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# the cultural production of evil

some notes on aunt jemima and the imagination.

BY EMILIE M. TOWNES

*Illustration by Josie Jammet*



“...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?”<sup>1</sup>

1. James Baldwin, “Many Thousands Gone,” in *Notes of a Native Son* (Beacon Press, 1955), 27.

in this 1955 essay, “many thousands gone,” james baldwin explores richard wright’s novel  
*native son*

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

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 2005

to think that we can leave our memories

checked at some dismal door of gerrymandered elections or xenophobic  
nationalism or sycophantic equalities

for baldwin, the story of black folk is the story of americans

one that is not, in his words

“a very pretty story”

this is a story of shadows

or a series of shadows for baldwin

that are “self-created, intertwining”

where black folk do not exist except in “the darkness of our minds”

1955 baldwin sounds like some 2005 black progressive social and moral thought concerning black lives

because as baldwin notes, so much of black history and our interrelationships with the rest of u.s. life have been shaped as a social project

and not the story of flesh and blood and spirit and emotion

it is, for baldwin—and for all of us—a matter of looking at black folk as

a set of “statistics, slums, rapes, injustices, remote violence; it is to be confronted with an endless cataloguing of losses, gains, skirmishes; it is to feel virtuous, outraged, helpless, as though [the negro’s] continuing status among us were somehow analogous to disease—cancer, perhaps, or tuberculosis—which must be checked, even though it cannot be cured.”

i begin with baldwin’s harsh assessment

because viewing aunt jemima as counter-memory engages the ways in which culture informs, or perhaps dances, with religious thought in black lives in the u.s. and my own discipline of christian ethics

aunt jemima, that smiling, friendly cultural and marketing icon is ubiquitous

and because she holds the power to convince us that we need and will be nourished by what is inside her box

she helps us explore baldwin’s trenchant observation that blacks are “a social and not a personal or a human problem”

she is representative of the commodification of identities in u.s. culture

and i would add in religious studies

for me, blacks are not the only ones damned by treating identity as property

to be sure, there are winners and losers in this deadly commodification

but, the ways in which we have produced this weary state of affairs have been a group project in american life

we have used history and memory to deceive ourselves—all of us

but 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 derridas or 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”

quite frankly, i'm tired of being called “the other”

i don't find it libratory or transformative

what i *am* finding, in postmodern america, is that it becomes an excuse  
to remain ignorant

and arrogant about our illiteracy of other peoples:

their thoughts, their religions, their politics, their values, their social  
structures, their moral landscapes

their isness/ontology

we practice this highly suspect brand of progressivism and liberalism and conservatism  
as import and export

and what remains “natural” is hegemony

it's just prettified with neat word games and mental onanism

all that we really achieve with many postmodern categories

is producing constructs like “center” and “periphery” that reveal our vexing  
fixation on making a complex world simplistic

and the messiness of diversity neat and pristine when it is really a mash pit  
of realities

so we remain the same people who want to do justice

but demand safety

who want to be prophetic

but fret over status and position

who search for truth

but grasp at nettling shadows

and the church becomes a monument to stifled cries and extinguished questions

rather than a beacon of justice and a way station to find spiritual sustenance in love  
and hope

i find that exploring evil as a cultural production highlights the systematic  
construction of

truncated narratives or stories

designed to support and perpetuate structural inequalities and forms of  
social oppression

i look at the interior material life of evil through these narratives

its roots are in my childhood

where i was transported to troy by homer and devoured all i could about greek  
and roman mythology

the idea of gods seemed quite novel to one who was growing up to “jesus loves me this i  
know...”

apollo and athena took me out of my daily musing on jesse helms and fire hoses  
and colored water fountains

bathrooms  
waiting rooms  
and cemeteries

i could enter, through homer’s prompting, a different time and place

where i learned that maybe the holy could be capricious and not always stern

i learn a great deal from writers and poets

like tina mcelroy ansa, alice walker, william faulkner, ernest hemingway, ayn rand,  
carson mccullers, gabriel garcía márquez, jorge amado, chinua achebe... the list  
goes on and on

fine writers help me “see” things in tangible ways and “feel” things through  
intangible means

their ability to turn the world at a tilt, to explore our humanity and inhumanity  
challenges me in ways that theories and concepts do not quite evoke

so, given my niebuhrian roots (more h. richard than reinhold here), i realized that i would be bound in untenable and unproductive ways if i approached a study of theodicy solely through the realm of concepts and theories

from john hick's classic study of evil, arthur mcgill, and john douglas hall to more recent work by wendy farley, david ray griffin, marjorie suchocki, and terrence tilley i found helpful ways to think about the *nature* of evil

but the deep interior material life of evil and its manifestations remained untapped for me

so what has the writing life taught me?

what have writers like james baldwin, patrick chamoiseau, june jordan, toni morrison, sonia sanchez, and harriet beecher stowe said about the struggles and joys of humanity that i can use to understand evil?

beginning with literary studies, i employ an interdisciplinary methodology starting with morrison's distinction between truth and fact in her essay, "site of memory"

for morrison, truth is the key ideal to seek, because fact can exist without human intelligence but truth cannot

where morrison explores the interior life of people, i want to explore the interior material life of evil

by parsing the interior worlds of those who endure evil

as well as the interior worlds of evil itself to discover what truths may be found there

from truth and fact, i move to the interplay of history and memory

rather than replicate the traditional paradigm of history as scientific and memory as subjective

i agree with matt matsuda and others and work from the perspective that history *and* memory are subjective

this expansion of french historian pierre nora's work in his influential essay "between memory and history"

is coupled with morrison to explore the subjective nature of history and memory to provide us with more articulate resources and strategies to tackle evil

such that we no longer make inordinate appeals to individual will and achievement, but lean into a richer and more diverse web of creation

the american story *can* be told another way

such that the voices and lives of those who, traditionally and historically, have been left out are now heard with clarity and precision

these voices can then be included into the discourse—not as additives—but as resources and co-determiners of actions and strategies—*as the moral agents they are*

but not in crass teleological or goals-driven moves, but ones that acknowledge the intimate humanity of our plurality

and work with as much precision as possible to name its textures

using the interplay of history and memory as a critical frame, i turn to consider how the imagination works within this to create images that buttress evil as a cultural production

combining michel foucault's understanding of the imagination and antonio gramsci's use of hegemony, i develop how the imagination—the fantastic hegemonic imagination—"plays" with history and memory to spawn caricatures and stereotypes

i want to push the boundaries of foucault's perception of the imaginary as that which is found in books

because i believe that the fantastic is not limited to the worlds of literature

but is part of the cultural production of our realities

it is in the very fabric of the every day

the fantastic lives in those moments of uncertainty

when it is not clear if what we perceive or experience is an illusion of the senses

which makes it a product of the imagination and the laws of the world remain intact

and when we detect that the event has actually taken place

but laws unknown to us control reality.<sup>2</sup>

the fantastic is the hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature

confronting an apparently supernatural event

it is defined in relation to the real and the imaginary

and yet, the fantastic is even more

it is also being comfortable with the supernatural or what may seem supernatural to others

the fantastic may be the every day for those who *live in it*

they may not find the presence of ghosts or shifted realities unusual and therefore require no explanation

it was a world which i was raised to respect and to expect as ancestors come to visit, those who are passing through from life to death may need help to ease the transition, or spirits simply just show up

2. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Cornell University Press, 1975; Press of Case Western Reserve, 1973), 25.



unannounced and most often unbidden

only those of us who sit outside these worlds must ponder what they “see,”  
“feel,” “know”

because *our* realities are challenged in the face of the fantastic as it emerges from  
other, sometimes more sinister sources

unfortunately, it is not only ghosts and shifted realities that comprise the fantastic

it may also be structures of domination and subordination

and this is not to suggest or advocate a subtle or not-so-subtle determinism

but i am suggesting that the cultural production of evil can and does entrap many  
if not most of us

we often operate out of structurally determined limits that do, at points, offer  
some creativity and autonomy

but these are controlled and managed by hegemonic forces

a few folk may prosper in conditions of domination; selected groups as well

but this is a limited prosperity that never threatens the framework and structure  
of society

it only creates an austere marginal space that can lull many of us into a false,  
but oh-so-deadly consciousness that contours our imaginations

i also nudge gramsci's basic understanding of hegemony as ideological domination that  
is moral, political, and cultural and is transmitted by language

hegemony is the set of ideas that dominant groups employ in a society to secure  
the consent of subordinates to abide by their rule

consent is key, for this is created through coercion that is gained by using the  
church, family, media, political parties, schools, unions, and other voluntary  
associations—the civil society and all its organizations

this breeds a kind of false consciousness (the fantastic in neo-cultural and  
sociopolitical drag)

that creates societal values and moralities such that there is *one* coherent and  
accurate viewpoint on the world

and we should never lose sight of the fact that hegemonies exist throughout history  
and within our society

christianity, islam, judaism, conservatism, liberalism, and so forth can be seen as  
hegemonic in particular societies

those who practice hegemony are not always “they” often it is “we”

gramschi is clear that revolutionaries who want to break hegemony must build up a counter-hegemony

for gramschi, hegemony does not mean there is only one universally valid position for all time

other worldviews—in any given stage of historical development—can provide the major way of interpreting and perceiving the world

the fantastic hegemonic imagination traffics in people's lives that are caricatured or pillaged so that the imagination that creates the fantastic can control the world in its own image

the rich diversities in our midst are seen as cloying distractions rather than as flesh and blood and spirit

this imagination conjures worlds and their social structures that are not based on supernatural events and phantasms, but on the ordinariness of evil

it is this imagination, i argue, that helps to hold systematic, structural evil in place

and spawns generation after generation

i will share one stereotype that is a product of this imagination to give you a sense of how the fantastic hegemonic imagination works—*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 of the 1800s and 1900s

*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

part of aunt jemima's appeal is that she was the turbo-prototype

of an idealized, if not stylized ante- and postbellum south

the fantastic hegemonic imagination creating denigrating stereotype

mythical aunt jemima who revived hundreds of (white) southern soldiers with her pancakes

mythical aunt jemima who had been a slave on colonel higbee's plantation 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 representative

this should have raised our collective eyebrows

to think that a black woman who knows how to cook

would give up *all* of her recipe

to anyone

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 because black folk never controlled aunt jemima

or uncle tom

or topsy

or any of their kin

they are creations of the fantastic hegemonic imagination

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

but because we often fail to examine caricatures and stereotypes

we never know ourselves or each other

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

and so she's back

updated

kerchief-less

and with pearls

popular not only on pancakes

original  
complete  
buttermilk  
buttermilk complete  
whole wheat (also available online)  
buckwheat (also available online)  
frozen homestyle and buttermilk  
and homestyle batter  
frozen mini pancakes  
and mini syrup pancake dunkers

but also on syrup

original  
butter rich  
lite  
and butter lite

and frozen waffles

homestyle  
blueberry (well, really dried apple parts treated with blue food dye)  
buttermilk  
lowfat  
and syrup dunkers

and frozen french toast

homestyle  
cinnamon  
cinnamon toast sticks  
and syrup dunkers

and coffee cake mix

and corn bread mix

and cornmeal mix

white  
yellow  
self-rising  
pre-blended

and griddlecake sandwiches

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 because she is profitable and identifiable

and in 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

offering us food that is processed, complete with unlabeled genetically  
modified ingredients

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

and rear up even weary heads to ask this ethical question:

who is it that has named aunt jemima's family?

indeed, who or what is naming *any* of us—regardless of color, gender, age, ability, class,  
nationality, and on and on

often making our histories—social and religious—denigrating hegemonic  
constructions

then we allow others

real others

to carve out hollow legacies for the generations yet to come

for all color of children

and moral thought collapses into a *meaningless* drivel of hosannas

or inconsequential theological escape hatches

that only serve to reify demonic stereotypes in religious discourses

the fact of the matter is that aunt jemima is a lie

she was modeled after the old black mammies of the south

and these mammies never existed in the ways the white southern imagination has presented them to us

few slaves ever had enough to eat—so fatness was almost totally out of the question

house slaves were usually light-skinned and young if they were women

and she cannot be found among the surviving ex-slave oral interviews

we must dismantle the fantastic hegemonic imagination

but we must do so with one crucial awareness:

we cannot simply banish aunt jemima into limbo

she is here in

baby suggs's clearing  
mama day's lightening powder  
celie's "till you do right by me"  
sanchez's lions  
baby's veil  
danticat's krick krack

she is in our imaginations and our psyches

and we are her kinfolk

*all* of us

we must name ourselves

with precise righteousness

and ornery love

blending justice and truth

relentless faith and moral brass

to shape and name and create

an identity

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

won't you join me? ■

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