



Opinion



BLACK HISTORY MONTH

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Stereotypes and the Black American

We Need Good Vibes to Promote Racial Harmony

By YUGEN RASHAD
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Most Americans want to be understood. Even among the different races, we need good vibes that will promote racial harmony. We realize the vision that

people, regardless of gender, class, or race, deserve to be accorded human respect and dignity.

But for many black Americans, the mass media has a predilection for broadcasting negative images to the rest of society, leaving more questions, then answers. Let's take what is often referred to as minstrelsy, or the negative portrayal of blacks.

The black image has yet to overcome the stigma of the slavemaster's entertainer. History reveals a time during Reconstruction when blacks were adrift, caught between cultures, discouraged, on the one hand to put on full citizenship, while on the other yearning for autonomy. This internal war often meant that blacks wanted to appear less threatening to the populace, following such tumultuous times and plantation life and the Civil War.

What followed was a drive to be a "good" neighbor and to inch closer to the idea that America was a welcome place. The former slave did whatever necessary to comply with the standards of the day, which usually meant second-class citizenship.

However, there was a segment who sought to capitalize on an opportunity. Traveling with bands of musicians, magicians, and circus acts, the nomadic black entertainer announced to

the world he was up for the task. Dancing in tap shoes with faces covered over with black shoe polish, these minstrel shows, as they were called, made big money.



Yugen Rashad

Many blacks to this day are chagrined at the notion that some would partake in such a disgraceful display. Yet, the tears of the "clown," as the lyric to the song goes, were often shed in secret. The public would only see the jovial, smiling black entertainer in character, pleasing the crowd with shuffling feet in a display of lilt and grace, in tap shoes and tails.

Let's look at it from a different point of view. Some say this nomenclature continues to this day, with many blacks shuffling to keep their positions at work, to gain a stronghold in the corporate world, and the like. Clearly, this perpetuates the age-old stereotypes of black Americans as the go-along, get-along, with the smile and compliant visage. But contrary to myth, there's a vibrant, fully developed being, yearning for a break out moment. Perhaps blacks have overcome the stigma of

negative stereotypes, and can now honor the valor of the brave men and women who trailblazed a concept that up to this point was only remembered with scorn. "Bamboozled," the latest film by Spike Lee is an example. Why, even the making of a film with buffoonery signals a change in how blacks

view this period in history. In fact, the industry's black actors advocates screenwriters seek to increase awareness by their willingness to accept this historic work. And history shows that the "masks," or images of the past weren't necessarily worn out of fear, but instead demonstrated a quality of

adaptability. Adjusting to social changes is nothing new for blacks in this country. From slavery to Hollywood, ingenuity and wit lay at the foundation of strategies to gain freedom and justice and an attitude that suggests, "I can do this," and still be a human being of soul and integrity. We must learn to celebrate the strength of the human character, and strive not to accept the convenience of blame.

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