

RACIALIZED COSTUMES: HIDDEN LOCAL HISTORY

In the 1940s, The B.C. Lions' club, a voluntary organization composed of businessmen, organized annual Halloween costume contests for the school children. *The Abbotsford Sumas and Matsqui News* desired Halloween 1945 as "a weird crowd of youngsters...They were dressed as ghosts, Indians, witches, pirates from the Spanish Main, darkies from the deep South and scarecrows capable of scaring all birds in creation," (ASMN 11/7/1945). Saidiya Hartman argues the term "darky" was used as a derogatory term that hyper-fixates on race as the central focus of "low-comedy." This type of racist comedy hinges on fictitious "darky antics [of] lying, loafing, stealing, and breakdown dancing," (1997, 28). In the newspaper clipping, people with dark skin are categorized as 'scary.' At 7 pm all the children watched fireworks and then two movies: "the life of the beavers and Donald Duck." At the end of the festival, all the children were gifted a goody bag which had, "candles, fruit cookies, and a Lion's pencils." A few years later in 1948, the photograph below was taken...

1840s

Blackface was popularized in Boston and Philadelphia during the 1830s and 1840s (Thompson and Jabouin, 2021)

1850s

Minstrel shows became a hit in Pacific Northwest theatres

1890s

The practise began to fall out of the limelight and was reinvented to be a part of freak shows acts in circuses

1920s

Local amateurs began to dress up in blackface to amuse their neighbours; It was a form of nostalgia to remember 'the good old days,' (Howard 2018).

Blackface

- Jim Crow Mask with crude exaggerated features: Animated grin, Expressive eyebrows, tobacco pipe. Most likely bought from a local grocery store.
- Note the carefully applied soot around the eyes and ears, most likely their mother applied the make-up.

Jewface

- Anti-Semitic mask with crude exaggerated features: Pointy nose and scraggly beard.
- Dr. Gilman posits that by the 20th century, Jewish people were illustrated with "hook noses" in cheap print.
- This type of embodied racism was meant to depict the Jewish people as sneaky, dirty, and untrustworthy (Jewish Museum 2018).



Antiziganism

- 'Gypsies', 'Bohemians' or 'Tsiganes' are caricatures of Roma women.
- Depicted as sexual objects of curiosity, they allured non-Roma men [Gadjo].
- Seen as mysterious fortune-tellers or objects stuck in time.
- Julia Hasdeu (2008) argues the Roma garb has always piqued the interest of non-Roma people
- Hodgepodge outfits reflect how Roma culture was perceived as Kitschy.

P4555, 1948, Photograph. Abbotsford, The Reach Museum.

"It happened so long ago..."

New historical findings about our community allow us all to reflect and change our ways. As time passes, nostalgic memories sour as a result of societal shifts. Unpleasant memories of public events are often hidden to protect community powerholders. As historians, ethnographers, students and professionals it is our responsibility to deconstruct misconceptions about our society (Best 2008: 224).

"It's just kids!"

It most likely was the parents who dressed their children up in these terrible costumes. This practice enculturates children to believe in racist fabrications. At a certain age, they would make a conscious effort to learn from their past mistakes or continue to enjoy this problematic pastime. We should criticize the actions of adults, not children.

"All this over costumes?"

These costumes embody racist stereotypes constructed to oppress and define marginalized people as 'others.' Embodiment racism disorients physical features to create a social hierarchy. Relief theory suggests certain humour is considered acceptable in temporary spaces, like carnivals or parties. Typically, lower-class people would organize events and costumes to feel temporarily empowered. Offensive comedic costumes enticed rural people to reenact white fantasies of domination (Howard 2018).