

EXPERT OPINION

Cynthia McKinney

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Background Expertise For Institutional Racism

In 1992 I was elected the first African-American woman to represent Georgia in the U.S. House of Representatives as a Member of Congress.

I remained in the U.S. House of Representatives for 12 years, elected as a member of the Democratic Party.

Before that, I had been elected to serve as a Georgia Representative in the Georgia General Assembly for 4 years.

In 2008 I was the U.S. Green Party nominee for President in the federal election.

I am currently a Ph.D. candidate at Antioch University, in its Leadership and Change program. My thesis research concerns targeted assassinations in the U.S. (including that of Malcolm X) and targeted assassinations practiced by the U.S. abroad.

I am a Juror on the Bertrand Russell Tribunal on Palestine, and have sat at each of its Sessions in Barcelona, London, Cape Town, New York, and Brussels.

I am a supporter of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's effort to "criminalise war."

I am the founder of DIGNITY, an international peace organization to assert respect for human rights. I have organized three DIGNITY delegations to Libya, including one delegation of independent journalists during the 2011 U.S./NATO aggression.

My entire career has been devoted to fighting bigotry, injustice, and intimidation, especially the state sanctioned varieties against citizens.

Instructions About Opinion Sought

I have been asked to provide the meaning of the term “house Negro,” and the criteria that constitute a determination that someone is a “house Negro.”

I was also asked whether “house Negro” means that the subject of the criticism:

- (a) “is a pariah in the Black community”;
- (b) “has forfeited her social identity with the Black community”;
- (c) “is a race traitor”; and
- (d) “has severed her bond with the Black community and her racial and cultural heritage.”

Finally, I was asked whether it is acceptable for a White person to use the “house Negro” criticism against a Black person.

Background Documents Consulted

In looking at the background of these questions, I have read the following documents:

- (a) the 2008 student report about systemic racism at the University of Ottawa;
<http://rancourt.academicfreedom.ca/Data/uofowatch/2008-11=SAC%202008%20Report.pdf>
 - (b) the 2008 report authored by Professor Joanne St. Lewis;
<http://web5.uottawa.ca/admingov/documents/evaluation-report-sac-2008-annual-report.pdf>
 - (c) the 2011 blog post of Professor Denis Rancourt;
<http://uofowatch.blogspot.ca/2011/02/did-professor-joanne-st-lewis-act-as.html>
 - (d) the access to information documents used by Professor Rancourt in writing his blog post;
<http://ia600405.us.archive.org/12/items/FippaDocuments-JoanneSt.lewisAndUpperAdministrationUOfO/JoannestlewisAndUpperAdministration.pdf>
 - (e) Professor St. Lewis’s Statement of Claim in the legal action;
<http://rancourt.academicfreedom.ca/Data/uofowatch/2011-06-23=OSCJ-11-51657=JStLvsDGR.PDF>
- and
- (f) the YouTube video of Ms. Hazel Gashoka about the criticism of Professor St. Lewis.
<http://youtu.be/q4E7tdCVQ7Y>

I have also read the University of Ottawa French student newspaper article of April 8, 2013 about the case: “La poursuite de Gashoka en suspens”: <http://www.larotonde.ca/?p=4081>

Opinion

Origin and present meaning of the term “house Negro”

The term “house Negro” is derived from the experience of slavery in the United States where certain members of the Black community were invited inside the master’s plantation house to serve the interests of the master.

The house Negro existed as a house Negro solely at the invitation of the plantation master. There was great benefit in being a house Negro, compared to the much harsher conditions of the laboring field Negroes. Consequently, the interests of the house Negro were consonant with the interests of the plantation master, and the house Negro played an important active role in preserving the status quo.

The house Negro purposely remained a part of the system that his brothers and sisters were fighting against. The house Negroes looked after themselves and their role was to moderate the appropriate outrage at the injustices felt by the other Blacks.

As explained by Malcolm X, we find parallels that continue up to present society. The term “house Negro” is in common use to criticize Blacks who are attributed privilege provided they help maintain the racialized and unbalanced power relations in society.

The term “house Negro” has a potent meaning because it is literally hundreds of years old. The term has “citationality,” in that a historical sequence of images is fused with other images and narratives in mind. The term has obtained its meaning through the iteration of already established norms and positions that are grafted into and grafted together with a new cultural and political context.

This citationality is such that not just the antebellum plantation image comes to mind, but everything in the hundreds of years that this culture has existed, in the path to the present. In present usage, clearly one is not literally saying that the person is a slave. However, a precise meaning, mapped onto the present social and political context, has been entirely preserved.

It is this history and continuity of meaning that give the term its complete definition, and its sting as a criticism. This cannot be replaced by an alternative description or expression. It is a description that is known since the creation of the term. As long as racially defined, unbalanced power relations exist, the term will continue to have currency and relevance.

The meaning of “house Negro” is anchored in the *function* of the house Negro. The function has not changed. In any economy based on exploitations of other groups, there have always been house Negroes. It is the function within such a system that defines the term at its root.

The term has racial content that was injected as a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The extent to which it has racial content is informed by the context. If you’re going to take away the use of that term, the function still exists in society as a result of the legacy of the crime against

humanity. Therefore, you can create a different way to say it but that doesn't get rid of the function. And the function is a common one, to the degree that society continues to be racialized with power disparities.

In summary, there is no other term than "house Negro" that describes the intended function in present society, derived from history, in the same way as "house Negro" does. You can say a whole lot of other words but it wouldn't have the same impact and meaning. Impact and meaning are one because of the term's citationality. In fact, it is due to this citationality that the term has superseded its original denotation and acquired a more universal connotation that lifts it out of a straight slavery setting—even out of its Black versus White setting because in the interplay of race, ethnicity, and power dynamics in a society, house Negroes can come in many different ethnicities as long as the societal function is served. I am in Malaysia right now with Malay friends who are acutely aware of their own colonial background. Immediately, when I say the words "house Negro" to them, they know what it means without further explanation.

Criteria in determining the function of "house Negro"

Sociologists and race theorists have developed criteria for the objective determination of behavior which is characteristic of a "house Negro." What are the functional circumstances and behaviors that establish that a person has acted like a house Negro in a modern institutional setting?

First, there must be an invitation by the "master" to enter the "house" and to "serve" the "master." If it is not by invitation, then it cannot be a "house Negro" situation. House Negroes serve at the pleasure of the master.

Second, there must be a need for a "Black face." The "master" has an advantage of using a Black servant for the task at hand reflecting the belief that the Black face accords acceptance of the act that could not otherwise be obtained if it were done in White face.

Third, the Black servant typically does what is requested irrespective of his/her training or experience for the task at hand and to the detriment of people who look like him or her.

In the modern institutional context, a diagnostic feature is that there is a deviation from the usual procedure or practice, in order to use a "Black face" for the specialized task, rather than rely on White agents.

In other words, the extent to which the institution goes out of its way to secure and use a Black face for the task at hand, is a measure of "house Negro" circumstances. And the extent to which the Black agent performs duties for which he/she was not trained, in pursuing the task at hand, is a corroborating feature. For the mindset of the house Negro is to simply do as told, no matter the consequences.

Application of the Criteria

The case of Professor Joanne St. Lewis is a textbook example of an individual acting the part of a house Negro in the modern institutional setting. The case of Professor St. Lewis satisfies the objective criteria whereby the “house Negro” criticism applies. The case is an exemplary illustration of the modern meaning of the term. This is clear from the following elements in the posted documents listed above.

1. Professor St. Lewis was invited by the White institution to perform the task of criticizing the student report. It is not something she chose to do from her own initiative. It is not a task she assigned to herself from her position as an established expert, or arising from her academic freedom. The element of “invitation” is present: To produce a body of work that furthers the interests of the inviter.
2. Given Professor St. Lewis’s opportunity to write her report, she could have written an accurate report that reflected the number of suspensions, and the disciplinary actions that were taken against students of color, and she could have left it there. But she chose not to do that.
3. Instead, Professor St. Lewis did exactly what continued the system of injustices that the students were rebelling against: She discredited the student report that there was racial discrimination in the institution’s treatment of academic fraud allegations. By analogy, the student report was the slave rebellion, which needed to be moderated.
4. Whereas Professor St. Lewis does have the expertise and credentials to evaluate the presence of institutional racism, she did not do that. Whereas Professor St. Lewis does not appear to have the expertise to criticize the statistical significance of the data in the student report, she did choose to do that.
5. The “invitation” was outside of the normal chain of command for addressing student complaints about academic fraud. Normally, there is a sequence for examining such complaints as were described in the student report. It would start in the academic departments where the complaints originated, move up to the faculty or school level, then be submitted to a senate academic committee, while being overseen under the authority of the academic provost.
6. Instead, the entire evaluation was circumvented and put in the hands of a professor to criticize the validity of the student complaints, while this was directly managed by the university President himself. Professor St. Lewis, the academic provost, other staff, and so on, all reported directly to the President. The President managed the communications, and suggested actions. The President was clearly in charge from the start. This deviation from standard operating procedure is a clear indication of the attention to race that started this entire episode: the criticism of the students of color on their disparate disciplinary treatment.
7. This case goes further than the usual because the President actually directed how to preserve the appearance that the academic provost was in charge.

8. In short, the university deviated and made an intentional affirmative action to go around the normal standard operating procedures, to find a Black face to perform the function that on its face was the function of justifying or defending its actions – it found a Black face to do it. The university circumvented the established procedure to deal with student complaints, to justify not dealing with the charge.

9. Further, it appears that neither the University nor Professor St. Lewis has, since the 2008 reports, ever examined the academic fraud process for systemic racism at the University of Ottawa. The student report has remained unaddressed. The acts and behavior that are correctly characterized by the “house Negro” criticism have achieved their goal.

10. It is also apparent that the University’s concern was the media attention around the student report. All the emphasis was in releasing Professor St. Lewis’s report to moderate the public impact of the student complaints, rather than an investigation into the substance of the student complaints. There was not even a public University commitment that a study or investigation would follow.

Furthermore, it is commonly part of the pattern of a house Negro’s actions that there be a running away from the implications of the body of work from the people who are affected by that body of work. So the house Negro has no choice but to seek refuge with other house Negroes because that’s where there is an area of comfort.

In this case, student Hazel Gashoka has reported that Professor St. Lewis ran away from the student’s attempts to meet her. This fits a pattern of a refusal to address the impact of the function on the victim. Professor St. Lewis’s report would be hurtful to students such as Ms. Gashoka, and helpful to the plantation master.

In conclusion, the example of Professor St. Lewis in this case is classic:

- (a) there was the invitation;
- (b) it was outside of established procedure;
- (c) the function was fulfilled; and
- (d) there was a refusal to address the impact of the function on the victim.

Does “house Negro” mean pariah, race traitor, etc.?

The definitive and short answer is “no.” In the context of the blog post, the term “house Negro” has its known meaning, a meaning understood since the term was first used, and which is the meaning today. The term relates to the function served. There is nothing about pariah, or about distance from the Black community.

At the end of the day, “Negro” is at the end of the word “house.” The blog post is entirely about the function of the act, of the behavior. Anything else is building a case out of whole cloth.

It does not hold up that “house Negro” could reasonably mean “has forfeited her social identity with the Black community” because, despite their overall substantial cost to the community,

house Negroes are in many ways looked up to. Many Blacks wanted to be house Negroes because house Negroes are rewarded by the society at large for performing that function. The same translates today, with high professional service to the employer being understood as “success.”

The house Negro abandons the rebellious field Negro, in fact works against the rebellious field Negro, but does not abandon house Negroes. The house Negroes form their own sub-culture, but they remain Negroes. There is no way to walk away from being a Negro. You cannot “forfeit” your Blackness. You can only chose a camp of service to the master, of passive obedience, or of rebellious resistance. Regarding function in the power structure, there is no uniform coping mechanism or monolithic ideology for the relative position to the master of powerlessness inside the Black community.

The house Negro performs a specific role, but that is only perceived to be a pariah role based on one’s ideological perspective. If one feels oneself a pariah after having served the function of a house Negro, this could be an indication that one knowingly deviated from one’s own values in order to perform that function and the alienation felt is from oneself and what one thought were prized values, only to be lost when put to the test. It is foremost a class or caste role. Is success exclusively White? Is access to a high position exclusively White? Is prison exclusively Black? No, success, position, and prison are features of the economic structure, which is racist by virtue of its selection criteria. A White does not forfeit his Whiteness by going to prison. Such arguments are meant only to obfuscate the role and function of house Negroes. This role is defined by the economic structure and derives in lineage from the system of slavery. It has nothing to do with belonging to some monolithic Black community.

Is it acceptable for a White person to use the term “house Negro”?

There is no other term, equivalent to “house Negro,” that describes the historic, functional, and political-societal complete meaning intended. The term has citationality, and a meaning derived in continuity from history to the present. To exclude Whites from using a term which has no substitute term would be absurd.

The only questions are whether the criticism is justified, or true, or reasonable, or fair, or malicious, and so on. In answering these questions, feelings of being hurt, and impact as insult, and so on, are all irrelevant. We do not live in a society where we are automatically responsible for the emotional reactions of others, only for our own intent and intellectual honesty.

People of whatever color should be able to make judgments freely based on the impact of whatever the behavior is that’s being discussed.

In this particular case, it’s alright for the University to deviate from its standard operating procedures, to go out of its way to find a Black face to hang onto its justification of disparate treatment of students of color. It’s alright for the President to direct this – as if he’s a traffic cop at rush hour – it’s alright for that behavior to take place, and it’s alright for the students of color to feel as if they are being harmed by the standard operating procedures of the university that

remain unexamined till today. That's alright. But when a professor calls out the behavior that is, in my opinion, all-the-way-around racist behavior – because the President went and found a Black face – when the professor calls out the President and the person who cooperated in that racist behavior, then the professor gets sanctioned by a lawsuit funded by that very University. This legal action is nothing short of retribution for calling out racism at a University that should have risen above such behavior a long time ago. In fact, it is this series of behaviors by the University that lend utmost credence to the foundational allegations lodged by the students of color in their report and that bolster the professor's claim of "house Negro" type behavior. In addition, while Professor St. Lewis filed a lawsuit against Professor Rancourt, the University was forced to admit that it would not fund a lawsuit against Black former student Hazel Gashoka for speaking out. Because Gashoka felt threatened enough to even pose the question of whether the University would fund a lawsuit against her, this entire scenario has rendered St. Lewis in the relative power position of the master and relegated Professor Rancourt and Gashoka to the powerless position of slave.

In my opinion, the question should be about a White professor's duty to honestly use the term that applies, a professor's duty to fight racism, and a White president's duty to society at large to create a just institution. Not about publicly funded legal battles related to the emotional impacts of words. A legal battle is no way to resolve an academic dispute. And sadly, this legal action does nothing for the students of color at University of Ottawa who feel that the environment at the University is one that discriminates against them.

Conclusion

The lawsuit uses inflammatory language to obscure the function and the role that is being played; once we forget the language and look at the behavior, Professor St. Lewis could win an Emmy for her performance, as I see it.