

Organic Education/Stay Woke¹

—Emilie M. Townes

I grew up in a deeply Black religious world that was filled with the smells of lemon polish on church pews, nurses in their white uniforms who helped revive those who were caught up in religious ecstasy and then collapsed, fiery preaching, quiet preaching, good sermons, pitiful sermons, and exceedingly bad sermons. The choirs of my growing up years ranged the gamut from wonderful to those who made a joyful *noise*, literally, to the Lord. In Sunday School, we were taught about the miracles of the Bible, the importance of faith, the love that the sweet baby Jesus had for each of us, and that he loved all the little children of the world—“red and yellow, black and white, we are precious in his sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world.” And I believed this (and still do) with all my heart and soul.

I was a Black middle class girl in the South in the late 1950s, 60s and early 70s. This filled me with a host of experiences and memories that continue to shape me today. I learned about racism from the Black and White folks around me and it was an education that puzzled me because racism made (and continues to make) absolutely no rational sense. My parents taught me about racism without pointing to it directly. Every evening, my mother would sit me down in front of the television so that she could watch the news while she braided my hair for the next day. I listened to Jesse Helms, who later became a U.S. Senator but was then an executive with the Capitol Broadcasting Company; spew his racist diatribes against the integrationists and the nigras (his thinly disguised mispronunciation of the N-word) in his daily editorials on WRAL-TV. As I became aware that he was referring to all the loving and hardworking folks that I knew, I also became aware that there were (and are) people in the world who are completely unreliable.

We sometimes forget the power of this kind of organic education that raises most if not all of us. And within this education, I was taught to dream—to use my imagination. To see new images that counter fire houses, police dogs, Fergusons, Baltimores, lynchings, Charlestons and so much more that devalues and denigrates life. These are the harsh and demonic step-children of what I call the fantastic hegemonic imagination.

This type of imagination is a blend of the thought of Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci and it traffics in peoples' lives to create caricatures of who we are that then become stereotypes—but we think are true and historic

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

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this imagination conjures worlds and their social structures that are based on the ordinariness of evil

it is this imagination, i argue, that helps to hold systematic, structural evil in place because we pass off its caricatures as knowledge

and it spawns generation after generation as we teach to oppress

enter counter-memory as imagination that liberates and educates for transformation

the use of counter-memory refuses to measure all of our realities by ideological stereotypes

it resists the scatological moonshine of the gross commodification of human lives in which people are reduced to profit margins or name brand products

there are days when i lean heavily on counter-memory because it can sometimes feel like i and others are rearranging the deck chairs on our pedagogical and theological titanics when it comes to dealing with incredibly complex bodies that are often fueled by heterosexism, empire, racism, imperialism, homophobia, and far too much more

the deadly pipe dream of “post-racial” is a tool of the fantastic hegemonic imagination

post-racialism is a don't worry and why the hell aren't you happy mentality that thrives on simplistic analysis masquerading as ultimate solutions

things like having a black president means that we don't have to talk about race anymore

believing, feeling, and acting as though we were past racism when we put Obama in the white house (let's ponder that image for a moment) is inept social analysis and an inarticulate understanding of how deeply imbedded “isms” are in our imaginations and actions

and furthermore, even if we had accomplished something about racism directed at black folk, we have done little to address that directed at latino/as and other skinned than white folk in this country

Scrooge was right: bah! humbug!

or consider the arguments we hear that we should not worry as the Supreme Court and other courts and legislatures in the country continue to chip away at the Civil Rights Act because we don't need it anymore

our response: #Blacklivesmatter, Stay woke

student protests at Vanderbilt, Yale, Princeton, University of Texas at Austin, Hampton University, Temple University and many more

using die-ins, hands up don't shoot, chalking, teach-ins and more

being led by young black folk and their allies

refusing to believe that we have made this country the land of the free because they can see with their lives that this simple is a bald-faced lie



we've still got work to do

or talking about race and racism on a black/white binary alone

yes, we still have tons of work to do to work through a past that includes enslavement and owning humans as a Christian and godly thing to do

but there is so much more in our racist society to address because we just include how the color coding in US society is black, white, brown, olive

tackling racism is a complex thing if we are going to do it well because at some point, all of us are implicated as oppressors

and most of us do not want to own that label for the things we do

but we must, so that we can get to work and become allies and freedom fighters for more than our self interests

ferguson can teach us that the new day has already dawned and it is, once again, being led by a younger generation than many if not most of us in this room

these freedom fighting folk are not the cheap trick stereotypes of millennials as either self-entitled narcissists or open-minded do-gooders

these liberation-leaning folk have sparked a smart and strategic movement for social change that refuses to leave Michael Brown's body lying in state on canfield drive

ferguson and the Black Lives Matter movement that has sprung from it are teaching us something many of us already knew and felt:

that focusing on heterosexual, cisgender black men frequently causes us not to see the significant amount of labor and thought leadership that black women provide to movements, not only in caretaking and auxiliary roles, but on the front lines of protests and in the strategy sessions that happen behind closed doors

that old models of leadership favored the old over the young, attempted to silence gay and lesbian leadership, and did not recognize the leadership possibilities of transgender people at all

and that a movement with a singular leader or a few visible leaders is vulnerable, because those leaders can be easily identified, harassed, bought off, and killed

new organizing is focusing on building and maintaining a leader-full movement

Ferguson is a profound code word for more than racism and police brutality

there is a range of issues such as our failing system of public education, which is a virtual school-to-prison pipeline for many black youth

there is the need to dismantle the prison industrial complex to end the problem of mass incarceration of black and Latino/as



there is safe and affordable housing

there is accessible, affordable, and excellent health care for all

there are issues with food security and reproductive justice challenges affecting poor women of color and all people needing access to reproductive care

there is countering the intentional exclusion of trans* lives with the pointed inclusion of trans* folk in leadership and as spokespeople for change

and it is important to state that the movement does not hate white people because these young black freedom fighters are clear that Black Lives matter, *too*

confining lives in an either/or proposition is one of the things that keeps the fantastic hegemonic imagination well fed and racism and all of its cousins warm and secure

what Black Lives Matter points out is that the system already treats white lives as if they have more value, as if they are more worthy of protection, safety, education, and a good quality of life than black lives are

and this must change

we are witnessing and participating in an intergenerational movement

yes, there have been schisms and battles between younger and older freedom fighters about tactics and strategies

today, the movement leaders practice a clear rejection of the respectability politics ethos of the civil rights era with its belief that proper dress and speech will guard against harassment by the police

within black communities, there is a point of tension between being caught in a system that makes one feel powerless to change it *and* the belief in the idea that a good job, being well-behaved, and having proper dress and comportment will protect us from the evils of racism

belief in the latter feels like this is something we can do to protect ourselves and have some control over our destiny

Black Lives Matter rejects such thinking in the face of massive evidence of police mistreatment of black people of all classes and backgrounds

it argues that all people should be treated with dignity and respect, regardless of how one looks or speaks (this sounds religious to me)

this current movement has a very different relationship to the church than movements past

black churches and black preachers in ferguson have been on the ground helping since the early days after Michael Brown's death

pastors and theologians around the country have come to help as well—being wise enough



to ask what they can do rather than telling the folk there what to do

and this is a profound difference from the civil rights era when the pastors lagged behind the laity in putting their bodies on the line for black dignity and respect

today's protesters and organizers patently reject any conservative theology that encourages keeping the peace, praying copiously, or turning the other cheek

such calls are viewed as a return to passive respectability politics

the theology of Ferguson and the Black Lives Movement is revolutionary—the theology of liberation theology and more specifically, black theology and womanist theology

seen as too radical and too unrelated to the church by some if not many, these theologies *are* speaking in a theological blue note to today's protesters and movement makers with their call for radical inclusion and a revolutionary Jesus

seminaries and divinity schools like the one I lead must become incubators for religious social change that helps provide the moral and spiritual resources that change agents need to sustain them for the long journey to justice

we must begin to listen to the questions coming from the communities in which we sit to see if we are providing pedagogies and resources for our students to be the leaders we like to tout that they will be

the fantastic hegemonic imagination is a stubborn chaperone and will continue to guide us into irrelevant and ineffectual social change strategies

we need counter-memories that remind us not only of the histories and theologies of the churches but also combine this with the skills of practitioners to use these knowledge bases to craft a faithfulness that does more than shake and moan about BlackLivesMattering

no, we must live it in our theologies

we must breath it in our pedagogies

we must help change the world unapologetically--blending spirituality and social justice

Stay woke





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She is the editor of two collection of essays, author of four books including her groundbreaking book, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. She is a co-editor of two books. Townes was elected a Fellow in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2009.

