

Blackface

HISTORY AND REFORM

I was looking at my high school yearbook, where I appeared as student body president, in my natural blackface — an actual eight-inch Afro, denim Levi's shirt, 50ls, and black steel-toed Vibram-soled combat boots: the stereotypical '70s high school radical.

There was a war on, and I was an enemy of the state, being against the Vietnam War, police brutality, racism, sexism and genocide, to name a few archetypal issues of concern.

The weapons I advocated were empowerment and education. Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. had been killed by enemy forces. I advocated a high school version of the Panthers' 10 Point Program: free contraceptives, relevant and practical sex education, drug awareness and treatment, draft counseling, ethnic studies, underground newspapers. That probably generated an FBI file that I've never seen but have heard about through an attorney friend.

With Ronald Reagan as governor of California, those reforms were too radical for 1972, though 20 years later they did implement the free condoms to prevent AIDS. Many of the Panthers' programs became free and reduced lunch, Meals on Wheels, WIC, senior programs and ethnic studies as examples of long-overdue ideas ahead of their time.

To my mind an archetype is a real human example of excellence, not simply a mythic or psychological symbol. After meditation, thought and action, you adapt the characteristics for personal use and implementation. Avoiding the mistakes of your role models, actualizing the strengths and improving on them.

Historically, watermelons came from Africa. Farmers would grow them, travelers would find them a useful natural canteen for crossing deserts before there was an REI, or Costco. Some of the oldest recipes for chicken — fried, curried or roasted — come from Egypt and India, ancient strongholds of complex urban civilizations built by people of color. So the demeaning blackface stereotype of Blacks eating fried chicken and watermelon actually have ancient archetypal roots.

Imitating demeaning racial stereotypes like appearing in artificial blackface, was a mean meme in the 19th century, just as it is today in the 21st. It is an example of the permanence of things like racism, some of which were enshrined in law, custom and curriculum. Even if you think that honoring a Black doctor, by wearing blackface and a lab coat, or a black musical genius by moonwalking with a wig, you're wrong.

However, emulating archetypes of excellence, in actual word and deed, is far better.

Emulate Black doctors, who work to eliminate health disparities. Emulate Black musicians who work for social justice. Lawyers, who work on disproportionate sentencing in the prison-industrial complex. Teachers, who eliminate achievement gaps. Actors, directors, producers, who tell hidden stories.

Musicians, artists, poets, writers, sanitation engineers, custodians, soldiers, nurses, astronauts, all exist as archetypal realities to inspire excellence, in a way that applying blackface does not. Blackface you can wipe off after Halloween. Some of our commitment goes deeper than cosmetics and stereotypes.

Why not apply Black thought? What have you done for the least of these, who suffer because they love what deceives them? Inspire them with real people who overcame seemingly impossible situations.

The radical Republicans, (way left of Lincoln, who ran on a pro-slavery platform) were considered radical because they believed in freeing the slaves immediately, giving them full citizenship and voting rights, education, compensation for their past labor and ending discrimination and white supremacy. They were largely white, though there were people of color like Frederick Douglass numbered among them.

It is a thin line between radical and common sense when you attempt to restore human beings to their natural state of freedom.

More than a century and a half later, white supremacy is still in the White House.

White supremacy follows a rule of law that goes against the traditions followed for thousands of years on this continent. We built pyramids and bridges, not walls and borders. If we had to cross through burning deserts in our quest for freedom, we were welcomed. The law should equally support poor people who are from this continent, as well as rich people from other continents, on the basis of what they can contribute to a healthier society.

That America doesn't exist yet. Archetypically, complex multiracial societies have existed on this continent before. Perhaps, when people stop covering up their skin with blackface, let the sun of justice and understanding kiss it, we'll have a different world emerge from beneath the paint.

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