

Eavesdropping: Can you hear who you are?

By JJ Wylie
Staff Opinion Writer

Do you know what other people really think of you? I do. Actually, I just know what two particular people think of me, not that thin slice of the populace which is even aware that I exist (nor that even thinner slice which cares). And, speech not being a transcription of thought, all I really know is what has been said about me. Still, it's interesting.

It began as a classic set-up: I was at work when two of my fellow employees began a conversation just outside the open door of the room in which I sat.

Well, it was less a room than a cubby-hole just off a larger conference-room, and I was where I was because I was reading the instruction manual of some software I had been ordered to install on the obsolete PC that my boss had seen fit to squirrel away in this outsized closet.

This manual had apparently been written by a graduate of the Phenobarbital School, where students learn to turn words into tranquilizers (their most famous alumni being James Michener). I kept yawning every line or so, actually having to shake my head to stay conscious. At one point, I even drooled right onto the page. If anyone had seen me sitting there, hunched over that hefty book and bobbing my head, they would have

thought that I was headbanging a silent mantra over the lyrics of Led Zeppelin. (And if they had seen me drool, I would've had to piss into a cup to keep my job.)

Now, I had heard my two co-workers come into the conference-room, but I was too preoccupied to take much notice; I was busy enough just maintaining consciousness. I wanted to stress this point lest I am later accused of sneaking around like some Hearing Tom.

So it wasn't until one of them said, "So tell me what you think about JJ," that I awoke enough to tune in.

Honestly, I'm not overly-worried about what other people think of me (or so I've learned to be through therapy), especially since I have spent years analyzing the effect I have on people and have long ago concluded that my case is hopeless: I have all the personal charisma of your average Vice-President (though Al Gore does do a better macarena).

But the situation at hand was this: I was being slowly tortured by a styleless tech-manual and the only way out of the cubicle in which I was trapped was to show myself to two people who were already discussing me. And I have at least a passing curiosity about how my "third person singular" matches with my first.

Besides, what would you have



done? Well, that's just what I did: I sat there.

In order to protect the innocent, I won't reveal the names or descriptions of the two people whom I overheard, except to say that they were a man and a woman. And I quickly figured out that, though they were speaking about me, I was not the real impetus of their dialogue.

What they were really interested in was each other, which made the request quoted above doubly complex, for it was the man who made it.

Workplace romance is tawdry enough, and nothing I could reveal here (like names) would broaden the horizons of such a subject any more than your average talk-show, except to say this: what I have often noticed about illicit liaisons is that public discussions of them carry an undercurrent of rivalry. It's as if the gossipers begrudg-

ingly identify with their respective counterparts in the coupling-at-hand and thus feel somehow defeated for being left out.

Thus, not only was I interested in eavesdropping on someone's candid assessment of me in order to get a better idea of my public persona, insignificant as it is (and not only was I wondering whether my male co-worker was going to run me down in order to build himself up via what my friends call the "Pulley Method of Self-Actualization"), I also wanted some dirt.

But what I heard, amidst all the knowing giggles and innuendos which characterize professional flirting, shocked me. What I heard about myself was so wildly exaggerated, so maliciously intended, and so factually untrue that all my qualms about eavesdropping were quickly overcome by my growing indignance.

It's tough learning how you really look in public. The public never gets it right. Celebrities are constantly bemoaning this, and the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges calls fame "a form of incomprehension, perhaps the worst." Imagine how bad it can be for those of us who can't afford publicists.

An inaccurate public persona can even cause a person to retreat from the world. Thus, because he feels persecuted, Mark Fuhrman moves to Idaho.

Thus the unnamed hero of Ralph Ellison's masterpiece begins his story by telling us, "I am an invisible man" whose public persona has been all but erased "because people refuse to see me."

Well, apparently I had been seen, although through very dirty lenses. In fact, public perception is nowhere near as close to being accurate enough to be used as a lens. Nor is it a mirror into which one can look at oneself. It's more like an inkblot that reveals more about whomever is interpreting it than whom it is that's being interpreted.

What we're looking for is what we want, not what's actually there, and few of our desires are pure. Thus the very impulse that had made me listen for dirt on my eavesdropees had caused some dirt to get dished on me.

I'm a little different than the people I work with, and many of them react to this difference with derogatory speculation about who I am. I'm as guilty of doing this as anyone, but it's alarming to realize that I'm also a target of it. Finding out who people think you are is a little like finding out you're adopted: it calls your own conception of yourself into question. Don DeLillo, in his novel, *White Noise*, has his narrator characterize himself thus: "I am the false character that follows the name around."

Land of Nott

By Alex Raffi/ Rebel Yell



Letters to the Editor

Response to Ebonics cartoon

Editor's note:

The Rebel Yell received 10 "Letters to the Editor" in response to the "Land of Nott" cartoon, which appeared in the April 8 edition. Due to space limitations, three were selected for publication. All appear in their entirety.

To the Editor:

I recently viewed a copy of *The Rebel Yell* and was shocked with what I witnessed. The cartoon pertaining to Ebonics was in poor taste and very offensive. As an African-American I felt it to be quite degrading. I'm not sure if you're just a racist or if you see another meaning behind the cartoon.

As the editor, I believe it was printed in poor taste and public apology is in order. To print such a thing is being very racially insensitive. I interpret the cartoon

to say that African Americans cannot understand proper English, and basically we lack intelligence as a whole. This, of course, is not true!

I will take this matter as far as needed until something is done. Read the cartoon and think about it. You cannot totally take away the feelings that you have stirred, however, you can alleviate future problems. This is a serious issue and you have offended many.

—Robin Allen,
Urban Affairs

To the Editor:

I recently read the cartoon entitled "Land of Nott" that was featured in your April 8 issue. As an educated African-American woman, I found this cartoon to be offensive and demeaning. In my opinion it took all African-American students and lumped them into one category: stupid. How can a supposed institution of higher not only allow but seemingly condone such racist and discriminatory subject matter to have a home in the

student newspaper.

—Sakecia Crockett

To the Editor:

In the April 8 issue of *The Rebel Yell*, I came across one of the most controversial, insensitive cartoons that I have ever read. I am referring to the "Land of Nott" cartoon by Alex Raffi, the one depicting a Caucasian teacher "breaking down" in Ebonics a statement by Martin Luther King Jr., an African-American man, to an African-American student. Now it took me a moment to rationalize and play devils advocate in trying to understand the point of this cartoon. Could it be that someone thought it was educational and insightful—no, of course not, it was printed in *The Rebel Yell*. After careful consideration the only thing I could do was get more upset and offended. Help me understand how a student journalist could be so culturally insensitive and offensive and use *The Rebel Yell* as a format to make a mockery of African-American

intellect.

As an African-American I could only surmise this cartoon to be offensively saying these things: that African-Americans are intellectually challenged, that we are only able to understand Ebonics, and furthermore, that all African-Americans accept the idea of Ebonics—I sure don't. Also, how is it that a Caucasian man can teach an African-American Ebonics if that in fact is supposed to be our "given" language? It is as idiotic as saying, "Let's explain this in Spanish to our Hispanic students or Chinese to our Chinese students," assuming they all understand their native language, unlike Ebonics, which is one man's idea of an official, separate dialect.

I for one am not in favor of the acceptance of Ebonics because English simply isn't hard to learn, nor would Ebonics be accepted in our society. Secondly, African-Americans already have a "social" dialect for which "some" use to communicate and it needs not to be named, specifically, Ebonics.

I am an African-American woman who is quite educated and

culturally aware of my surroundings. I also happen to be a constituent of this paper. In the future I would appreciate a responsible depiction of issues by *The Rebel Yell* journalists and not callous attempts to display personal feelings and use *The Rebel Yell* as a tool to continually insult people of all backgrounds. If *The Rebel Yell* journalists want to do that, then they should do so in the opinion section of the paper (I realize this cartoon was in the opinion section but it displayed no opinion). At the same time, they should allow other students to freely and equally disagree and respond in the same format. It has been clearly shown that *The Rebel Yell* severely lacks sensitivity in the areas of cultural and racial issues. As a student reader, I would appreciate it if all future articles relating to such issues, take not only my offense in consideration, but that of all student readers that are being represented by *The Rebel Yell*.

—Amber Edwards