that the cultural context is a “fundamental site of resistance” (Collins, 1990, p. 228). In the case of Rutgers’ University, the athletes’ resistant voices were allowed space in mainstream media, but were ultimately framed to suggest that the controversy was the result of one individual’s racism against an “undeserving” group.

Outside the Frame: Social Issues in Sport and Society

Missing from the media frames was critical self-reflexivity on the media’s long-standing tradition of silence, trivialization, and sexualization of female athletes. Only a few articles actually dealt with issues pertaining to women’s sport, such as gender discrimination in sport or the sexualization of female athletes in the media, or African-American female athletes in sport. Moreover, the national newspapers in the sample included between two to three times the coverage of Imus’/Rutgers University controversy than on the *entire* 2007 NCAA women’s basketball tournament (which spans 2–3 weeks). That one white man’s insult can spur more print news media coverage than one of sport’s major competitions illustrates the power of the mainstream to continually silence women’s sport.

The findings also reveal that very few articles explored how female athletes are held to different standards than male athletes or how the hair texture of women of Color is devalued in U.S. culture. When female athletes transgress gender norms and boundaries, even in a “Post-Title IX” moment, they are still held to antiquated societal standards of emphasized femininity and feminine appearance by the mainstream news media.

Also outside of the media frame was a discussion of racism and/or sexism in the U. S. Although over half (51.6%, Table 4) of the articles do not mention racism or sexism in U.S. society, the other half does tie the incident to racism and/or sexism in the wider society. Thirty-five percent of articles mention the prevalence of continued racism in U.S. society, while only 16% link the incident to continued sexism. In other words, there were twice as many articles that focused on racism than on sexism. A few articles acknowledged that although sexism played a role, racism in society is usually seen as more significant. J. A. Adande, a sports jour-

Table 4 Outside the Frame: Sexism and Racism in American Society

Discussion of . . .	Percent (# of articles) <i>n</i> = 188
Racism	35.6 (67)
Sexism	16 (30)
Article does not mention racism/sexism	51.6% (97)

nalist for the *Los Angeles Times* notes that the story is “as much about sexism as it is about racism. It is sexist that looks even came into play while talking about a sporting event...but historically, racism trumps sexism...” (Adande, 2007, p. D2). Similarly, Christine Brennan, a journalist for *USA Today* who covers women’s sport notes, “When an issue like this explodes in our culture, the first outrage is usually racial, the second gender-related” (2007, p. C12).

Articles may have mentioned that the comment itself was sexist, or linked the comment to the misogyny in rap music and “Black culture,” but few discussed sexism in U.S. society. *The Star Ledger*, serving the New Jersey market, was one of the few newspapers to acknowledge the intersections of race and gender or how the comment was both racist *and* sexist. One article in *The Star Ledger* quoted Rutgers University history professor, Carolyn A. Brown: “Rutgers released a letter from Black female faculty at Rutgers” writing Imus’ slurs ‘must be understood within a long history of oppression’ in which African-American women have suffered from racism and sexism” (Wentworth & Patterson, 2007, p. 1).

Summary and Conclusion

Imus, and the subsequent mainstream news media framing of the event, reminds audiences that female athletes’ looks matter, and racist notions of beauty remain alive and well. Our analysis shows that what was left outside the frame, in conjunction with what was highlighted inside the frame, created a dominant understanding of this media event as predominantly a *racial* event. This racial frame deflected the opportunity the Imus controversy provided for an intersectional understanding of how gender, race, class, and sexuality operate in contemporary sporting contexts in the United States. We found that racial meanings of African-American women/athletes were reproduced through gender, sexuality, and class as seen in the “young ladies of class” and “innocent victims” frames. Given the overall silence of women of Color in the mainstream media, the dominant media frame on racism in society demonstrates the mainstream media’s power to construct frames and to determine who and what is inside and outside the frame. Following Collins (1990), we observe that power operates to silence these subjugated knowledges that were outside or marginalized in the media frame. Thus, other ways of knowing are obscured.

We conclude that the Imus dialogue stirred controversy and provoked debate in part because sport has been ideologically positioned as a “level playing field,” particularly for African-Americans (Smith, 2007; Hartmann, 2000). Ironically, the

timing of Imus' comments coincided with the 60th anniversary of Jackie Robinson's breaking the color barrier in Major League Baseball. This historical event is significant due to the way it has served as an important symbol for the Civil Rights Movement, and since has come to represent racial equality not only in sport but also in broader society. The contradiction between the anniversary and the dialogue on Imus' show highlights how "controlling images" of African-American women (Collins, 1990) continue to circulate despite the efforts of race- and gender-based progressive movements in the U.S. An intersectional analysis illustrates how moments of resistance against race and gender domination that are mobilized around hegemonic middle class values, can be framed by the media in ways that de-fuse a broader critical analysis of the ways that power works in the sports/media complex.

Notes

1. Information on timeline of events found in: Horn, J. (2007, April 13). The Imus Scandal: Chronology and Aftermath. *Los Angeles Times*, p. A 21.

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