

Black Experiences as Described in Art or Pop Culture

Professor Michael Ray Charles

University of Houston

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Being Black in America

- Professor Charles says in his opening, “This is the world I inherited.” Think about how Black experiences might have shifted across generations in relation to the “problem of the Negro.”
 - What kind of “world” do you think our Black youth feel they have inherited?
- How does popular culture perpetuate white identity as the norm?
 - What does this say about representation of Black identity in popular culture?
- How do you think misrepresentations like Blackface impact Black individuals?
 - What does Charles mean by “minstrelsy is an extension”?
 - Should performing artists be accountable for inappropriate portrayals, or are they a product of social programming?
 - How can celebrities use their power and privilege to create change?
- Professor Charles acknowledges the long history of how media has been used to marginalize others. This goes beyond Black identity to negatively impact other groups such as Asians and Native Americans. Utah has several local public schools and universities that still use Native American mascots.
 - Consider your stance on these mascots as it relates to stereotyping, and discuss how this may be harmful to communities of color.
- Professor Charles mentions the idea of cultural currency. Cultural capital (a related term coined by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu) refers to how power is transferred and maintained in society. The more cultural capital you have, the more power or status you might enjoy.
 - How are Black artists, filmmakers, and other creatives working to increase the cultural currency or capital of Black communities?
 - Does the dominant culture still profit on the cultural capital of Black folks?
- Think about how Charles’ work ties back to the point that widely used household products were often marketed using stereotypical Black images (e.g., linking Black people to ownership).
 - Discuss how he uses negative images pertaining to ownership to expose ongoing social issues.
 - Charles’ work focuses on Blackness. Discuss the ways that irony and satire in his work expose social issues for other groups.
- Professor Charles talks about his experience seeing Black men portrayed on the big screen for the first time in “Three the Hard Way.” He describes these men as “bold, strong, matter of fact, sexy, and commanding.”
 - Based on the images from the presentation, how can art serve as a way to highlight or elevate the Black experience in America?
 - How might these images reclaim possibilities or create new possibilities for Black identity?
- Think about the discussion regarding the television show “Good Times.” Do we still portray Black families as dysfunctional in popular culture?
 - Name other archetypes (i.e. typical representations) popular culture uses to portray Black individuals.
 - Can you name any positive archetypes for Black communities?
- How often are you a consumer of works by Black artists, filmmakers, etc.?
 - How often do you watch movies or television written from a Black perspective?
 - How often do you view artwork by Black artists?
 - Is this a conscious choice? Why or why not?
- Some of Professor Charles’ works may be seen as highly controversial or provocative. Take a few minutes to reflect on your initial reactions to these images.
 - Discuss the emotions these images stirred up.
 - Why do you think you had the reaction that you did?
 - Would you view them a second time?
 - Do you think you would feel differently upon a second viewing now that you have attended the Inclusive Excellence Symposium?

Resources:

- How the History of Blackface is Rooted in Racism
- Native Mascots Still a Sticking Point in Utah High School Sports
- What is Cultural Capital?
- Gucci Apologizes After Social Media Users Say Sweater Resembles Blackface

Writer: Devon Isaacs

Editor: Jeffrey Spears