

Jemima In the Mirror

By Crystal Williams

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Me: sitting around a cocktail table, in a hotel lobby bar, with seven or eight writers, having a good time. The conversation is flowing between bits of literary gossip and generalities. We are all approaching conference fatigue, having attended too few panels to consider the trip a pedagogical success but too many panels to remember what we've heard, who we've heard it from. I'm sitting next to a poet, let's call him "Jack," whose work I don't know but who is intriguing: soft voice, complex, intelligent, and with deep set eyes that remind me of wolves and things that go bump. So, Jack and I are talking. I'm questioning him about his work, his life, poking around places I don't belong, which, of course, is another reason I like him: he's answering. We've just met. Earlier, we participated in a panel where I read a poem entitled, "In Search of Aunt Jemima," my effort to combat the stereotypes with which I've so long been afflicted.

Anyway, that night I wanted to get to know him. In the middle of our conversation, Jack turned, looked me square in the face with those drastic blues and said, *I know I shouldn't say this... Bump. But, you do look like Aunt Jemima.* Double bump. "Jack!" I exclaimed, "why would you say something like that?!" Which turned him down a path of pardons until I felt uncomfortable for him and laughed off his faux pas with some witticism.

Whatever I said wasn't remotely enough to make him know that he was wrong. Flat-out, dead-centered, wrong. Jack was wrong because he'd said I looked like Mammy, that jovial, round-bodied, caretaker of white people. Jack felt so comfortable, so entitled in his white-maleness that no matter the insult, *I know I shouldn't say this ...it would be*

okay. He hadn't seen *me* and thus, had no reason to respect me. No, Jack saw a random black woman who would forgive him because, after all, it was his right to offend me as long as he softened his offense with what he considered a suitably contrite preface.

I am not a skinny woman. I am a round woman, with an easy smile. And, worse: I am a toucher. For me, the representation of Aunt Jemima is particularly difficult to overcome because she is not just a picture on an old pancake box. She is not just the innocuous slave, minstrel show heroine, not Hattie McDaniel or Butterfly McQueen. Jemima reigns as American myth: sister of Sambo, cousin of Tom, great grandmother to the Good Negro. All smoke and mirrors, Jemima is the ideal black woman, the exhausting standard of generosity and geniality against which every black woman is unconsciously measured. Jemima is the bewilderment one feels when confronted with a black woman who isn't maternal, who doesn't enjoy cooking. But, I *am* a nurturer and ascertaining where Jemima's legacy ends and where I begin has become arduous, if not impossible. Battling her is to fight wild fire. She is elusive, adaptive, evanescent and just when I think it is safe to regroup, she rises anew, redder, more devastating. This fight, then, is about finding a way to be in the world as I am, without being continually singed.

In light of this, in that dour, emotion-filled moment, when all hope for discussion had been doomed...*You do look like Aunt Jemima*, I was left with two options, both antithetical to my nature. One, tell the Jack to go to hell and thereby become "Angry Black Woman." Two, stay silent and embody Aunt Jemima, again. In both cases Jack gets off the hook—either my anger obfuscates the real issue and causes him to shut down or my silence absolves him of moral responsibility. Either way, I am relegated to a social construct. Either way I am left with a rattling conscious. So, I tried to find humor in a humorless situation, promptly returned to the hotel room, and was left with myself in the mirror, facing another series of grotesque images: Coward—at twenty-nine I had yet to seriously address my own responses to such offenses; Victim—I'd continued to

allow the Jack's of the world to silence me; Co-conspirator—guilty of not “fessing up” to my part in perpetuating racial misunderstanding. Since that night, the only answer I’ve come up with is that this identity-based paradoxicalness, is about practice, not theory. So, I set about trying to find my individual voice in the chorus of black women’s voices who have had to say *Unun, sucker, you will not make me into your mammy today!*

This, of course, is a difficulty for many black women: how do you interact with people who want you to be the perpetual “make it okay” woman. Indeed, we are expected to be *more* compassionate, *more* reasonable, *more* nice. The expectation comes from a certain history: black women forced to clean up white people's messes, raise white children, suckle white babies and teach them right from wrong. But the lessons white people learn regarding black folks rarely include responsibility, rarely include having to look at themselves in their full-privilege regalia. I’ve seen white people hop into a cab that has just passed a black person without, I presume, a second thought about inequity. I’ve been asked by a stranger who saw my eyes twinkle at her child, if I would become her live-in nanny, no references, no questions, just black me—with twinkling eyes. As a nurturer I find it difficult to, as Cornelius Eady writes in his poem *Gratitude*, “sustain rage.” I’m always contextualizing, empathizing, focusing on our commonalities. This, I do even though I know that most white people want desperately to believe that hundreds of years of racism, oppression, and stereotypes have gone away. They want to act upon that silly belief, come to the table with clean hands, if you will. Then they want to turn, wide-eyed, to me for absolution.

Regarding the Jacks and Jills of the world, I am, as I have said, not without some guilt. When Jack committed his act of aggression, for his comment was a verbal assault, I should have been ready with my fire extinguisher. But, I wasn’t. And, Auntie J. had already bumrushed the bar, embedded herself in the eyes of my conversation mate, and made herself present, dangerously so. Herein lies the conundrum: myself in contradiction. I believe such situations require dialog. However, finding a way of getting

to the dialog table without blundering, as I did with Jack, had thus far eluded me. So, yes, I went into default mode. I sought humor: my plight: laugh to "keep from crying."

Also, I guffawed because I recognized that whereas I live in discord with Jemima's social construction, Jack was perhaps more damned in his affliction in that he did not understand or even recognize his impairment. I joked because the nurturer in me felt bad for him. Jack, ignorant of his own situation. As long as his entitlement allowed him to say such a thing to any black person, he would never know a black person. This, I think, is the big divide between black folks and white folks. Until you can imagine what my world looks like, you can't ever know me. I, on the other hand, had better know what your world looks like so I know when to duck and for how long.

And let me be clear lest Jack becomes a singular villain. Most white people never bother to remove themselves from their "whiteness" long enough to consider how the world must operate for people of color because they do not have to. That, is called arrogance. A couple of months ago my mother and I visited an antiques shop where a Sambo-esk standing butler was for sell. "Umph," I said, "look at that." The shop owner responded, "Isn't he the cutest thing!" I held my tongue, again. What could I say to her? Do I begin with 1760 or perhaps jump-skip to 1860? On the drive home I discussed the incident with my mother, who is white. She thought the shop owner a "nice" woman. I found the shop owner, who might well have been nice, to be ignorant. It is this I-see-nothing-I-know-nothing ignorance, offered by otherwise good people, that gets thrust into the world and comes to a stunted halt, just, as Baldwin wrote, "above my head."

After the incident, on the plane home, I began, really, to reconsider Jack's comment and more importantly, my reaction to it. Once home the slow fury which had begun to build exploded and I was awash in red. The question before me: At what cost will you continue to allow the Jack's and Jill's of this world their arrogance? So, I sent Jack the following packet: Page One, *Jack*; Page Two, *a photo of Aunt Jemima*; Page Three,

a photo of me; Page Four, a question mark. That was it. Between him and me no question or commentary was more pertinent.

Jack called me as soon as he got the packet, full of apologies and wanting to talk. And, we did. We discussed Auntie J. and Mammy. He: wants a world in which no social construct can do another person harm. And yet, he already lives in such a luxurious world. For white men there is no construction, historical or modern, that can impact their ability to get a job, their wage, how the world sees and treats them. For white women, too, there are few constructions that can so damage their ability to survive. I: don't live in such a world. His apologies, though, sounded sincere. Ultimately, though, whether he understands or not, whether he ever takes another step out of his whiteness, is not immediately helpful to me—there will always be another Jack. Instead: Auntie J. was usurped. For the first time I faced her ominous reflection in the eyes of another and stared Jemima down. For the first time, I found *my* voice in the chorus. And, Jack, well Jack heard it and for a moment, staring at the question mark I'd placed before him, Jack misplaced his whiteness, and imagined, for an instant, my world.