

“False Media, We Don’t Need It, Do We?: Embracing Change”

The title of my talk today is, “False Media, We Don’t Need It, Do We?: Embracing Change.” I want to begin with a quotation from one of my favorite hip hop groups, The Roots, who coincidentally hail from my hometown of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The lyrics that I want to share are as follows:

America’s lost somewhere inside of Littleton
Eleven million children are on Ritalin
That’s why I don’t rhyme for the sake of riddlin’
False media, we don’t need it, do we?
Pilgrims, Slaves, Indian, Mexican
It looks real messed up for your next of kin
That’s why I don’t rhyme for the sake of riddlin’
False media, we don't need it, do we?

For those of you up for a little hip hop trivia, here The Roots have revised the lyrics to “Don’t Believe the Hype,” by pioneering rap group Public Enemy who were popular when I was an undergraduate and who profoundly affected the development of both my racial and political consciousness. In Public Enemy’s version, they bemoan their censorship and negative depiction by the mainstream media. In this version, The Roots revise the lyrics to critique contemporary American society.

At this point, some of the parents here might be simply mortified. Perhaps some of you were looking forward to not having to hear that loud rap music in your house now that your daughter or son was off to college. Perhaps some of you even expected that college would wean your child off of hip hop. And incidentally, some of you might recognize the name “Public Enemy” from one of its members, Flava Flav, who has become a staple on the reality television circuits (the *Surreal Life* and *Flava of Love*) for his buffoonish antics – all the more reason to be skeptical of my motives right now. At any rate, you are not prepared to put your hard earned dollars towards your child’s college education for this. But as another favorite group of mine has phrased it, “It’s bigger than hip hop.”

For some of us, the changing times are almost apocalyptic; this is the end of the world as we know it. My mother, who is not yet 60, said to me recently that she never thought that she would live to see the day when both a black man or a white woman would be serious contenders for the presidency of the United States. Times are changing. Even here at Texas A & M. For example, who would have ever thought that Texas A & M would have a Hispanic *female* president? Not its founding fathers, that’s for sure. Times are changing. Of course, some people fail to acknowledge this fact. Don Imus, who called the Rutgers women’s basketball team, “nappy headed hoes.” Michael Richards when he launched into a racist tirade at a black heckler, who I had watched faithfully on *Sienfield* for years, I might add. And then there is Spain’s basketball team, who had the poor taste to pose for a group picture, while making a “slant eyed” gesture.

This speech is entitled “False Media, We Don’t Need it Do We?” because in these changing times, we must rethink some of the things we have come to believe as fact and not berate the change agents as purveyors of political correctness. *False Media, We Don’t Need it Do We?* For me, the purpose of college is more than just a means of obtaining a good job. It is a safe space to decide what type of adult you plan to be; what type of mark you plan to leave on the world. And if you learn only one humanistic lesson in college, let it be how to become a good *global* citizen.

Times are changing. For many I don’t fit their image of a college professor. And it has nothing to do with the absence of a tweed blazer – because I have one of those. For example, it has recently come to my attention that I am actually the first person of color, female or male, ever selected to give this keynote address. The selection committee was brave, because they were “warned” about me. *False Media, I don’t Need it, Do I?* On a campus where there are less than 70 African Americans in a faculty of approximately 2,500 members, I am acutely aware of my subject position as an African American female professor. Many of my students have never before taken a course taught by a black instructor, and therefore I am not just an English professor to them, but the embodiment of *difference*. Having taught at predominately white universities as a graduate student prior to obtaining my position here at Texas A&M, this situation is not new to me. I want to make it clear that I do not view my race or sex as handicaps, but rather as *opportunities* to engage my students in candid and honest discussions about race and other issues of so called difference.

I selected a rap lyric, not just to be provocative, but to suggest that the aesthetic predilection of professors might have changed a bit since some of you were in college. As a scholar of African American literature and culture, I have a vested interest in the cultural production of those of my own generation. And I see the vilification of hip hop as just another way to discredit the knowledge of blacks and other marginalized groups. *False Media, We Don’t Need it Do We?* And at the risk of placing my catch phrases too close to each other, *It’s bigger than hip hop*. Students need to be aware of what’s happening in the world today. Students have to move beyond the myths we are taught about the United States and learn about different realities.

Harvard University professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. once commented on the irony that white students often complain about not being able to relate to African American literature because they aren’t black, but don’t make the same complaint about not being able to relate to characters in say a Shakespearean play that lived centuries ago. His point is simply that people should not let race be a deterrent to understanding – particularly if the person in question lives in the same time period, not to mention the same country. And in this day in age, one can hardly afford this type of ignorance. Keep in mind that I didn’t have a course that focused on blacks until I went to college, which means that my entire education up to that point was predicated on my ability to decipher knowledge from people who looked nothing like me.

There is a picture titled *The Cause of the War*ⁱ that depicts an enslaved black man who has been posed by the photographer to reveal a back covered with keloided scars. I can

imagine every lick delivered at the hand of some cruel overseer indelibly inscribing the very definition of slavery on this man's body. Rather than interpret the photograph as a testament to the morality of those responsible for initiating the Civil War, as its title suggests, I see it as symbolic of the "unrelenting protest" of enslaved blacks who fought to preserve their humanity in the face of those who sought to deny it. June Jordan writes that slavery means, "... that certain men comfortably destroyed other, real people as individuals. Enslaved, black men and women were forced into the status merely of machines making money for the 'master.' Literally lashed into a role rejecting particular, human life, the cultivation of *own voice* became a workaday occupation, an unrelenting protest, and an ultimate social triumph" (Jordan 1970). Each raised and roped mark left on the body of the unnamed man tells a silent story of rebellion – his oppressors could destroy his body, but not his spirit, not his "own voice." I have often looked at that picture and wondered what made him so defiant. What went on in his mind to make him act of his own volition *in spite* of the constant threat of the lash? On his back I have seen the deferred dreams of hundreds of my ancestors riddled in the maze of elevated scars. In each lumpy welt I have also envisioned the unhealed scars that been left to fester on face of America's history. I've looked at this photograph and thought, "How do I teach *this*?"

Although nothing can compare to slavery, in my capacity as a professor, I have encountered students of all classes and races who feel powerless or even apathetic. While there have been several events in recent history that might cause students to feel disenfranchised, I often suggest to them that one of the reasons for their disaffection might be their lack of exposure to the history of student protest in this country and abroad. I want to empower my students to challenge the world around them. I want to argue with inquisitive minds, not brainwash students into my way of thinking. I want to make students understand that they can make a difference.

In order to foster better critical writing among my students, I emphasize the importance of close-reading in my classrooms – or an attention to meticulous textual analysis. My teaching methods are predicated on a text called *Ways of Reading*, which emphasizes the importance of "reading with and against the grain of a text, reproducing an author's methods, questioning his or her direction and authority" (Bartholomae and Petrosky *Ways of Reading* 11). In teaching literature, I not only emphasize the importance of "reading with and against the grain" in order to determine the writer's main themes or her or his underlying ideologies, but I also invite students to interpret and interrogate the rhetorical devices an author uses to develop an argument or a theme. I want to equip my students with the tools necessary to participate in a series of dialogues; a dialogue between the student and the teacher, between the student and the critic, and between the student and established theoretical and literary traditions. In short, I encourage my students to develop their own critical voices but also to think critically about texts and the larger issues that inform them.

My reason for choosing to be the director of Africana Studies is somewhat similar. While a relatively new minor at Texas A & M, programs such as these have existed for almost twenty years in order to equip students to compete in an ever-growing global economy. And contrary to popular belief, it is not just a minor for black students. *False*

Media, We Don't Need it Do We? Africana Studies is an interdisciplinary minor in the College of Liberal Arts that encompasses courses in the discipline of Africana Studies as well as courses in Anthropology, Communication, English, Hispanic Studies, History, Performance Studies, Political Science, Psychology, and Sociology. One of the main goals of the College of Liberal Arts is to diversify and internationalize its curriculum offerings. Africana Studies provides students with a unique opportunity to learn about the cultural, historical and social contributions and experiences of peoples from Africa and of African descent.

AAfricana@ is a term that refers to any cultural and intellectual production relating to Africa and its Diaspora. Our faculty expertise in this area includes the literature, society, history and culture of blacks in Africa, Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean and the United States. The program rejects monolithic constructions of blackness and instead examines its construction across ethnic, regional, and national boundaries.

But why minor in Africana Studies in a place like Texas A & M? Well, approximately 95% of Texas A & M undergraduates hail from the state of Texas. Texas A & M graduates are often ranked high for their loyalty, but low in their acceptance and awareness of cultural diversity. In an ever-increasing pluralistic society and global economy, students cannot afford to enter into the workforce without a fundamental respect and understanding of people from different racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Dr. Muana, the former coordinator of Africana Studies, accurately states, AAs Aggie graduates pursue professional careers in private/public sector and international jobs, they will be better prepared to handle the complexities of intercultural and intergroup relations especially involving people of African descent.@ Given its global dimension, Africana Studies can be paired with any major. Additionally, minoring in Africana Studies is sound preparation for most major professional programs, as well as graduate programs in social sciences, and liberal arts.

Now that I've gotten this shameful plug out of the way, I want to end by briefly reminiscing about my own undergraduate days. Now, when I went away to college for the first time at the age of 17, I only had a vague notion of why I was there. While it seemed that I had been preparing for this moment for my entire life up until that point, if I were to be completely honest, I went to college because it was expected of me and because I didn't know what else to do with myself. College meant freedom from my family, and a way to eventually get a job. Some women I knew went to college to find a husband. While I won't damage my reputation with stories of my freshman year exploits, I will say that my extensive partying led to academic probation and my parents threatening to bring me home to attend community college. At the time, that threat was a fate worse than death since I had bragged so much to my high school friends about going away to college.

It wasn't until I felt a connection, an *intellectual* connection to the university in which I was enrolled, that I truly understood what I wanted to get out of college, and that understanding eventually helped me to define my purpose in life. Being a professor *is* my life's purpose, as corny as that sounds. For me, that connection occurred when I

took a course in Black Studies with Dr. Barbara Sizemore. Not only was this the first class that I had ever taken concerning black cultures and histories (the use of the plural is intentional), but she was the first professor to take an interest in me and to convince me that I was intelligent. She did that by expecting more from me as a student than I expected of myself. Before Dr. Sizemore, the clothes that I bought to wear to class were more important to me than the books I purchased for the same purpose. Now you, you will have to find your own academic connection. Respect the passion that professors have for their subject matter and just maybe they will help you to discover your own true passion and potential life calling.

Thank you for your attention this afternoon. I look forward to having some of you in class or as Africana Studies minors over the next four years.
