

THIS TYPE OF ISH HAPPENS

EVERYDAY.

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I Wore Blackface for Zulu, but I Think Zulu Should Change.

New Orleans is a city hemmed in by tradition. The way we have always done things can border on the sacred, and anyone brave enough to ask why or suggest change is in danger of being run out of town by a pitchfork mob.

After more than a century the city decided that it was time to pull the curtains on Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis and PGT Beauregard. In this case the mob

circled their Confederate heroes, and replaced their pitchforks with

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automatic weapons. They camped out and marked their territory with Rebel flags, but they couldn't stop these racist relics of the past from coming down.

On Feb. 25, 2004, a man appeared on the front page of the New Orleans Times Picayune in blackface. I confess I was the culprit, but before I'm disinvented to the Black family cook out, please let me explain.

The Zulu Social Aid & Pleasure Club is a predominately Black Mardi Gras krewe that has been parading in blackface since 1909. Many of my friends joined the club, and my two younger brothers started riding once we were older and



Louis Armstrong, King Zulu '49 & Nathan King, King Zulu '55.



Chuck Perkins leading Black Indian tribal call & response.

more established. Whenever we met partying at family gatherings, they would relay the excitement of riding in the parade, and all I could do is imagine being with them. Eventually I donned the black face, but I was conflicted. As a college student I read Harold Cruse's "The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual" and when I finished, I couldn't hate minstrels more.

I admit that I can't imagine going to another city and watching several hundred Black men and women parade past me in what feels like a Bert Williams look-alike contest. The shock would traumatize me, and I might succumb to a massive heart attack and die on the spot. I often think of the price that Louis Armstrong paid for ending up on the

cover of Life Magazine in blackface as King of the Zulus.

He participated in an odd local tradition of working class Black men that was misplaced in a national context. Black folk in New York, Chicago or Boise, Idaho, were confused, and they should have been. When he appeared in blackface with white paint around the lips and bulging eyes, there was no way they could have known that Satchmo wasn't Stepin Fetchit. They couldn't know that when he agreed to be King, it was his way of honoring his people, the ones he hustled and gambled with in his youth, the people he fought and cried with. They could not have known that he wasn't cooning for white folks, he was showing love for the hood.

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Unfortunately, perception is everything. After viewing the aforementioned picture, Billie Holiday said that Louis Armstrong was a Tom to his heart.

What my younger brothers described was too compelling. I surrendered to the temptation and rode with Zulu as well. I rationalized my decision

by reminding myself that despite the blackface, grass skirt and Afro wig, the Zulus weren't the minstrels from the movies. They weren't simpletons who relish white humiliation, and they didn't walk around afraid of their own shadows, even if they looked like it. If a tourist treated one of them like an easy mark, the tourist might end up in the emergency room. I'm from New Orleans, and I knew that despite the look, the Zulus weren't what they seemed.

My epic ride began at the Hyatt Regency Hotel before dawn. There was already a low level of excitement, even though many people still seemed half sleep. All of the riders from each float met in separate rooms. We put on our costumes and prepared to have our faces painted. There seemed to be a couple of blackface Picassos in each krew. One by one we willingly sat in their chairs and allowed ourselves to be transformed. I enjoyed the camaraderie between my brothers and all my friends, but when the coat of liquid blackness was spread across my face, I couldn't help but think about the humiliation that black people have had to endure in this country.

The truth of the matter is that when I rode in the Zulu parade, I have never had more fun in my life. The adrenaline rush I received when the float made its first turn on the corner of South Claiborne and Jackson Avenue

was mind blowing. Imagine a sea of blackness accented with purple and gold Mardi Gras colors, where everybody's eating, drinking, dancing and having a ball. The streets are lined with throngs of beautiful people, especially the kids, all shapes and sizes, screaming their lungs out for beads and coconuts. All of them shouting to the Zulu riders as if we were the rulers of the world.



The white 'supremacist' monument is removed. Blackface remains.

Fortunately, when Zulu decides to remove the blackface, nothing in this magical picture will be lost.

Despite the good time I had rolling with Zulu, I would like to throw myself at the mercy of the court and beg for forgiveness. In New Orleans, we have been the vanguard of a movement working to remove

symbols of white “supremacy” that insult our humanity. This movement has spread through the country, to the Caribbean and Africa. The discussion about blackface in the 21st century is no longer circumscribed to Black people in New Orleans—the discourse is international. When politicians and others in our community are exposed in blackface, we must hold them accountable. If we make exceptions for Zulu, we forfeit our goal of removing slave masters and murderers from our public spaces.

The official Zulu historian says that it isn’t blackface, it’s black paint. He explains that the Zulus are not aping minstrels, they are channeling proud African warriors.



TEDN led the removal of the 4 white supremacist monuments.

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In order to weigh the claim, we must go back to 1909, the scene of the crime. Africans had been in the city for 190 years, we were 44 years out

of slavery, and 32 years on the other side of Reconstruction. How our bodies were exploited and broken for profit was not the worst thing to happen to us; that distinction belongs to how we were taught to hate ourselves.

Many Black Americans saw Africa as a vast cultural wasteland of savages. We preferred being called colored, and a Black man might shoot you in the head for calling him African or Black. If you asked a typical African American in the early 1900s to portray an African, ninety times out of a hundred, the caricature that Zulu has kept alive for 110 years is what you would get. But the mental damage caused by two centuries of oppression doesn’t have to be permanent.

When we wrap our arms lovingly around a way of life, even if we close our eyes, it doesn’t change the reality. It cannot be disputed that in the

city of New Orleans some of our traditions have been filtered through a racial prism of slavery and Jim Crow. Therefore, it doesn't matter how you skin it, these relics of white "supremacy" are the partial progenitors of blackface. Like the child of a rapist, their DNA is in the lifeblood of Zulu's representation of Africans. The family can forget that the rapist father ever lived, but he is still the father.

When it comes to people all we can do is love the beauty born out of evil. We should never throw out the baby because he has his daddy's eyes; however, when we open our eyes and see harmful vestiges of the oppressor in our traditions, they must be tossed out, nothing is beyond reproach. We are forever endowed with the agency to keep what is useful and to discard all ideas that are no longer consistent with our world views.

It's time for blackface to die.

"If we make exceptions for Zulu, we forfeit our goal of removing slave masters and murderers from our public spaces." -Chuck Perkins

Chuck Perkins is a New Orleans poet. He's a radio talk-show host and the owner of Cafe Istanbul.

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