

# Vanishing into Limbo: The Peculiar Career of Aunt Jemima

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... what it means to be a Negro in America can perhaps be suggested by an examination of the myths we perpetuate about him.

Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom are dead, their places taken by a group of amazingly well-adjusted young men and women, almost as dark, but ferociously literate, well-dressed and scrubbed, who are never laughed at, who are not likely ever to set foot in a cotton or tobacco field or in any but the most modern of kitchens. There are others who remain, in our odd idiom, "underprivileged;" some are bitter and these come to grief; some are unhappy, but, continually presented with the evidence of a better day soon to come, are speedily becoming less so. Most of them care nothing whatever about race. They want only their proper place in the sun and the right to be left alone, like any other citizen of the republic. We may all breathe more easily. Before, however, our joy at the demise of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom approaches the indecent, we had better ask whence they sprang, how they lived. Into what limbo have they vanished?

in his 1955 essay "many thousands gone" james baldwin explores richard wright's *native son*<sup>2</sup>

baldwin is working fiercely to construct what it means to be a negro in america

for baldwin, this is visceral

he is tired of black folk being treated as mere social agendas

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1. This address was delivered on the occasion of the author's inauguration as Professor of Christian Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, February 16, 2001.

2. James Baldwin, "Too Many Thousands Gone," in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 27.

rather than as flesh and blood  
 he notes that dehumanization is never a one-way street  
 that the loss of identity  
     be it stolen, borrowed, denied, or annihilated  
         has consequences far beyond those who are the  
         immediate victims  
 that our crimes against ourselves  
     echo  
     and haunt  
     and damn  
     and eviscerate us  
 and it is not enough  
     not in 1955  
     not in 2001  
 to think that we can leave our memories  
     checked at some dismal door of gerrymandered elections or sycophantic equalities  
 the smell of blood and dirt and catastrophe are ripe within our nostrils  
     if we remember  
     if we allow memory and the power of memory to weave other stories of the american dream  
         not different  
             not separate  
                 not oppositional  
                     not subversive  
     simply other stories  
 not the other as object for too many foucaults or spivaks

but the folks who are really

just 'round the corner

but we act as if we do not know them

because this is what we have been trained to do as "natural"

memories can disrupt our status quo

because they do not rest solely or wholly on objectivity or facts

they materialize from emotions and sight and sounds and touch  
and smell

they come from the deepest part of who we are

and they can vanish

into limbo (into absolute neglect, into oblivion)

only to filter back into our lives

as shame or anger or pride or righteousness

## I

we have all seen her: aunt jemima

she began when a white man decided that he could be black and a  
woman

so he dressed in drag

put on blackface

and became a part of the minstrel tradition

singing that white man's cares away

but certainly not chasing away the blues of  
those who did not dress in drag or have to  
put on blackface

"my old missus promise me

old aunt jemima, oh, oh, oh

when she died she'd set me free

old aunt jemima, oh, oh, oh

she lived so long her head got bald

old aunt jemima, oh, oh, oh  
 she shore she would not die at all  
 old aunt jemima, oh, oh, oh"<sup>3</sup>

aunt jemima

she was a real ex-slave whose face was put on bags of self-rising  
 pancake flour

who entertained the crowds at the 1893 world's fair

with *inoffensive* tales of slavery

told in dialect

(read irony, read horror, read annihilation)

aunt jemima

she came to life from the pens of advertising copy editors

and illustrators

to "grace" the pages of ladies' magazines

while real-life aunt jemimas toured county fairs and grocery stores  
 and club bake-offs to sell the pancake dough of a white man who  
 understood that images sell

and these jemimas made her up—creating legends about her

or was it about themselves

mythical aunt jemima who revived hundreds of (white) southern sol-  
 diers with her pancakes

mythical aunt jemima who had been a slave on colonel higbee's planta-  
 tion down on the mississippi river

mythical aunt jemima who was freed after the civil war

who gave up her flapjack recipe to a northern milling representa-  
 tive

yes, this had to be myth

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3. Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1994), 65.

to think that a black woman who knows how to cook  
 would give up *all* of her recipe  
 to anyone

(what more proof do we need that she did not spring from  
 authentic black life than this?)

aunt jemima

many in my generation grew to despise her or be embarrassed by  
 her in the 1960s

and we thought we had banished her with raised black-gloved fists

and self empowerment

and affirmative action

and an emerging black middle class

but she did not vanish into limbo, into some disinterested oblivion

baldwin tried to warn us this would not happen

she could not vanish into limbo

because black folk never controlled aunt jemima

or uncle tom

or topsy

or any of their kin

they are creations of the white imagination

both its fears and its terrors and its stereotypes and its attempts at  
 justice

and because we did not heed baldwin's warning

that if black folk do not examine the myths perpetuated about us

we will never know ourselves

only our caricatures that sit like so many rows of false teeth  
 molded to fit someone else's head

we will fail to grasp the full impact of what it means that black folk did  
 not

and do not own these public identities of black life  
 and so she's back  
     updated  
     kerchief-less  
     and with pearls  
 popular not only on pancakes

    original  
     complete  
     buttermilk  
     buttermilk complete  
     whole wheat  
     frozen homestyle *and* buttermilk  
     homestyle batter  
     and frozen mini pancakes

but also on syrup

    original  
     buttermilk  
     butter rich  
     lite  
     and butter lite

and frozen waffles

    homestyle and blueberry

and frozen french toast

    homestyle and cinnamon

and coffee cake mix

aunt jemima is back because limbo

    returns her to us as more than a relic

    more than an updated image of black womanhood

    or as collateral to black manhood

she is back as commodity and property

she is back because she is profitable and identifiable

and a world where you and i are often reduced to digits and statistics

image matters when it is making money

she is back in giveaways and mail-in premiums and in recipe booklets and dishware and with an entire family of character dolls

with names and history

and if we refuse to use the power of her presence and endurance

and rear up even weary heads to ask

who is it that has named aunt jemima's family

is this some obscene product line from the world wrestling federation or mattel

sold at our local toys-r-us

or kay-bees

or fao schwartz

meant to out duel

barney

and beanie babies

and teletubbies

for the favor of little kids who have been shaped into mega-consumers of a mega-culture and pseudo-history

is this barbie and ken

in black woman drag

electric sliding off boxes of powered flapjacks

so that we can dash into the day more efficiently with the promise that we've been well-fed by a good cook

if there is no time or space or method in womanist discourse to ask the crucial question

who is naming us  
 then we allow others  
   real others  
   to carve out hollow legacies for the generations yet to come  
   for all color of children  
 and womanist thought collapses into a meaningless drivel of hosannas  
   or inconsequential theological escape hatches  
     that only serve to reify demonic stereotypes in theo-ethical  
     discourses meant to break the fine rain of death on black iden-  
     tities and realities

## II

it is small wonder  
   that we have tried our best to vanish aunt jemima into limbo  
     into a gross marginal space  
 the complex sociocultural matrix of u.s. society  
   and the intracommunal dynamics of african american communities  
   make her a painful reminder of not only slavery  
   but the very commodification of identities  
     that has become our stock and trade on a global scale  
 even in the communities of resistance that seek genuine diversity and  
 equality  
   aunt jemina and her kind  
     uncle ben  
     rastus  
     old uncle tom  
     uncle remus  
     mandy the maid  
     preacher brown  
     deacon jones  
     sambo



the gold dust twins  
and ol' mammy

rise up as haunting spectered caricatures of Black life  
created to buy and sell not only products  
but to siphon off our lives

through a sea of big lips, large grins, rolling eyes  
rather than avoiding the reinscription of conventional oppressive hierar-  
chies of class, gender, and race

black marginalized communities have often fallen victim to these  
hegemonic forces

with aunt jemima and *all* of us as the casualties  
our identity has been made property

and it leaves a sickening weariness  
in the pit of our collective stomach

for property means things owned, possession

on a good day it can mean attribute, quality, or characteristic  
on another day it may mean a moveable object used in a dramatic  
performance<sup>4</sup>

and it does not help us

it does not help us that property stems from the latin *proprietas*—  
related to “proper”<sup>5</sup>

that is: pertaining to oneself or itself or a person or thing  
particularly

strictly pertaining; thorough, complete, excellent, fine  
specifically adapted

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4. “Property,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, ed. Della Thompson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

5. “Proper,” in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, ed T.F. Hoad (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

from the latin *proprius*: one's own, special, peculiar,  
problem

from the french *pro priuo*: as private or peculiar thing

hence properly (appropriate, fitting)

property ownership (especially private): thing or things  
owned

attribute, quality; propriety, portable article for a dramatic  
performance

all the word studies in the world will not relieve my womanist method-  
ological queasiness

because ultimately property gets back to owning and ownership  
and possession

even my own discipline of christian ethics gives me the  
willies because of how it has understood property<sup>6</sup>

as the goods of this earth that are given by God so we all  
must use them in the pursuit of our self-realization

that property rights are subordinate to the common  
right to use property, but there is a right to own property

why am i caught with this churning in the pit of my womanist theo-ethi-  
cal stomach?

because the arrogance of all of these definitions is the assumption  
of control and autonomy

i am left wondering in what space or spaces in this country

after living and enduring a grotesque presidential erection

in which massive voter registration drives were countered  
with massive disenfranchisement

a pliant public and press that often seemed only interested in  
who would win the game rather than discuss the morality of  
its existence

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6. "Property," in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. James F. Childress and John Macquarrie (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967).

and the sad part is that this is nothing new for poor communi-  
ties or colored peoples in this country

its just that this time it was national

it was public

and the same damned thing happened in broad daylight

that usually takes place in some misbegotten  
metaphorical or actual backwoods

what spaces in this country, then, do black peoples and our kin  
have control and autonomy

how do we grasp a-hold of our identity and truly name ourselves

instead of constantly looking into some strategically placed  
funhouse mirror of distortions and innuendos and mass  
marketing

that smacks its lips and rolls its eyes while chanting  
“mmmm mmmm good”

i am not here tonight to offer solutions

i am only naming the territory of what i understand to be threshing  
floor for my work

as a social ethicist who is unabashedly and unapologetically

but critically and rigorously womanist in her approach

for when black identity is property

that can be owned by someone else

defined by someone else

created by someone else

shaped by someone else

and marketed by someone else

we are chattel now dressed up in postmodern silks and linens

our buckboards and dusty trails have been exchanged for one-  
legged stools by the one-way revolving door of academia and  
boardrooms

we are told that these canting stools are truly seats at the table  
 but when we speak, we are not heard  
 when we scream, they do not listen

we are often left standing on

some malformed gold dust twins soap box  
 with auction blocks as our foot stools

and the hangman's noose as our lullabies to rock us into the  
 ultimate deep sleep

it is of little help

if in our cultural and theo-ethical critiques

womanist thought replaces the forms of supremacy we know so  
 well

with a postmodern black slow drag of annihilation

if we sanction a brand of scholarship that is nothing more  
 than a gigantic holding pen for the mind and the intellect

if the plateau for excellence means to make lists, set quotas,  
 craft exclusive standards of specious excellence

aunt jemima and the proud reality and history i inherit as a mclean and  
 as a townes

means that i must fight like hell to keep my work and life from  
 becoming monuments of irrelevancy and domination

simply put, my momma did not raise me that way

### III

aunt jemima has not vanished into limbo

she has not slipped away into a nether-world

she is here in

Baby Suggs clearing  
 Mama Day's lightening powder

Celie's "till you do right by me"  
Sanchez's lions  
Baby's veil  
Danticat's krick krack

and we are her family

*all* of us  
we must name ourselves

with precise anger  
and ornery love

blending justice and truth

into an new ethical dilemma

the dilemma of what it means  
to shape and name and create  
an identity

that is forged on the hope found in those who  
are still here . . . regardless

thank you.



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