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13

THE ACADEMIC ADDICT

Mainlining (& Kicking) White Supremacy (WS)

Joy James

I HAVE BEEN MAINLINING WHITE SUPREMACY (WS) for so long that I have lost clarity and spirit.¹ I do not remember what it means to be without addiction, that is, how to be truly alive. I could blame this on the university, the degrees, publishing, narcissism, and careerism (my own, and that of my colleagues and students), as well as player-haters (being high eases the pain of being played or playing, hated or hating). Yet, I was hooked long before I went to graduate school and long before I got the green light for tenure track, tenure, and promotion.

I likely started off in my preacademic years in incremental dosages, sniffing rather than shooting. But the supply was so plentiful and pervasive. It was (is) neither cheap nor scarce, but *free* and mandatory, ostensibly so in order to inoculate against some greater ill. (As with the anthrax vaccine required of troops who serve in global warfare, the government supplies clean needles. Those who refuse injections are stigmatized and/or arrested.)

To clearly view WS addiction as disease is akin to researching and teaching about government complicity in cocaine trafficking and the sex trade. Clarity raises difficult questions that are often shunned—questions about the underground drug and sex economy as a structural feature of "market" capitalism, about the nature of institutional WS addictions, and about the power of influential or wealthy WS addicts in shaping democratic and intellectual cultures.

Conventional truism: Addicts are known to exaggerate (a euphemism for “lie”). Yet, which addicts: government leaders, corporate CEOs, police and military chiefs, academic administrators, professors, or students? For decades, those taking WS (to speak of intergenerational addiction, one must include those born of parents who were users) have built personal, national, and imperial wealth on WS. The false dichotomies between classroom purveyor and street pusher, suburban recreational user and urban junkie, bank launderer and immigrant mule suggest that words have become weapons in a rhetorical war on WS. Regardless of Senator Trent Lott’s apology, this nation is incredibly strung out.

Another truism: The trouble with addicts is that they are so troubled—full of self-loathing, half of the time unintelligible, the other half, prophetic. This is where the role of academics and scholars-intellectuals (their functions are not synonymous) is so crucial. Yet it’s difficult to distinguish between gibberish and prophecy, academic and intellectual. Partly because of the overlap between the entities and functions, partly because in a culture of denial most people are closet users and with such a high dependency on WS, few resources have gone into finding reliable healing programs.

In an addicted culture, or a culture of addicts, academic addicts likely distinguish themselves in their search for getting clean or becoming increasingly lost by words, usually those found in their articles or on their reading lists. Syllabi and bibliographies are paraphernalia. Addiction makes you convoluted, hiding in words, pumping something into a vein or artery for an infusion of self-worth. Sometimes words bring clarity, like talking in tongues.

How to describe the felt need to perform, to be on stage, to fake sobriety, to mask shooting up on synthetic substances such as “master race” narratives or discourses only to long for a conscience? First, talk nonsense. Then (re)gain enough consciousness to speak in the “double consciousness” of the antiracist addict, critiquing the master narratives for occlusion of “race” and collusion with racism. Next realize that your very deconstruction of the masters’ narrative(s) reveals addiction. The addict’s trap. To embrace or reject WS, pick up or put down the needle—all require a concentration of energy, nerve, and mind on “whiteness.”

It would be “highly offensive,” I am told, to seriously suggest some correlation between academics and addicts. Perhaps those offended disdain the status of the common addict, who in this culture is usually constructed as impoverished and black. One could hardly wish to embrace bodies so policed, imprisoned, and despised given the

punitive aspects associated with certain strains of addiction in a stratified culture.

White addicts are assumed to be able to handle their addictions with dignity and civility while black addicts are presumed to be emboldened by theirs into a savagery only recently relinquished. Hence, black addicts are policed and sentenced differently from white addicts. The black addicts tend to be restrained in the academic carceral at higher rates with more repressive measures than those used against their white counterparts. Those not completely high know that Michel Foucault exaggerated in *Discipline and Punish*. Torture had not “disappeared” from the landscape; it had “disappeared” into black or racially marked bodies. (The addict housed in the academic carceral has some relation to the addict warehoused in the state’s penal sites, but it would be surreal in this missive to enter into a serious discussion of Attica, Guantanamo, or your local prison or INS detention center; such important information is readily available in reports from human rights organizations such as Amnesty International.)

If you do “white time,” you are more likely to be sentenced to rehab through seminars on diversity. If you do “black time,” you are more likely to be caged, to be pimped by guards and guardians of the containment center, and to be profiled when driving, or walking, or voting, or teaching. It is commonly argued, another truism, that those so held deserve to be imprisoned. How then do the racially “different” (read *deviant*) survive addiction?

The faith-based initiative currently promoted by the secular government suggests religious revival as an essential component of survival and rehabilitation. Signing up for rehab (I have class privilege) led me to an interview on black women’s religious responses to 9/11, conducted in early 2002 for the now-defunct women’s publication *Sojourners*. I turned the interview into a referendum on white supremacy and militarism in a duly unelected government. The interview was never published, perhaps because of my refusal to take personal responsibility and my habit of blaming the government and corporate-military elites for excessive dysfunctionality, violence, and a WS pandemic. As part of a program to kick WS, I have reworked the interviewer’s questions and my responses into my own five-step program.

1. Find examples of religion/spirituality in history and your own family or personal experience to help you stay strong [and sober].

The historical wells that black people drew from are the sources of contemporary strength and courage. Spirituality existed and exists outside of and beyond religions, which are often set by rules that attempt to

contain and articulate a deeper consciousness in peace and grace. Blacks drew and draw from the love and compassion that we have for each other, and for ourselves, the love that leads to a determination that we survive, despite being lied to, stolen, and stolen from. We were caged, and mobilized for or made passive in the face of destructive practices and policies. The peace we found or fought for, that we find or fight for, is embodied in a respect for life, for others' lives and the spirit that surrounds us. Strength is reflected in struggle. The ocean, mountains, winter sunlight offer space for calm and insight.

2. *Identify particular women whose lives inspire you in times of crisis [and offer instructions for sobriety].*

In my academic writings, I remember the ancestors. It is opportunistic to call them only in prefaces, and, immature to run to them only in crises (like calling out "Jesus!" only in desperation). I am still evolving. So I remember more often antilynching crusader Ida B. Wells and civil rights mentor Ella Baker. Of the living, my mothers include the twins who raised and reraised me (an incomplete work), and, my god-mother, a priestess of Yemoya.

3. *[Question if] religion and spirituality have helped you to cope with the September 11 tragedy [and its tragic aftermath, U.S. warfare and occupation].*

In religion I have heard the chant often: "With God on our side, we can kill [without remorse]." The multicultural collage of state terrorists and insurgent terrorists all claim to be men (and women) of faith. Such religious people have managed to destroy and kill at a shocking and awesome rate.

The aftermath of September 11 includes the killing of more people. Why should I "cope" with that? Religion can incite war or bring comfort that helps survivors, but it does not necessarily bring resistance to war and killing. There was so much American indifference to those dying before September 11 in Africa, in the Middle East (including hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children affected by U.S. sanctions), in Latin America, in Europe, in Asia from poverty, disease, wars, torture, and prison.

Fortunately, there have always been those (not all claim a religion) who love humanity and who condemn not only the tragedy of September 11, 2001, but also the killings before and after. Our ability to love despite the horror—to not give in to mindless patriotism, police state powers, or exhortations to shop in order to feel better (and

boost the economy)—allows us to seek peace and justice. It also allows grief to unfold, not as a numbing weight but as a girder, in our bodies.

Spirit guides resistance in ways that are very old and familiar. So, very much in the tradition, I allow myself to reject authoritarian figures, to hear in presidential speeches about "crusades," "evildoers," and the "absolute good" embodied by the United States another religious fanatic, another instrument of death.

So spirit(s) comes full circle, with its instructions: We have the same duties and obligations that our foremothers and fathers had—to survive and to go beyond survival to freedom. Not as individuals or (affluent) families stockpiling Cipro² and purchasing country homes but as international communities who, with their international bodies, arrest the spread of terror and warfare, repression and incarceration, and daily violence and poverty.

4. *Adjust your vision of peace for the world and the alterations to it by current events.*

My vision(s) centers on people in right relation with themselves, nature, creation, and life itself. Peace for the world ideally is the absence of physical want and coercion or force. Things are so imbalanced: income disparities, dictatorships, dysfunctional democracies, pacified populaces. Read Octavia Butler, 1 Corinthians 13.

Life is not different now; nor is death. It is the same (although some are more attentive or anesthetized to suffering and struggle). Resistance to repression that indigenous, black, and poor peoples have historically known mandates a moratorium on warfare, on its industries, on corporate profiteering, on its racist opportunism, on its hatred of or indifference to families and communities, its violence against women and children. Peace would be a rejection of paternal leadership, of police state and prison expansion, of greed. Peace would mean the inclusion of life-affirming nonelites into the decision-making processes of the governments and corporations and military and police centers that adjudicate lives. Democracy, of course, requires the same. So to struggle for a true democracy is to be in struggle for peace. To be in struggle for peace is to work to alter or abolish repressive institutions and governments and addictions.

5. *Say something to our children to help them.*

Tell them how we love; how we've failed at it; how we've managed to triumph in loving; how our lives are committed to them and their learning compassion, demanding justice, and freedom. Freedom from

violence, hunger, fear, ignorance: Those are our true legacies for children. All of the ideals that make living and dying dignified and filled with grace and beauty, ideals not to be hoarded but to be spread, with spirit, globally.

NOTES

1. I offer no definition of "white supremacy" here. As a recovering black WS addict, I know that WS is part fantasy, part nightmare, an artificially or chemically induced altered state, one that promotes an exaggerated sense of self shaped by the presence (or absence) of mythical value. The reader may refer to the considerable literature in print (and performance) on the contradictions of black WS addiction.
2. Cipro is a prescription drug used to counter bacterial infection. Following 9/11 it was promoted by some as a potential "antidote" to biological warfare.

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