

“What Can I say, you bring out the ‘F*** You’ in Me.”

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Last Monday night, I was watching one of my favorite shows, *Weeds*. It is now in its third season. The theme song for the show is Malvina Reynold’s 1962 song, *Little Boxes**, apparently inspired by Daly City. The plot of the sitcom revolves around a white suburban housewife, Nancy, who lives in a white and affluent subdivision. In Agrestic, all the McMansions look the same, and the one-size-fits-all hypocritical dominant culture has turned a great many of its residents into counter culture consumers of marijuana. The premise of the show is that Nancy’s husband suddenly dies of a heart attack and Nancy has to figure out how to maintain herself and her two sons’ lifestyles in the manner to which they have become accustomed.

Nancy is stumped as to how to make enough money to keep her McMansion and her Latina maid until she decides to become a dealer. Her source is Heylia James, a black woman who has been doing wholesale for a long time, which means she is a smart, careful and a no-nonsense business woman. Heylia is skeptical of Nancy’s status as both white and as a beginner—both are potential threats to the success of her business. Their relationship begins and continues rockily, mostly because Nancy consistently expects Heylia to bail her out of all the jams she gets into.

In last Monday night’s episode, Nancy arrived at Heylia’s distribution center to pay for a large consignment. Nancy greets Heylia with, “Hello, how are you?” Heylia replies with a colorful satirical remark. Nancy is not amused and complains that Heylia never treats her like a normal person. Heylia takes a moment to seriously consider this remark and finally concludes, “What can I say, you bring out the ‘F*** You’ in me.”

Of all the clever and witty dialogue during the first three seasons, this pithy reply has struck the deepest chord in me. It seems to capture, with poetic simplicity, the complexity of black/white relationships. White peoples’ privilege drips and oozes off of them throughout their lives without their being aware of it. This understandably provokes irritation, anger, frustration, or rage on the part of people of color. But it is not just white privilege—e.g., the police assuming that Nancy’s teenage son’s drunken and destructive binge was a youthful indiscretion (bringing the son home at 4 AM and telling Nancy to make sure he doesn’t do it again)—that challenges the patience of people of color. It is also the deeply embedded, unconscious negative associations to “black” that we are taught all our lives by the dominant culture. The effects of such lessons have been clearly demonstrated by the Harvard Implicit Association Tests (www.implicit.harvard.edu). The IATs show that what we say we *believe* and how we *act* are most probably not the same. That is why most white people will feel completely sincere when they say they are not prejudiced but will demonstrate prejudicial behavior 24/7 without any sense of how they are doing it. Nancy has no idea that in her body language, her assumptions, her way of speaking, her style, and in her values, she is subtly expressing negative associations with blackness. Heylia feels it and unhappily puts up with it as the price of doing business.

For white people like myself, this is a highly problematic situation. I can only hope to try to assume as little as possible, listen a lot, speak carefully, and to challenge

white supremacy as much as possible. Racism is the foundation upon which our society has been built. To say, act or believe otherwise will justifiably provoke the “F*** You” in people of color.

* Listen to *Little Boxes* at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AvGd8vwWLP&feature=Playlist&p=E3BCFA2E0FAEE11&index=0>