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Black Narratives zine

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LOCAL MAGAZINE

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The articles will analyze different dimensions about the cultural, social and economic policies that revolve around the American Black community.

It will shed light on the obstacles African Americans must face in a society built upon systemic racism, consciously or unconsciously determined to not allow them to forget their Blackness.

The line between black and white yet stark in a minority Anglo society.

First, we will examine the recent phenomenon of Black Excellence, where the case of John Lewis will be presented followed by an analysis on the 'hunch' of Black exceptionalism.

Second, it will examine the three dimensions no person can escape and how they affect Black communities: Social, economic and political.

And finally, the perpetuation of racism through white culture appropriation will be illustrated throughout two phenomena: blackface and black fishing.



BLACK EXCELLENCE



JOHN LEWIS:

THE LASTING EFFECTS OF HIS WORK

By:Vanessa Keeley



Former Representative John Lewis was a perfect example of the power that those who fight can make a difference in the political world. In remembrance of him and what he had fought for, there is the Voting Rights Act that helps to strengthen the right to vote in our country. This is what John Lewis fought for throughout his political and non-political career. Though he is mostly remembered as a Representative for Georgia's 5th congressional district, John Lewis began his fight for political equality long before he took office.

John Lewis was born outside of Troy, Alabama during the period of segregation in the United States. John Lewis spent most of his childhood working to assist his parents who were sharecroppers. Share cropping was a system that was created in the South that allowed for portions of a farm to be rented out. As payment to the owners of the land, the renters would have to give a portion of their crop to the tenant.

As a young child, the combination of the struggle he saw his parents had and the wise words of Martin Luther King Jr. influenced him to become an advocate for equal rights in the United States.

Eventually in 1957, John Lewis left his hometown in Alabama and headed to Tennessee to attend a seminar. The seminar was taught about peaceful protest and the best ways to enact social change. Much like Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis practiced peaceful protests. Eventually, all that John Lewis had learned at the seminar was being practiced. He began to organize sit-ins that would protest segregated lunch counters. John Lewis would be arrested countless of times because of his protests. One of the most influential protests that Lewis participated in was the Freedom Rides of 1961. During these protests, African American men and women would sit in the front of the bus instead of sitting in the back,



which according to the law was where they should be. Another influential protest that John Lewis participated in was what is referred to as Bloody Sunday. On this day, there was a march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama on March 7, 1965. Once the protesters had reached the end of the bridge, protesters were beaten by police. John Lewis suffered from a fractured skull due to the attacks by the police and countless of others were injured as well. Though the protesters were beaten and arrested, they still achieved what they had wanted, which was to expedite the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Prior to the march in Alabama, John Lewis was also able to speak at the March on Washington in 1964. He was the youngest speaker at the event.

After the assassination of Martin Luther King, John Lewis continued the efforts to fight for equal voting rights and equality. In 1970, he became the director of the Voter Education Project (VEP). During his time at VEP, Lewis was able to help register millions of minority voters. In 1981, his political career began. In 1981, Lewis was elected to the Atlanta City Council and in 1986, he became a Representative for Georgia's 5th District. During his political career, John Lewis continued his work with voting rights. During his time in office, he was also able to witness multiple renewals of the Voting Rights Act and the eventual strike down of part of the law.

During his political career he won many awards and created a series of graphic novels about his work for civil rights during the movement.

John Lewis stayed a Representative of Georgia until his death in 2020 due to pancreatic cancer.

Since the death of John Lewis, there was a voting act introduced in honor of him. The Act was named the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act. The main goal of the act was to reinforce voting rights and try to prevent voter suppression in the U.S. Though it is not discussed, voter suppression continues to be a large issue in the United States still. The Act was passed in the House of Representatives with all Democrats voting in favor of the legislation, while the Republicans voted against. Unfortunately, the bill was not passed in the Senate and would not become law.

Though the bill was not passed, the work of John Lewis continues to linger in our politics today. John Lewis was able to foster a change in our country that was struggling to happen. Without the work of John Lewis, we may not have been where we are today. Lewis is a prime example of the positive effects of Black Excellence. His work influences many people to not let the walls built up against them. He was beaten not only by a system but by those who were against him. The work of John Lewis stands to be influential.



THE HUNCH OF BLACK EXCEPTIONALISM

By: Elisa Jiménez Calisti

Black Excellence, a term coined and used nowadays to not only express, but also shed light on the accomplishments and excellence obtained by the Black community, by Blacks within the American community.

The term Black Excellence has been given different definitions by different authors. For some it can be reduced to the single outstanding actions of a black person. Others, see it as an equation where the beneficial consequences befalling the achievements of a black person, consequently, lead to the benefit of the whole Black community. Nonetheless, there are also those who view it as a mentality, a way of life: “essentially promoting black self-love and solidarity while simultaneously acknowledging all the roadblocks placed in our way by systemic racism within America.” (Adeleye, 2019).

Martin Luther King, Beyonce... they all have carried very different roles and yet the weight on their shoulders bears a similarity. They can be seen as the very definition of Black Excellence. Symbols of a possibility. The possibility for Black people in a system structured to work against them, to thrive, to stand out.

However, perfection does not exist, and Black Excellence, despite its undeniable merits, is no exception. Therefore, how can Black Excellence, Black exceptionalism, harm Black people?

The idea behind the creation of Black Excellence, the proud empowerment of people of color in a society built upon racism, is good in nature. Change requires movements, the unison of voices that share a mindset and a will to fight against systemic illogical discrimination. Therefore, the problem is hidden in plain sight, as it does not lie with the idea behind Black Excellence, but with the consequences the name itself ‘excellence’ can lead to, as if requiring ‘exceptionalism’. Black *exceptionalism*.



A barrier can be created between what is deemed as normal, expected behavior within the white, Anglo community, while transforming into exceptional the same behavior with the sole distinction of the color of the person.

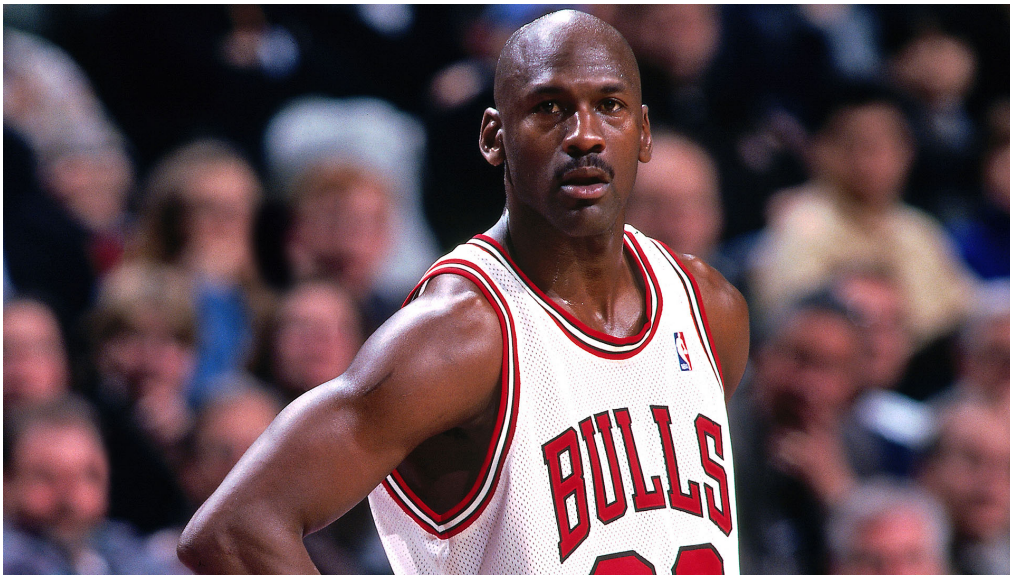
An article written by Nicolas Adeleye (Adeleye, 2019), encapsules this idea through the example of school enrollment. School enrolment, something considered normal and compulsory, is deemed excellent when referring to people of color. If going to school is presented as excellent amidst black people, then it can lead to situations where the train of thought a child might follow is: “well I’m normal, not excellent.” (Adeleye, 2019).

The portrayal of school enrollment as an accomplishment for the black community, feeds the wrongful mentality that school, the academic world, is a white kids world. By celebrating as an accomplishment, the enrollment of black children, the narrative of white superiority is being empowered, as white academic enrollment in not an exception, is normal. White people are cultured, educated, whilst the black community is uneducated.

The acceptance of this narrative, which sadly is the reality we still must face, where the black community is more uneducated than the white community due to a series of endemic social obstacles, can discourage the will to challenge the narrative and encourage the acceptance of their fate in a world that seems to reject them.

The treatment of black school enrollment as normal and expected, can strip away the white school enrollment superiority mentality and render it powerless, as it no longer bears a mark of distinction. Otherwise, it becomes an exception for black people and can be seen as such.

The bar of normalcy is raised for people of color in a society that already presents an obstacle. In this sense, black exceptionalism can be translated into a notion where only those within the black community who are educated, skilled... are not only the exception but also the desired goal, minimizing the valor and freedom that comes with normalcy and the right to be normal, to not be outstanding.



Is the black mother of four children, juggling jobs to make ends meet less exceptional than that who appears in magazines and whose achievements are celebrated within the black community? Could this not have the danger of suggesting that those whose achievements must be celebrated is exceptional and therefore, must not be a victim of racism? Are we not in danger of creating a linkage between racism and black exceptionalism?

Elijah McClain, Simone Biles... they are examples of how only when injustice strikes, and have been publicly labeled as a 'good black person', they must not be subject of discrimination. Their good actions are given as explanations of why no racist comment must befall their name. In the case of the Elijah McClain, killed by the police, it was after the death of George Floyd that voices were heard: "McClain was repeatedly described as a 'kind' and 'gentle' person who spent time at shelters caring for animals." (Asare, 2021)

While it is true and cannot be denied that these movements have helped raise important, ignored, inherent issues of the US' social construct, such as in this case, the yet existence of racism, there is a danger in defending the non-discrimination of a black person because he or she was good. It does not allow us to tackle the roots of racism, but barely scratch the surface.

Black exceptionalism can create requirements to be exceptional. This sentiment is reflected in the words used by the character Olivia Pope interpreted by Kerry Washington in the show Scandal: "You have to be twice as good as them to get half of what they have." (Asare, 2021).

Black exceptionalism encourages sacrifice. This can be both good and bad, as it gives hope to people from the Black community to defy history and the white social contract. Nonetheless, it has its negative consequences as, once again, it can demand sacrifice. What right do we have to demand exceptionalism to be seen, to be respected? What right do we have to demand children to work twice as hard to do get half as much? What right do we have to ask them to give up their normalcy to become excellent?

All in all, while it is true Black Excellence encourages the empowerment of Black people in a white built community, we need to be more aware in the manner we use this term, when we use it, and the links we might be creating. A state of constant consciousness is required.

It should not only encourage excellence, but also be a message to encourage black people to think of who they want to be and fight for that goal. Remind people that it is okay not to be exceptional, because having a normal life as a mother of four, is exceptional. Black Excellence should encourage black people to fight for their dreams, without conditioning what they should be and drawing lines between exceptionalism and normalcy. After all, what someone deems as excellent, is product of their own free will.



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S U C C E S S F U L B L A C K C O M M U N I T I E S

By Mariana Aboumrad

When a low-income neighborhood has been gentrified, most of the time it means that old buildings have been torn down, new residences have been built, big-name businesses have moved in, and demographics of the area have changed. The word “gentrification” has become a threat to multiple communities, it is not only about investments into neighborhoods. According to the Brookings Institute, it is a process that dislocates traditional low-income residents (generally, residents of color and minorities) and changes the collectivity of a neighborhood. There is a constant threat on people being pushed out of their homes with new housing policies and urban renewal planning. Gentrification may increase property values, raises rents and property taxes, making longtime residents move out of the neighborhood, leading to more whites and fewer Black residents. This means that there is less wealth in the hands of Black Americans who already just own around 10% of the wealth of white Americans on average.

A lot of people may think that the gentrification process is inevitable to have an economic growth. However, there are ways to reduce and avoid the effects of gentrification and keep longtime minority residents from being displaced.

Successful black communities do exist without gentrification. Take a look at this article to see which are those communities that have improved and managed to succeed without having a displacement of black people!





According to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, they have found some historic Black Neighborhoods that celebrate Black Excellence. In addition, some of the wealthiest African American suburbs have been qualified in Black Enterprise. Because of racist actions and gentrification, black cultural identity significantly affects communities, however, some neighborhoods continue to rebuild and evolve.

Greenwood/Black Wall Street in Tulsa, Oklahoma

This neighborhood is well known for its Black business districts. The district of Greenwood is a self-sufficient society where Black businesses triumph. Historically, African Americans worked mainly as servants in Tulsa and in 1905, African Americans acquired the land. But in 1921, the race massacre took a heavy financial toll on African Americans. For improvement, the business area known as Black Wall Street contained a business college and reopened offices of the African American newspaper, they promoted grocery stores, barbershops, doctors, and estate agents to open their own business. They also included political participation to addressing African American culture and working on creating a harmonious race relation.

DeSoto Texas

This suburb is owned by African Americans, where approximately 50,000 people reside. It's interesting to see here that 50% of the population being married, 90% are high school graduates, and over 30% have a bachelor's degree or higher. In this case it very low violent crimes and very low property crimes and has a low cost of living index. This means that purchasing power will go a lot further in Desoto.

U Street-Washington, D.C.

Historically known as "Black Broadway", it is the epicenter for Black Excellence and talent. U street is the place of Black, social, cultural, and economic prosperity. There are distinguished entertainers, educator and artists who have shaped its history into what is known today. Black influence has had a great impact in these communities and segregation and gentrification has almost disappear.

Tenth Street Historic District—Dallas, Texas

This neighborhood was situated in a white community called Oak Cliff, however, the Tenth Street District grew to become a leading Black community after the Civil War because of the causes of segregation. The effects of demolition, construction, and integration caused a lot of people to relocate, making the cultural influence a great impact with them.

Black Beverly Hills- California

This suburb is in the Ladera Heights and View Park-Windsor Hills. The area is famous for its many wealthy and successful African American residents that include doctors and attorneys making it one of the most coveted black suburbs in the country. It has low violent crime rates, but the cost of living is very high. The City-Data reports a small population of only 6,500, nearly 100% have high school diplomas, 44% are married, and nearly 54% have a bachelor's degree or higher.

These are multiple neighborhoods and suburbs that were able to have an economic growth an improve their socio-economic factors. However, it is mentioned before in the article that often trying to do this leads to gentrification and will have negative effects. Black Americans have been left behind in economic recovery. A lot of communities with high violent crime rates, low incomes, high unemployment, low educational lever find difficulties to improve their quality of life that do not have repercussions.

WHAT ARE THE KEYS TO SUCCESS FOR BLACK COMMUNITIES WITHOUT GENTRIFICATION?

By Mariana Aboumrad

GET TO KNOW YOUR NEIGHBORS

Getting to know your neighbors and speaking to people in the streets can build strong connections and alliances. There need to be an open communication about the topic of gentrification. If gentrifiers are moving to your community and you are afraid of being pushed, you should open your options and talk to them. It is a complicated thing, willing to open yourself, thinking that talking between people can change the fact of being gentrified. However, these connections are the best root for building a community. Not only will this fight gentrification, but you will get to know the interest and goals of the people that surround you and live next to you.

SAVING THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

Parks, schools, libraries, roads and community centers should not be privatized. This is a way of connecting with neighbors and activist to protect and expand public areas.

For example, Paula Segal of NYC started 596 Acres after getting a map that showed all the vacant public in Brooklyn. Today this area empowers residents to be responsible and act in public land. Most cities have a public land trust where it can be a friendly space and be usable for multiple events.

Residents can come together and by out their privately owned companies or systems, for example the water system.



Although successful black communities do exist, we find that there is a lot of trouble succeeding while evading gentrification. Some questions came up: How can neighborhoods encourage growth but also provide a sense of continuity? How can over-taxed city planning departments accommodate the forces of change while still respecting local communities and their cultures? What are the best ways to fight for income equality, racial justice, and inclusionary housing?

Here are some of the key aspects for solutions that could work in black communities.



DEMAND AFFORDABLE HOUSING

It is about the systemic economic violation based on decades of racist housing policies that has denied people of color to have access to fair and equal housing. Protect the existing affordable housing and demand that newly built housing is affordable is key to fight gentrification. An analysis found that resident's incomes in Los Angeles, New York and San Francisco mostly go to rents. The U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development consider housing to be unaffordable when its costs exceed 30% of family's income. Rising rents in the United States go with hand on growing urban inequality and the widening gap between the demand and supply of affordable housing. Demand that any new development should allocate a certain number of units for affordable housing, and they accommodate the change of its definition of "affordable". The city should acquire the neighborhood-level median incomes and give priority to the ones who make less than 60% of median income, especially people who are homeless or at risk of losing their homes.

Organized renters and working-class homeowners' associations, neighborhoods associate and activist groups. This also includes political education to challenge the ideology that homes are just a commodity to be bought and sold without thinking of the consequences of what happens to the relations and social fabric of a neighborhood.

CONFRONT ELECTED OFFICIALS

Part of securing safe housing often involves fighting for legislation that requires input when it comes to city planning or equitable use. A good example for national recourse is “Right to the City Alliance”, its mission is to stop abruptly the displacement of low-income people, Black, Indigenous, people of color, LGBTQ communities, and youth of color, and protect while expanding affordable housing with a boarder movement to build democratic, just, and sustainable communities. Round together local organizations, policies, and advocacy campaigns to build a strong movement for inclusive, healthy housing and community development. Better representation and increasing voter participation come in hand as well, representation that is responsive to their needs and interests will have a better way of economic mobility. Even though there are multiple voter suppression laws, there are various pro-voter reforms that lawmaker can adopt to empower more people of color to participate in the democratic process, ensuring that their voices are heard.



The real way to achieve success is to organize people so they can collectively respond to real estate developers, finance capital, and elect officials who are more interested in keeping work-class people in their homes than in building new real estate.



UNION REPRESENTATION

Union representation can raise minimum wages and improve economic outcomes to African Americans. Union membership is also linked tie intergenerational mobility through higher earning and stronger benefits. Public sector workers, domestic workers and agricultural workers do not have haggling rights under the National Labor Relations Act, these occupations ae disproportionately held by blacks. By increasing union representation and improving worker power can lead to a positive income growth. This potential solution would mean to have a co-enforcement, where agencies like unions and religious organizations would partner up to enforce wage and other labor standards.

Why Vote?

BY: VANESSA
KEELEY

Growing up, we were often taught the importance of voting. One of the first things that we learn about in history, is how our “great democracy” was built. We rebelled from the English who were suppressing us and taxing us unfairly. We stood for equality and change that we wanted to occur. We decided that a democracy was the best way to stay away from a ruler, which is what we had with the English. In school we were constantly told that we are “the land of the free” and that we have a right to choose what happens to us. We are constantly told the government is for the people. But it has shown that it is not always for the people.

There are plenty of instances in our country where the right to vote was not for everyone. Specifically, minorities in this country have not been able to vote just like white men have in this country. The fight has been fought and now everyone can vote. But even with the power to vote, we often feel our voices and ideals aren’t heard. The change we want to occur doesn’t always happen. So why vote even when we feel our voices aren’t being heard?

Even though we often feel our voices aren’t heard, there is still power behind the vote that we place. There is power in numbers. If a politician sees a large support for one topic, they are going to want to push for the topic that has high support. The more people support an issue, the more a politician is going to want to support that idea. Especially because they won’t make it into office without our vote

A politician needs votes, and without those votes they will not make it into office. The politician may not follow your ideas after winning, you will have the option to vote them out. Which can help to make the change occur.

If you don’t vote for the politician who is trying to make your country better, that lessens the chance of the politician winning. The politician you vote for could enact the change that needs to occur in your country. Without your vote, that politician may not have a chance to get into office.



YOUR VOICE YOUR VOTE

Without that politician in office, you may not get the much-needed attention you want for a certain topic. The legislation that may not seem very important to you, could help you in the long run. Without voting that person in, the change cannot occur.

For example, you have legislation concerning healthcare, COVID-19 relief, abortion laws, immigration laws, and other important topics that can easily affect you or someone you know. The two majority parties that we have in our system each have their own views on what should be done. You have the chance to vote the person with the views closest to you. Without your vote, you may lose something that is important to either you or someone you know.

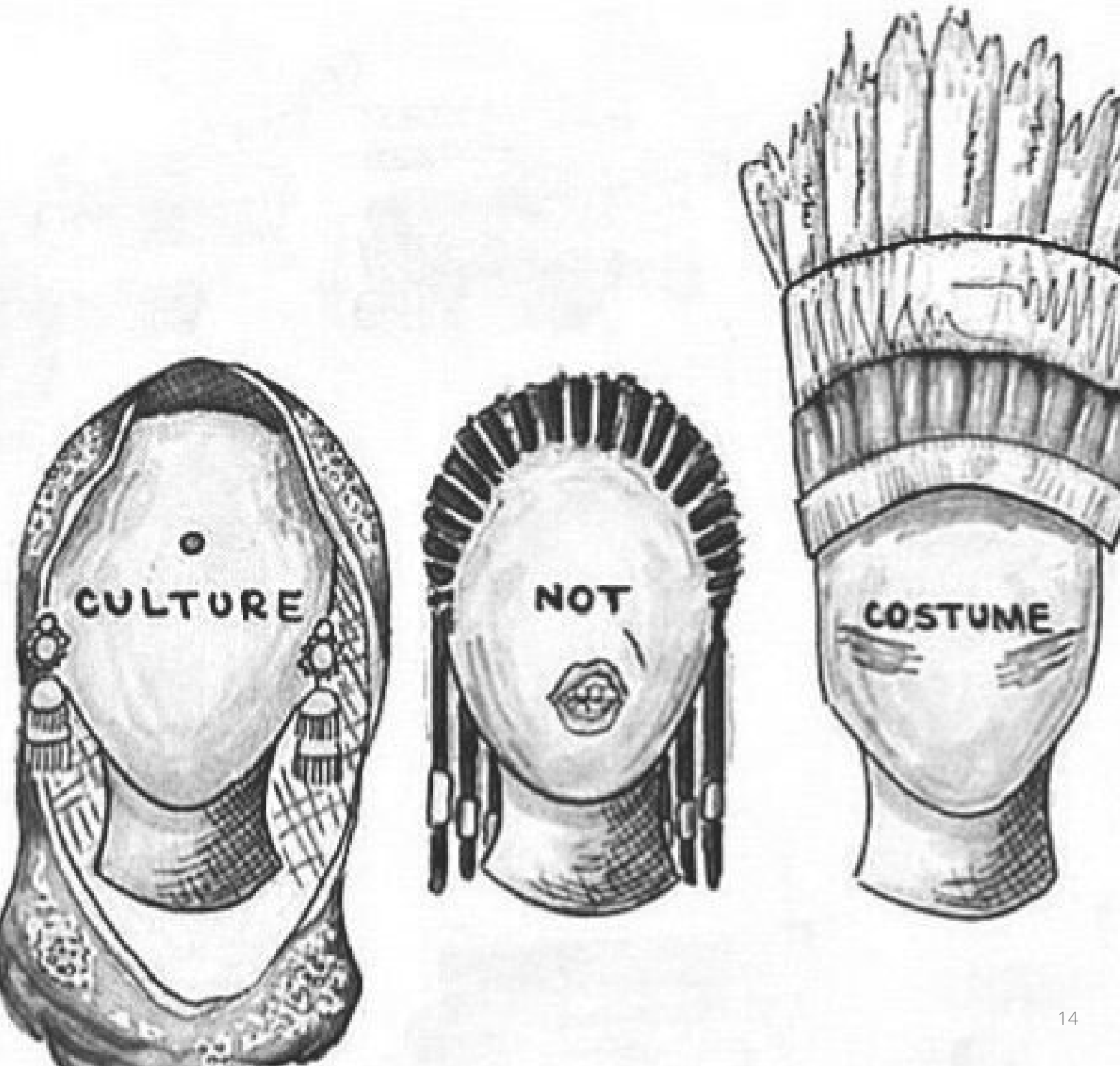
There are many different things that can be affected using your vote. Your everyday life can be affected by the results of voting. The importance of voting does only lie on the federal level. The importance of voting also lies within your community. Your vote in your community can be even more important. The voting within a community can directly affect the population and yourself.

Often things like school funding, taxes, and jobs can be directly affected by legislation in a community. A lot of the time, you can vote on the amount of funding that goes to your education system. If you know that your school district needs more money, you can vote to have more money put into the funding. You can also vote on your taxes. If you want to change your taxes and how much you pay, you can vote to change that. If you were to vote, you would have a higher chance of having a politician who supports your topics. If you want a change in this country or in your community, the only way to really make the change needed. So even when you feel your vote doesn't matter, it does.

Although you may feel discouraged from going to vote, your vote does matter. A lot of the time, we can get frustrated with the way the government is functioning. We all have things we want to change in our country, so why not use your power to vote? Your vote can invoke the change you hope can occur. Your vote can help not only yourself, but the thousands and even millions that need that change.

Even though it often doesn't feel like it, change can occur, and it starts with you. Your vote may not seem important because plenty of others vote. But your vote is important because you could be the one vote that allows for change to occur in the country. The country isn't for the people unless you use your right to vote.

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION





THE NARRATIVE OF COLOR: A TALE OF WHITE CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

By: Elisa Jiménez Calisti

The present article will travel through the origin and end of blackface, the emergence of blackfishing and the perpetual connector: racism through cultural appropriation.

Blackface is an expression of racism through cultural appropriation, starred by white performers who used burnt cork or shoe polish to paint their faces black and used other traits to adopt: "exaggerated features" (Clark, 2021) in order to represent a dehumanized, African American. A form of soft power exerted throughout a negative characterization of a stereotype (ignorant, sexual, criminal...) to simplify a threat and reinforce a century's old idea and fable of white supremacy.

The strength of such fable however, required the cooperation of the Black community, who participated in Black minstrel shows. A requisite, in order to be part of the entertainment community and therefore, despite presenting their characters in a more eloquent way than white performers, submitting to the new form of racism.

Black minstrel shows found their apex, ironically, after the American Civil War (where slavery was one of the main drivers) and into the 20th century, when African Americans were demanding full citizenship. A new form of racism through comedy to maintain alive the social division between black and white. While, distancing itself from the traditional forms of racism (slavery for example) which could no longer be publicly supported or accepted.

They became an industry, a form of entertainment. The media played its magnifying role and spread it from the stage to the theatres, radio and television.

It can even be found in the origins of the loving cartoon Micky Mouse, its white gloves (used by blackface performers), and its "Old Zip Coon" tune (Radio, 2019).

Then, came the civil rights movement and blackface disappeared from the surface of American culture. As slavery before, it became a taboo. Nonetheless, as highlighted by Alexis Clark, the practice of blackface is still alive today: "...wearing blackface to dress up as famous African Americans during Halloween remains an ongoing issue" (Clark, 2021).

Blackface would eventually evolve to what is now known as blackfishing, helping keep the seed of racism alive through the perpetuation of cultural appropriation.



What is blackfishing? According to a WNYC podcast: "Blackfishing is the relatively recent online phenomenon, particularly on Instagram, where influencers and other online personalities are using fashion and tans and other physical features to present themselves as possibly black or biracial or racially ambiguous when they are, in fact, white." (Radio, 2019)

The pattern goes on as a new form of racism through a more subtle black cultural appropriation takes hold of society in a world where whites consciously or unconsciously seem unable to detach themselves from the narratives of color. On the one hand, wearing big round earrings (a fashion statement brought to life by Latinos and Blacks) seems harmless, complimentary even. However, blackfishing speaks of a white fascination with blackness without having to suffer racial discrimination. A white, ambiguously pretending to be black and misleading the public into believing they are black. This leads to a situation where a white is posing as a reference of black culture. A white who never had to understand what it is to be black.

The White community shares a centuries old tradition of black cultural appropriation. Intentionally or not, we are all part of the same crime, the perpetuation of racism and asymmetry of black and white. Blackface used black paint and other traits in order to present a stark difference between the white and black community. Even when black African Americans painted their face black and performed to a white audience, they still had to mask themselves for the white audience, even for the black audience. Their race was still part of the show, an essential part of the show.

Blackfishing does the same, perhaps the message is more subliminal, even an un-intentional appropriation of black features, but they are still whites performing as blacks. The line is still being drawn, not allowing them to forget their black origins, and the fact that these features, are only successful when wore by white actors, models and influencers, modern performers.

Blackface and blackfishing are two different and yet similar ways to maintain alive the black inferiority-white superiority narrative. The media has made the issue and history of African American racism international. Now, the whole world is both victim and perpetrator of the black/white division.

All in all, in colonial times, the justification given to slavery was one of morality, the need to save the inferior black beings. What is our excuse now?

Education has taught us to treat and see everyone the same. Education, cartoons, TV shows, the fashion industry... has taught us otherwise. The difference between blackface and blackfishing, is that blackface was less subtle in hiding its racist origins, whereas blackfishing is a continuation of a racist narrative through cultural appropriation operating from the sidelines, silently conditioning and dividing our minds into black and white culture and trends.

Trends, that can generally only reach importance when made popular by a white reference, impersonating something that was never ours. However, in order to detach ourselves from this common practice we must ask ourselves why it exists in the first place. Do we fear what a black rise in power would do to our social, political and economic status?

Generally, we fear change because it can bring unknown consequences. It can disrupt the chain of power to which we have grown comfortable. It can lead to questions such as, do I have this economic advantage because more than half of the population has to overcome systemic obstacles? And fear the answer. What will happen when this advantage is taken away?

Rationality makes us argue in favor of racial equality. Fear of change, makes us passively watch from the sidelines as we wait for others to do what we know must be done, but cannot bring ourselves to do.



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