

HIP-HOP'S INSIDIOUS INFECTION

ROBERT ZASLAVSKY

One of the glorious complexities of Shakespeare's plays is his recurrent tendency to keep our minds alert by placing angelic insights into satanic mouths. For example, in *Othello*, Iago says (III. iii. 181 ff.):

Good name in Man, & woman (dear my Lord)
Is the immediate Jewel of their Souls;
Who steals my purse, steals trash:
'Tis something, nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands:
But he that filches from me my good Name,
Robs me of that, which not enriches him,
And makes me poor indeed.

This came to my mind recently as I watched the unfolding of the flap over Don Imus's thoughtlessly insensitive (racist and sexist) remark about the Rutgers women's basketball team.

The overwhelming focus of the media coverage was on Don Imus himself, a classic example of an alternative culture personality who, over the years, has sidled into the niche of an irascible establishmentarian. No one publicly applauded his remark, and the media talk kept coming back to the question of what would be an appropriate punishment for him, his on-air cohorts, and his media employers and outlets.

As the controversy unfolded, the initial oblique allusions to his remark yielded to an endless repetition of the remark. Thus, the coverage itself—and the relish with which commentators, black and white, female and male, uttered the remark ad nauseam—became a living example of the mindless brutality that has come to pervade our cultural universe.

The whole affair was a paradigm of the tempest-in-a-teapot mentality that muddies our political waters on a daily basis while we ignore the ambient hurricane that surrounds it, a hurricane that is laying waste to our cultural landscape.

The outrage that was expressed, like so much social and political outrage these days, was shot through with hypocrisy and filled with the kind of posturing and special-interest pandering that has become the stock and trade of our political leaders. In many cases, the stones thrown at Imus were cast by residents of glass palaces built on insult and invective. Indeed, insult and invective have become the verbal coin of our political realm, a substitute for substantive discourse and rational dialogue and debate.

In the midst of this circus-like media frenzy, there was an island of sense, the relatively dignified press conference of the Rutgers coach and athletes. However, what was said at that press conference, in which every attempt was made to stress that this situation far transcended Imus and his fate, fell largely on deaf ears.

Why? Because we had a societal scapegoat whom we could punish. What then? —Without question, the status quo would reassert itself, as it already started to do within a week after the incident, as other tabloid fodder rose to its evanescent prominence.

In other words, rap and hip-hop music's insidious infection of its audience—both black and white, female and male—remained inviolate; and talk radio hosts—both on the right and on the left—continued spewing their respective distortions of reality. And no doubt, a new avatar of Swift Boat Veterans was waiting in the wings to be given credence by the same kind of coverage that has given a perverse credence to Imus's remark.

Coach Stringer's comment that "It's about us as a people" quickly was forgotten.

Don Imus's remark too will soon be forgotten in the welter of sensationalizing that now passes for news reporting.

After all, think how many times we all heard our parents say, as we were growing up, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Remember how conflicted we felt when we realized how wrong they—and that sentiment—were.

As children, we knew that words can hurt far more effectively than deeds. Deeds hurt bodies, but words hurt souls and spirits. Bodies can heal with reasonable efficiency, but souls and spirits, in their tragic vulnerability, can be maimed permanently.

What we say, as persons and as a people, is very much what we are. Moreover, what we say finds expression in what we do.

Language is our essence as humans. Therefore, until we humanize our language, we will be no better than, as Hamlet says, "a beast that wants discourse of reason." (I. ii. 150) We the people must not allow ourselves to continue to sink that low.

Robert Zaslavsky is a retired teacher of our much-neglected humanities.