

SPRING FACULTY ASSEMBLY TALK
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perhaps you are familiar with this childhood chant: sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me

i remember my teachers, grandmother, parents, aunts, and other mothers teaching it to us when we were growing up

in that small transclass black southern community that i called home in my youth

i also remember using it as a retort to playmates who sometimes turned cruel or indifferent or worse dismissive

it was only as i grew older and understood the power of words that i no longer used this retort because it was not true

i experienced the some-time anguish of being called out of my name (as the old folks used to say)

of being labeled ugly or gay or too smart or naïve

and having to dig deep into other resources my parents and other loving adults put in me to say no and not be fooled into self-hatred

the other day, i recalled this old adage when it was used in a senior paper i was reading and preparing for the student's oral defense

hmmmm...why did the older adults in my life teach us little black kids this adage with such universal vigor

they had to know that we would figure it out as we grew older and experienced more in life and living

i do not think it coincidental that one of the earliest, if not *the* earliest citation of it is from a US religious periodical that had a largely black audience, *The Christian Recorder* of March 1862, though i suspect its origin is much earlier than this

it was deployed to help express indifference to verbal insult while reckoning with the dangers of physical abuse or violence

this verbal signification was a way to preserve the inner person

that which would help folk tolerate whatever verbal insult or name-calling that came their way so that they could possibly survive the some-time deadly assault on black lives

but from our 2021 perch, this can appear to be a rather thin defense against systematic “isms” that have been woven into the threads of our lives and scholarship and sometimes enters our classrooms

to say that hurtful words may not cause physical pain and because they do not, one should ignore or disregard them

rings as trite with all we know about the way that language functions in our ego and psyche to begin to wither us from within

and can create hollowed out methods and musings that may be interesting but fail to address the rich excitement of living and the challenges we face in the academy and society to help translate our work into vibrant and public conversations interested in truth-telling

rather than swapping misguided bromides of power in verbal and physical minefields

as a sometimes grumpy social ethicist, i have an investment in the systems and structures that shape us as we shape them to be just and to try to suss out what we mean by powerful notions such as “the common good” or “academic freedom”

and then it came to me: this old adage was a holding pattern for us

it gave little black kids like me a chance to gain some thickness to our skin

some confidence in our worth

some time to believe we were just as much a gift to the rest of creation as anyone else

so that when the name calling came—we could catch it and deflect it

and if safe to do so—call out the lie and the constellation of stereotypes and caricatures that hold that lie in place

much of my work over these last several years has been exploring the nature of stereotypes that demean and draw what i think of as hellish caricatures of black folk, particularly black women and children

aunt jemima

sapphire

welfare queen

tragic mulatta

pickaninny

these names and others that call Asian groups, indigenous groups, ethnicities, nationalities, citizenships, genders, sexualities and more out of their name are meant to define, categorize, commodify and dismiss the complexity of lives that we often do not know, but have glimpses of

and assume that the glimpse is exhaustive

these negative, demeaning caricatures/stereotypes and other stereotypes based on other races and ethnicities, genders, nationalities, sexual orientations, age, political persuasions, religious beliefs, theologies are products of our imagination gone wrong

what i term the fantastic hegemonic imagination—drawing on Foucault’s fantastic and Gramsci’s hegemony melded by womanist social ethical methodology and analysis

in short, the fantastic hegemonic imagination traffics in peoples’ lives that are caricatured or pillaged so that the imagination that creates the fantastic can control the world in its own image

if we say it enough, even when not true, we begin to think it accurate and representative and ultimately fact

the caricature moves from simplification and exaggeration to policy and religious tenets or in the case of aunt jemima—to pancake, waffle, and cornmeal mixes, grits, and syrup

she was not a historical figure—house slaves were, for the most part, mulatta or quadroon—not dark-skinned

they were not fat—even though working in the plantation house, servants were not guaranteed an abundance of food, so few were stout

but the minstrel shows of the late 1800s began to conjure her up for laughs and entertainment

she was the creation of the white imagination that began appearing in post-civil war magazines imagining a bucolic south that never existed

and from the moment she was introduced by the Pearl Milling Company of St Joseph, MO in 1888 for the first commercial pancake mix, black folk and allies protested her existence because she was not accurate nor true

finally, Quaker has announced that it will remove the Aunt Jemima icon—who did go through several iterations—from its packaging and change the name of the brand in 2020

now going back to its original name, Pearl Milling Company, this summer she will finally be gone from the packaging

but she lingers

one of the things about words is that they often conjure up images

and the images created in the fantastic hegemonic imagination are no respecter of race or gender or any of the many ways we realize our living in our great diversity

words can harm but they can also heal

and this is where we in the academy can be helpful, if not necessary as we engage in putting the knowledge we have into public spaces and are constantly learning to help create a democracy that we can live in

that welcomes the diversity of what it means to be in this big tent republic of ours with all of the highest aspirations we have

from Winthrop's city on a hill

to Hoover's chicken in every pot

to Roosevelt's happy days are here again

to Eisenhower's peace and prosperity

to Haaland's only one earth, let's take care of it

to Amanda Gorman who reminded us

When day comes we step out of the shade,

aflame and unafraid,

the new dawn blooms as we free it.

For there is always light,

if only we're brave enough to see it.

If only we're brave enough to be it.

Thank you for your attention