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Bernie Foster
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Christen McCurdy
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Patricia Irvin
Graphic Designer

Monica J. Foster
Seattle Office Coordinator

Susan Fried
Photographer



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415 N. Killingsworth St.
P.O. Box 5455
Portland, OR 97228

Telephone (503) 285-5555
Fax: (503) 285-2900

info@theskanner.com

www.TheSkanner.com

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Opinion

A More Diverse Congress, a More Perfect Union?

The 116th Congress, sworn in on January 3, is the most diverse our nation has ever seen. There are more women — 102 — than ever before. More members of the Congressional Black Caucus — 55 — than ever before. Indeed, a former Congressional Black Caucus intern, Lauren Underwood (D-IL) is part of the incoming first-year class. At 32, she is the youngest Black woman to serve.

This Congress includes the first Native American woman, two Muslim women, openly gay representatives, and others. Much of this diversity was displayed at the ceremonial swearing-in of the Congressional Black Caucus, an inspirational event that preceded the official swearing-in on Capitol Hill. There, as I listened to speeches by the top Congressional Democrats — incoming speaker Nancy Pelosi (CA), incoming Majority leader Steny Hoyer (MD), and incoming Whip James Clyburn (SC), I was awash in hope and optimism. These leaders, along with outgoing Congressional Black Caucus Chairman Cedric Richmond (LA) and incoming Chair Karen Bass (CA) spoke of challenge, struggle, and optimism and focused on possibilities.

As I listened to them I could not help but think of the poet Langston Hughes, and his poem “Let America Be America Again.” Written in 1935,



Julianne Malveaux
NNPA Columnist

the poem was first published in *Esquire Magazine* in 1936. Though Hughes did not consider it one of his favorites, it captures the duality of our nation, the marked difference between our nation’s soaring establishing rhetoric and the stark reality that many

“No freedom in this homeland of the free, but this Congress offers freedom possibilities

experience. In the words of Malcolm X, it is the difference between the American dream and the American nightmare. Here is what Langston Hughes writes in his poem:

“Let America be America again. Let it be the dream it used to be. Let it be the pioneer on the plain Seeking a home where he himself is free. (America never was America to me.) Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed — Let it be that great strong land of love Where never kings

connive nor tyrants scheme That any man be crushed by one above. (It never was America to me.) O, let my land be a land where Liberty Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath, But opportunity is real, and life is free, Equality is in the air we breathe.”

(There’s never been equality for me, Nor freedom in this “homeland of the free.”)

No freedom in this homeland of the free, but this Congress offers freedom possibilities. It offers the possibility of fixing the Voting Rights Act, even as the Supreme Court has attempted to erode voting rights, even as at least two elections were stolen in 2018, those of Stacey Abrams in Georgia and Andrew Gillum in Florida.

This Congress offers freedom possibilities in resisting the insanity of a “wall” that the Great Negotiator (and purported author of *The Art of the Deal*) swore that Mexico was paying for. Not. This Congress offers freedom possibilities in its efforts to preserve the Affordable Health Care Act and to move us to Medicare for all. This colorful Congress (the pictures tell it all) offers a sharp contrast to the dismal (as in grey and navy suits) set of Republicans, overwhelmingly white and male, and overwhelmingly staid.

It’s not about MAGA (Make America Great Again), it’s about MAF, or Make America

Fair. This is what Congressman James Clyburn shared when he spoke at the ceremonial swearing-in.

He opened with the words of French historian Alexis Tocqueville, who observed when visiting this country: “the greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults.”

Clyburn went on to list the many ways our nation has attempted to self-correct, from the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation to the Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* decision declaring “separate but equal” to be “inherently unequal.”

Clyburn talked about the Great Society legislation, another of our nation’s attempts at self-repair, and he concluded by saying that, “America does not need to be made great again, she is already great. Our challenge is to make that greatness apply fairly and equitably to all of our citizens.”

Can this diverse new Congress make our nation fair for many who have never experienced our nation in the way it is supposed to be? In the words of Langston Hughes, “It never was America to me.”

We’ve come a long way since he wrote his 1935 poem, but we still have so much to do. After these last two dystopian years, this new Congress offers us many possibilities.

May they manifest!

LOOKING BACK: In 2018, ‘Living While Black’ Stories Exploded on Social and Mainstream Media

Whether it was sitting at a Starbucks in Philadelphia, sleeping at college or simply walking to one’s apartment in one’s own building, a major social media trend emerged in 2018. That trend was: Documenting bias and micro-aggressions that would later be featured in mainstream media.

Much of what was documented was recording by the object so many have with them 24/7: Their cell phone. The wave of incidents documented was not new — but the media attention on such stories along with the responses that have followed signals a cultural shift that’s likely to last for years to come.

There were multiple incidents. Below are six that made headlines and garnered widespread media attention:

In April in Oakland, California, Michelle Snider posted a YouTube video of Jennifer Schulte calling the police on her and her husband Kenzie Smith. Schulte dialed 911 because she was upset they were



Lauren Victoria Burke
NNPA Columnist

BBQ’ing in a public park. The story quickly went viral and Schulte was tagged as “BBQ Betty.”

In May in Connecticut, Sarah Braasch called the police on Yale graduate student Lolade Siyonbola. The problem? after she fell asleep in a common room in her dorm. When police arrived, Siyonbola ran the conversation live on her Facebook Live.

In May in Philadelphia, two men, Donte Robinson and Rashon Nelson, were arrested at a Starbucks after an employee called the cops on them as they waited for a business meeting to begin. The multi-billion-dollar coffee chain would later close all of its stores to conduct training for all their employees regarding racial bias.

In August in Madison, Wis-

consin, Shelia Stubbs, who is the only African American on the 37-member Dane County Board of Supervisors, was campaigning in her district when someone called the police.

“The national political environment has become contentious with President Trump’s relentless focus on vilifying and stereotyping minorities

In December in New Jersey, Andrew Johnson, a Black high school wrestler, was compelled to have an impromptu pre-match haircut after a referee with a racist incident in his past decided Johnson’s hair violated the rules. The referee, Alan Maloney, was

later fired.

In late December, a security guard at a DoubleTree Hotel called the police on Jermaine Massey as he used a phone in a lobby. Two employees were fired because of the incident.

It was likely not coincidental that such incidents have spiked on social media and in mainstream news during the presidency of Donald Trump.

The national political environment has become contentious with President Trump’s relentless focus on vilifying and stereotyping minorities, particularly Mexican immigrants, while at the same time failing to quickly and affirmatively denounce racism and xenophobia.

Hate crimes along with a resurgence of white supremacist groups have been recorded by the Southern Poverty Law Center and other hate watchdog organizations. The incidents have highlighted the power of social media a few years after the birth of Black Lives Matter which also featured the power of social media content.