

Summer 7-14-2018

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Recommended Citation

Barr, Marleen S. "Fighting the 'Cold Civil War' Or The Inadvertent Epic Involving Roseanne and Valerie and Samantha and Ivanka," Quail Bell Magazine, July 14, 2018, www.quailbellmagazine.com/the-real/essay-roseanne-and-other-banned-words

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Fighting the 'Cold Civil War' or The Inadvertent Epic Involving Roseanne and Valerie and Samantha and Ivanka

By Marleen S. Barr

QuailBellMagazine.com



The Roseanne Barr and Samantha Bee word usage debacle and Robert De Niro's subsequent F-word contribution to the locutionary fray is still raging. On June 18 a Broadway theater audience member held up a "Trump 2020" banner at a performance of De Niro's "Bronx Tale." Instead of being categorized as yesterday's news, this connected linguistic tale needs further telling insight.

Meaning depends on context. For example, consider the following sentence: I wish to discuss my late aunt. Without further information, it is impossible to know if the aunt is tardy or deceased. Context is all important in relation to the comments Roseanne Barr (who, thank god, is not related to me) and Samantha Bee made. Their comments were articulated within an unavoidable racial and gendered context which makes it possible to interpret them.

Epithets elicit different interpretations vis-à-vis who articulates them. Members of a group can direct epithets to their fellow group members. For example, science fiction writer Esther Friesner called one of her humorous books *Chicks in Chainmail*. If a male writer used the word “chicks,” his choice would not resonate as being funny. Marginalized groups can change the meaning of slurs from denigrating to empowering. Cool young Jews launched a magazine called *Heeb*. “Queer” became synonymous with empowerment.

Because she is not black, Roseanne had no license to tweet the following comment about Valerie Jarrett: “Muslim brotherhood & planet of the apes had a baby=vj.” Jarrett took no action to elicit Roseanne’s vitriol; Obama’s former advisor was merely existing while black. Bee, in contrast, had license to call Ivanka a “feckless” c-word because Bee, like Ivanka, is a woman. Ivanka elicited Bee’s comment; Ivanka took no action to prevent an atrocity from being committed against immigrant children. There is no word in the English language which is vile enough to describe Ivanka’s complacency. Roseanne’s language is racist; Bee’s language is justified. This observation has been expressed ad infinitum. My purpose is to place Roseanne and Bee’s comments within a new context, to theorize these comments in light of the fact that women are both the commenters and the objects of the comments.

When I heard Carl Bernstein tell Anderson Cooper on CNN that Americans are fighting a “cold Civil War,” it occurred to me to position what Roseanne and Bee said in terms of the eminent literary scholar Leslie Fiedler’s *The Inadvertent Epic: From Uncle Tom’s Cabin to Roots*. By discussing five literary works—Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Thomas Dixon’s *The Leopard’s Spots* and *The Clansman*, Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*, and Alex Haley’s *Roots*—Fiedler argues that these works form a continuing American narrative which positions black people as a means to discuss racialized American sexual conflict. Fiedler explains that “I want to discuss the treatment of what seems to me now a kind of communal or co-operative prose epic, dealing with the War Between the States, Reconstruction, and the Ku Klux Klan as well as certain ethnic and sexual conflicts in America which helped motivate those political events and were in turn exacerbated by them.” In other words, the five literary works involving blacks belong together under the rubric of cold Civil War ethnic and racial conflict.

Similarly, Roseanne and Bee’s comments belong together in that they are by and about women; the comments also involve ethnic and sexual conflict in America. Roseanne and Bee have articulated a communal epithet epic dealing with the antipathy between liberals and conservatives as well as American racial and sexual conflict. Trump both motivates and exacerbates the epithets. Fiedler describes a cold Civil War played out in a connected epic involving black literary protagonists. I describe a cold Civil War played out in connected short comments involving female speakers and female targets. Roseanne and Bee’s comments have been inadvertently (from the commenters’ viewpoint) juxtaposed and discussed in epic proportions.

Roseanne’s tweet is akin to the racist imagery in *King Kong*. When Jarrett responded with dignity by calling the tweet a “teaching moment,” it became clear that Roseanne’s words bounced back to reflect on her in that they made her appear as an appropriate candidate for inclusion in the Wicked Witch’s flying monkey attack troop. What is not so apparent is that, in addition to being racist, the comment is at once sexualized and feminized. Stating that Jarrett is the baby resulting from the Muslim Brotherhood copulating with *The Planet of the Apes*—what Roseanne specifically wrote as “=vj” -- refers to female

birth giving; it is Roseanne's Birther comment. Her "=vj" could be interpreted as meaning "equivalent to 'vagina.'" Since humans cannot reproduce with apes, Roseanne is authoring an alternative fact. Her tweet is antifeminist science fiction.

Bee's use of the c-word is inadvertently akin to Roseanne's tweet because that word, which is also a synonym of vagina, like birth, applies only to women. Bee is writing in response to Ivanka pictured with her son in her arms—a picture which is motherhood-sodden to the extent that it resonates as a twenty-first century version of a Renaissance painting depicting Mary holding the Baby Jesus. The most important motherhood question is as follows: why isn't the mother/child relationship between immigrants and their children as sacrosanct as the one between Ivanka and her son? Bee's language appropriately reflects her outrage in regard to the fact that Ivanka, Bee's fellow woman, is not taking action to help her fellow mothers. Ivanka at once pictures herself as an exalted Madonna and fails to try to make sure that the sanctity of the word "motherhood" applies to her fellow women who are immigrants. Sojourner Truth's racially charged question "ain't I a woman?" is applicable to the immigrant mothers' plights situated in relation to Ivanka's picture.

In the wake of the Roseanne and Bee pairing, Robert De Niro justifiably contributed to the cold Civil War by launching the F-bomb at Trump during the Tony Awards ceremony. His words are not part of the inadvertent epic Roseanne and Bee's comments form. The antipathy between De Niro and Trump is an altercation involving two men. When De Niro launches the F-bomb and then immediately proceeds to raise his clenched fists above his head, he is enacting male aggression. His man-spreading gesture, which falls outside of typical feminine bodily positioning, evokes another famous example of science fiction's depiction of apes. I refer to the opening scene of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* in which a chimp brandishes a bone while raising his arms over his head. De Niro and the ape are making the exact same masculine aggressive gesture.

Male aggression, unlike female aggression, is not taboo. Hence, Trump can get away with spewing racism and sexism in a manner analogous to Hawaii's erupting volcano and De Niro's words will provoke a discussion which is less epic than the one Roseanne and Bee generated.

Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice was a response to the sexual revolution. Roseanne and Valerie and Samantha and Ivanka is a feminized and connected salvo in the cold Civil War. It is time for liberals and conservatives to stop fighting and meet together in a contemporary version of Lee's surrender in the village of Appomattox Court House. The real fact is that all Americans do not reside in a science fiction world. All Americans reside on the planet of the humans, not The Planet of the Apes. When the president of the United States conducts himself with dignity and civility in terms of his words and his actions, the cold Civil War will be abated.

Unlike Kubrick's ape, we have the ability to stop screeching, unclench our fists, and put our weaponized bones down. All women have the ability to respect all of their fellow women in general--and all mothers in particular. Doing so would constitute an advertent new human epic.