



DPAC August Newsletter

When a Costume Becomes a Classroom: Turning Cultural Offense into Cultural Education

By Edward Chisolm

Sometimes an offensive image can become a portal to a much larger conversation.

Recently, Target removed a children's Halloween costume after concerns were raised that its imagery evoked the painful history of blackface and minstrel caricatures. The company apologized and acknowledged that the product should not have made it through its approval process. Removing the costume was appropriate. But the larger issue should not disappear when the costume disappears from the shelves. Moments like this invite us not only to confront offensive imagery, but also to examine the history behind it and celebrate the culture such imagery has attempted to diminish.

We should resist explaining every incident of this kind simply as ignorance. Blackface, minstrelsy, and racial caricatures are not obscure subjects. When recognizable imagery passes through the designers, buyers, marketers, and approval systems of a major corporation, we should ask: How did no one with the knowledge, judgment, or authority to stop it succeed in doing so? The same question arose when a video shared by the President of the United States depicted former President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama as apes—drawing upon one of the oldest and most dehumanizing stereotypes directed at people of African descent. Whether such imagery appears on a store shelf or a social-media account, dismissing it as a mistake, joke, or oversight does not erase its history or harm.

History reminds us why these images matter. America's "Peculiar Institution" of slavery required more than chains, plantations, and laws; it required a story that portrayed Africans and their descendants as intellectually, culturally, and morally inferior. That story helped rationalize treating human beings as property and profiting from their labor. After slavery, blackface minstrelsy and racial caricatures continued to depict Black people as ignorant, childish, lazy, dangerous, or merely comical. During segregation, such images helped normalize unequal citizenship and the denial of human dignity. They were never harmless entertainment.

That history is precisely why contemporary images resembling those caricatures deserve scrutiny. We do not have to claim that everyone involved intended a racist outcome to recognize the tradition from which the imagery comes. People and institutions should know better, and we should expect better. Yet accountability need not be the end of the conversation; it can be the beginning of another one.

When controversy captures public attention, we can move beyond explaining what is wrong with a caricature and begin teaching the truth about the people behind it. We can move from offense to education and from caricature to culture. One of the most important truths we can teach is simple: Black history did not begin with slavery.

Before the slave ships, there was Africa. There were civilizations, governments, systems of commerce, scholars, artisans, builders, farmers, languages, spiritual traditions, and complex communities. Mali, Songhai, Kush, Nubia, and the centers of scholarship associated with Timbuktu represent only portions of a much larger African story.

Africans brought to the Americas were dispossessed of their freedom, but not of their humanity, history, or identity. Even under unimaginable conditions, elements of African culture survived and evolved through music, food, language, spirituality, storytelling, family traditions, resistance, and community life. Across the Caribbean, Latin America, North America, and beyond, those expressions became part of the extraordinary story of the African Diaspora. It is a story of oppression, but also of survival, creativity, achievement, resistance, and cultural continuity.

This is where an offensive Halloween costume can unexpectedly become a classroom. We can teach about African civilizations, the African Diaspora, and Pan-African thought. We can introduce another generation not only to Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey, but also to Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, Mary McLeod Bethune, Amy Jacques Garvey, and countless other women and men whose contributions deserve greater recognition.

Most importantly, we can help young people understand that their history did not begin with their oppression. There is a profound difference between teaching children that their ancestors were slaves and teaching them that their ancestors were people who were enslaved. One description begins identity with bondage; the other recognizes humanity, culture, history, and identity before bondage. That is more than semantics. It determines where we begin the story. Marcus Garvey captured the stakes: "A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots."

This is why organizations such as the Diaspora Pan Africanism Center (DPAC) choose to pick up this work. The mission is larger than responding to the next offensive costume, advertisement, or racial controversy. It is about education, preservation, celebration, and connection. Mary McLeod Bethune declared, "I leave you a thirst for education. Knowledge is the prime need of the hour." DPAC seeks to nurture that thirst by creating opportunities to explore the histories and cultures of Africa and the African Diaspora, connecting generations, and helping young people understand the shoulders upon which they stand.

This work is also about cultural self-determination. For too much of history, people of African descent have been viewed through lenses created by others. Others created the caricatures, wrote many textbooks, determined which figures deserved attention, and decided where Black history should begin. Cultural institutions allow African-descended people to research, preserve, interpret, and tell their own stories. This does not mean replacing one distorted history with another. History should be pursued honestly, including its achievements, complexities, contradictions, and pain. But people must have a meaningful role in telling their own story.

Soon, this particular costume will disappear from public conversation and another controversy will take its place. We should not allow the educational opportunity to disappear with it. We can demand accountability and educate at the same time. We can challenge racist imagery while celebrating African identity. We can replace caricature with culture and transform an offensive moment into an opportunity for learning.

Those who sought to dehumanize African people attempted to tell the world who we were. Today, we can tell our own story. And as Kwame Nkrumah reminded the world at Ghana's independence, "Our independence is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of the African continent." That Pan-African vision calls us to connect knowledge with freedom and cultural identity with collective liberation. That is why this work matters—and why DPAC chooses to pick it up not simply when controversy knocks on the door, but every day.

African cultural identity should never be defined by a costume someone else created. It is a heritage to be studied, celebrated, preserved, and passed forward.