Editorial: Cultures are not costumes, watch what you wear on Halloween

Liz Theriault

The timing is like clockwork. The calendar is creeping closer to Oct. 31 and the privileged cries of not understanding the impact of Halloween costumes incorporating blackface has hit the airwaves once more. This time, Megyn Kelly, former host of “Megyn Kelly Today” on NBC, sparked this discussion when she defended the use of blackface for costumes on national television.
She opened her morning segment on the topic by warning her viewers she was "a little red up over Halloween costumes." However, the discussion that followed shortly after was more than just being "red up.” In short, it was racist.

“Political correctness has gone amok,” said Kelly. “There are strict rules on what you may or may not wear issued by someone who thinks they are the boss of you.”

Her comments were met from laughter from the crowd. Kelly went on to say “But what is racist? Because you get in trouble if you are a white person who puts on a blackface for Halloween, or a black person that puts on a white face for Halloween. But back when I was a kid, that was okay as long as you were dressing up as a character.”

So here we are again. The seemingly-endless debate over why some things are offensive and whether our nation is attempting to be too politically correct has reared its ugly head, just in time for Halloween. You’d think that by 2018 we would understand that cultures, races and histories do not exist to be warped into costumes for personal amusement, but every year we need to be reminded why this just won’t fly.

The history of the use of blackface is one engrained with hatred and dehumanization. Blackface originated on the stage of mid-to-late 19th century minstrel shows. White actors would use black grease paint to cover their faces and portray themselves as slaves or emancipated blacks. These shows became popular at the end of the Civil War era, and were broadcast on early mechanical television sets, radio shows and ushered into theaters, around the same time as emancipation and the African Americans’ fight to gain full citizenship. These actors’ portrayals were overtly racist; they dehumanized and repeatedly reinforced the assumed inferiority of blacks.

“Blackface is part of a history of dehumanization, of denied citizenship, and of efforts to excuse and justify state violence. From lynchings to mass incarceration, whites have utilized blackface (and the resulting dehumanization) as part of its moral and legal justification for violence,” said David Leonard, chair of Washington State University’s department of critical culture, gender and race studies in his 2012 Huffington Post essay. “Blackface is never a neutral form of entertainment, but an incredibly loaded site for the production of damaging stereotypes … the same stereotypes that undergird individual and state violence, American racism, and a centuries worth of injustice”

This is precisely why blackface is an unacceptable Halloween costume — always has been and always will be. And even if Kelly claims she believes it was okay when she was a child, it definitely was not. Instead, her background of privilege shielded her, and continues to shield her, from her own ignorance on how disrespectful these Halloween portrayals are.

This extends to other ethnicities and cultures as well. Native American costumes, Day of the Dead makeup, or any type of exploitation of race perpetuate this issue of objectifying histories for personal gain.

Kelly also talked about these others types of costumes on her morning Halloween segment. Her tone conveyed a sense of ridicule and offense that society wants to restrict what people should wear on Halloween.

“You cannot dress as a Native American, that apparently has been a rule for a long time, or you can't dress as a nun,” said Kelly. “I mean isn’t the whole purpose of Halloween to dress up and pretend to be something other than yourself?”

Kelly also interrupted one of her guests who was trying to explain why you should not dress as a ‘sexy Handmaid’ from Handmaid’s Tale to say “Get over it! Wear what you want!”

This dismissive attitude is reflective of everyone who decides that the “wearing what you want” or only wearing an offensive costume “as a joke” excuses are enough to justify their racist actions. Just because the wearer of a costume believes that they are not doing so with malicious or racist intent does not erase their ignorance, racism and exercise of privilege over cultures and races that have been historically targeted and discriminated against. Wearing offensive costumes reinforces stereotypes that are based in negative and destructive beliefs and supports the idea that minorities are appropriate targets for ridicule and mockery.

It’s 2018. Don't knowingly try to alter your own skin color on the basis on the costume. Don't pick up the Pocahontas dress from off the rack. Refrain from creating costumes that depict national tragedies. It is time to abandon any type of cultural appropriation or the act of defending it. If you think that your costume might be offensive or problematic, then it probably is and you need to consider finding something that will not out you as a secret bigot among your friends.
These shows became popular at the end of the Civil War era, and were broadcast on early mechanical television sets, radio shows and ushered into theaters, around the same time as emancipation and the African Americans’ fight to gain full citizenship.

Oh dear. The writer doesn't appear to be aware that "mechanical" television sets and broadcast radio were not around during emancipation.

"emancipation" freed no one. Maryland was a slave state. Lincoln didn't free the slaves there, only those in the Confederacy and I'm sure Jefferson Davis listened to what Lincoln had said...

The Massachusetts 54th was Free Blacks, including two of Frederick Douglass' sons.

And those early "mechanical" television sets... they were cathode ray tubes, electronic particle beam guns shooting at phosphorescent dots.