

**OPINION****HOME****GUEST VIEWPOINT**

# Blackface costume incident: Professor's costume a vile act in itself, but it exposes a much bigger problem

**BY MICHAEL HAMES-GARCÍA***For The Register-Guard*

NOV. 13, 2016



**R**ecent events at the University of Oregon have been troubling for many of us. I write as someone who identifies as neither black nor white, but who grew up in a nation built to a great extent by white violence against black people. I write in the hopes of contributing to a necessary, important, painful and extremely difficult conversation at our institution.

Part of the problem with blackface is that white people don't know why it's a problem. It's impossible to understand why black people are so angered by its use unless one knows what it is that black people see when they see white people in blackface. From the perspective of the harm done, it doesn't matter what the white person's intention was.

---

---

Nothing about the history of what white people have done to black people and other people of color is shocking to people of color. We know that white people hanged, burned alive and dismembered not hundreds but thousands of black men and women, indigenous men and women, Mexican men and women, Chinese and Japanese men and women, and others for well over a hundred years. We know it was done with impunity. We know it was done publicly. We know they took genitalia from lynched men and women and collected them as souvenirs. We know they posed for pictures and made postcards to commemorate the events.

We know that blackface and other racial impersonations were forms of entertainment for white people that were part of a larger dehumanizing process that made lynching possible. We know that these impersonations never honored us.

Unfortunately, many white people don't know these things. They come to college and take a class about who-knows-what to fulfill a multicultural requirement and come away singing "Kumbaya" and decide to have a "Mexican gangster" or "pimps and hos" party at their sorority, and don't know why people of color are so sensitive about it.

The possibility that Shurtz's act was done with no deliberate racist intent to harm makes it worse, in my view. It confirms everything I suspect and fear daily about the ignorance and callous disregard for black humanity among my colleagues and students. It makes me less likely to trust my white colleagues. It makes me dislike them. In that sense, you need to understand that Shurtz has injured you.

At the same time, I am taken aback by the university's swift suspension of Shurtz. I don't know if the suspension happened in consultation with her, and I understand that the university has stated that this was not a disciplinary action.

---

Let me be clear: Shurtz is not a young, uninformed undergraduate. She has been a professor almost as long as I've been alive. She grew up during the Civil Rights Movement. I find it very hard to accept any protestation of ignorance or statement of good intent from her.

Do I find Shurtz's behavior to be vile? Emphatically. Do I buy her protestations of goodwill? By no means. Do I join my law school colleagues in calling for her to resign? With gusto. Her resignation would be the best, most productive action she could take, sparing the university, our students and her colleagues further trauma and embarrassment.

However, I fear there is a risk of scapegoating, with the effect that Shurtz is punished for the sins of many and outrage over her behavior evades discussion about what is, unfortunately, a common practice in U.S. society. This is the "bad apple"

phenomenon that one sees in discussions of police shootings: You deal with the bad apple and pretend that the barrel isn't rotten.

First, Shurtz could have had patently racist intent in donning blackface, but her suspension is still troubling. Being a racist outside of work is not cause for dismissal.

As someone who teaches, writes on and speaks about controversial subjects, as someone who has been publicly critical of the university administration in the past, as someone who has more than once been called "racist" by white students after teaching them about the history of racism, I find Shurtz's swift suspension chilling — not because I think she was misunderstood or had good intentions, but because I know how censoring of unpopular actions and words has historically affected women, people of color and queer people disproportionately.

Second, Shurtz's actions are shocking in a university faculty context, but frequently re-enacted in Hollywood films, at undergraduate parties, at sporting events, at Halloween parties, and in the costume section of Walmart. Indeed, if Shurtz were the only person to dress up in blackface (or redface or yellowface or brownface) in recent memory, the effect would not be as disconcerting.

She is a symptom, and we make a grave, possibly fatal error when we treat only the symptom and leave untreated the underlying malady.

*More **GUEST VIEWPOINT** articles »*