

Journal of American Studies, 44 (2010), e49. doi:10.1017/S002187581000109X

Michael Awkward, *Burying Don Imus: Anatomy of a Scapgoat* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, \$24.95). Pp. 232. ISBN 978 0 8166 674 3.

Michael Awkward's book on the Don Imus controversy looks to contextualize the events and aftermath of the morning of 4 April 2007 where the curmudgeonly MSNBC radio show host and his producer famously referred to the Rutgers University Women's Basketball teams as "nappy-headed hos." As the book's subtitle signposts, Awkward argues that during his suspension, media-orchestrated mauling and subsequent sacking, "Imus was made to stand in for millions of well-known and faceless whites whom blacks (and liberal and progressive whites) want desperately to identify, put on trial, and excoriate." Awkward's analysis follows what happens when material with this kind of racist history is taken out of black American street speech, picked up by a white, cowboy-hatted, mealy-mouthed locker-room comedian, and thrown back at a group of young women who had just lost the championship to what the skit implied was a more feminine, whiter, University of Tennessee team.

Imus made his fortune through an on-air banter that lampoons what he called in an interview with Fox News a "freak parade" of fictional and high-profile nonfictional media figures (Bernard McGuirk, his producer, did the voices, Imus the interviews) and which consistently reverts to lowest-common-denominator insults, but it was not until the Rutgers incident that the American media turned on Imus to eat one of their own. To a large extent this tipping point is what concerns Awkward, and he uses half of the book to analyse the discourses preexisting and embedded in the skit, anatomizing hip-hop vernacular (through T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting's *Pimps Up Ho's Down*), the history of African American attitudes to tightly curled black hair, the Spike Lee movies that Imus and McGuirk mis-cite, and finally Houston Baker's comments about the incident in 2006 where three members of the Duke University Lacrosse team were falsely accused of raping an African American college girl working as an escort. Awkward's book is at its best in the first and last chapters where Awkward anatomizes his own controversial thesis; those chapters that dissect the workings of racialized comedic insult are also worthwhile. The moments where Awkward places himself as Houston Baker's dissertation advisee, as a long-term Imus listener, and as a beleaguered black male feminist critic are clearly necessary in an argument that rests so firmly on subject position, but Awkward's bid to move beyond what he sees as his place as an "unwelcome guest in black feminist discourse" leads to an elision of the misogyny in Imus's jokes and a gap in the place where a reader would expect an extended exploration of the many parallels between racist and sexist insult as devices for social stratification. In recontextualizing these offensive remarks and the discourse that sprang out of the three central words, Awkward analyses convincingly the racial wounds that remain, even if he mirrors the American media coverage that is his subject in underanalysing the background cultural sexism that makes it supposedly funny to refer to black women as "hos" and that takes the way the Rutgers team look as legitimate reason to insult them in the first place.

University of East Anglia

SARAH GARLAND