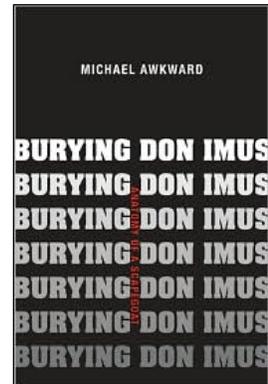


Michael Awkward, **Burying Don Imus: Anatomy of a Scapegoat**, University of Minnesota Press, 2009, 207 pp., \$17.50 (hardcover).

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By now, it is common knowledge that Dr. Laura Schlessinger left her 30-year long-running radio career after an N-word-dropping tirade. Basing her choice of words on unnamed African American men and HBO comics who use the word as part of their repertoires, the host instructed an African American caller on her radio show to “toughen up” when it comes to issues of race and racism. The outcry following Dr. Schlessinger’s racially-charged response to this caller prompted an immediate apology via her Web site as well as an announcement of her retirement from radio on *Larry King Live*. Dr. Laura’s comments were definitely controversial. Equally controversial, according to African American Literature Professor and self-identified feminist Michael Awkward, is that this kind of controversy is nothing new. In *Burying Don Imus: Anatomy of a Scapegoat*, Awkward proves this point by analyzing Don Imus’s April 4, 2007 reference to the Rutgers women’s basketball team using “the other N-word” as part of an on-air radio/television conversation with producer Bernard McGuirk and sports reporter Sid Rosenberg (2009, p. 111). The conversation was as follows:



- 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, no stranger to contentious banter, was terminated shortly after this conversation. In *Burying Don Imus*, Awkward argues persuasively that Imus forgot “that big business and media corporations can tolerate association with virtually anyone who can increase their earnings or cultural capital . . . except a person widely recognized as a racist” (p. 135).

But that is only part of Awkward’s story. Awkward also maintains that it was because Imus was seen as speaking for himself, and not in comic character as “a young black man,” that he was labeled a racist and sexist (p. 125). He suggests that scapegoating Imus for his racial offense allows the wider public to escape self-examination and acknowledgment of our nation’s history of racial offenses; namely, the offenses of slavery and segregation. By avoiding our own culpability in these events and in their forgetting we allow ourselves only to initiate this conversation repeatedly and never to resolve it. So, once Imus disappears and pays for his racial transgression, “we” (the audience) can move on to the next equally “shocking” and “offensive” scapegoat like Schlessinger.

If the book has a flaw, it’s in its delivery—part memoir, part Imus biography, part comedy study, and part a psycho-social analysis of African Americans’ “collective trauma”—the narrative is, at times, difficult to follow. But perhaps this is also the book’s strength. Written in the first-person and as an *Imus in the Morning* fan, Awkward is not trying to make things easy. He takes great pains to showcase our raced, gendered, and generational interconnectedness and interdependence, with all its psychic discomfort and (pardon the pun) awkwardness. Awkward renders African Americans’ communal suffering concrete through carefully crafted discussions of Spike Lee’s films, Toni Morrison’s literature, and Houston Baker’s reaction to the Duke rape scandal. Yet at the same time he stresses the importance of being able to separate people from their public persona, expressed in words they speak and write.

The larger question posed is both personal and structural. Given that laws have changed to some degree, and that we have elected a self-identified African American multiracial President, are there moments in which we misidentify racism? Using Imus as example Awkward presents us with two answers. On one hand, the answer is *no*. For instance, many African Americans expressed deep personal pain upon hearing Imus’s words. According to Awkward, there were two immediate reactions. The first was emotional. Many interpreted the statement as a reminder that black women will never attain mainstream standards of beauty. The second reaction was psychological and political. Many African Americans took the comments as salt in their historical wound of racist denial by white people—the latest episode in our nation’s post-racial drama. On the other hand, however, Awkward suggests that the answer is *yes*. These knee-jerk responses are overreactions in which people assume racist intentions that may not actually exist. He hopes that these same people (both black and white) will be forced to reevaluate their positions based on further information and contextualization, such as the type he aims to provide in this text.

Indeed, Awkward raises an important point. However, it would have helped his case to state explicitly that *scapegoats do not have to be innocent victims*. The scapegoat’s “crimes” can be all too real. Regardless, he is right to remind us that scapegoats afford the rest of us an opportunity for purification, unburdening our guilt onto the next worthy contender. According to Kenneth Burke (1966), this process is part of a guilt-redemption cycle that is intrinsic to Western thinking. Awkward takes the argument a step further, asserting that the unending search for newer and bigger scapegoats gets in the way of true racial

reconciliation. We trade what he hopes will be temporary discomfort and complexity for the comfort of permanent simplicity. Awkward maintains that our preference for simple worldviews ultimately fuels an addiction to moral superiority that gets in the way of real, and necessary, progress. Sadly, this only fuels the guilt-redemption cycle.

In the interest of breaking this cycle, Awkward stops short of answering the question of whether Imus is or is not a racist and sexist. Instead, he hints at the possibility that Imus could both revel in sexist talk and be a feminist. Complicating things further, he implicates aspects of African American popular culture that do exactly what Imus admitted to doing—saying bad things about gender and race. For Awkward, it seems that saying bad things about gender and race is the hallmark of our time. So far, current events have not proven him wrong. In addition to Imus's and Schlessinger's debacles, accusations of racism are leveled at civil rights institutions like the NAACP and those who are "reclaiming" civil rights like the Tea Party. Even the President was quoted recently as saying that his opponents talk about him as if he were "a dog." With all sides firing off statements accusing others of being either racist or more racist, some questions remain. Who can be considered racist? Who can call someone else a racist? And, the nagging question, what exactly is racism anyway? For Awkward, the answer begins with a sincere acknowledgment and more public national apology for slavery and segregation and continues with interpersonal and interracial dialogue among Americans that acknowledges mutual distrust. I agree. For that reason *Burying Don Imus* is a valuable addition to any library in critical race studies, African American psychology, media studies, cultural studies, and interracial communication.

### References

- Burke, K. (1966). *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press.