

My Mustache By Wesley Morris I didn't realize t



pandemic would lead me to question how I became

e that experimenting with my facial hair during the



ame who I am. Photograph by Jessica Pettway Page 21

Like a lot of men, in pursuit of novelty and amusement during these months of isolation, I grew a mustache. The reviews were predictably mixed and predictably predictable. “Porny”? Yes. “Creepy”? Obviously. “’70s”? True (the 18- and 1970s). On some video calls, I heard “rugged” and “extra gay.” Someone I love called me “zaddy.” Children were harsh. My 11-year-old nephew told his Minecraft friends that his uncle has this ... *mustache*; the midgame disgust was audible through his headset. In August, I spent two weeks with my niece, who’s 7. She would rise each morning dismayed anew to be spending another day looking at the hair on my face. Once, she climbed on my back and began combing the mustache with her fingers, whispering in the warmest tones of endearment, “Uncle Wesley, when are you going to shave this thing off?”

It hasn’t been all bad. Halfway through a quick stop-and-chat outside a friend’s house in July, he and I removed our masks and exploded at the sight of each other. *No way: mustache!* I spent video meetings searching amid the boxes for other mustaches, to admire the way they enhance eyes and redefine faces with a force of irreversible handsomeness, the way Burt Reynolds never made the same kind of sense without his. The mustache aged me. (People didn’t mind letting me know that, either.) But so what? It pulled me past “mature” to a particular kind of “distinguished.” It looks fetching, for instance, with suits I currently have no logical reason to wear.

One afternoon, on a group call to celebrate a friend’s good news, somebody said what I didn’t know I needed to hear. More reviews were pouring in (thumbs down, mostly), but I was already committed at that point. I just didn’t know to what. That’s when my friend chimed in: “You look like a lawyer for the N.A.A.C.P. Legal Defense Fund!”

What I remember was laughter. But where someone might have sensed shade being thrown, I experienced the opposite. A light had been shone. It was said as a winking correction and an earnest clarification. *Y’all, this is what it is.* The call moved on, but I didn’t. That *is* what it is: one

of the sweetest, truest things anybody had said about me in a long time.

My friend had identified a mighty American tradition and placed my face within it. Any time 20th-century Black people found themselves entangled in racialized peril, anytime the roots of racism pushed up some new, hideous weed, a thoughtful-looking, solemn-seeming, crisply attired gentleman would be photographed entering a courthouse or seated somewhere (a library, a living room) alongside the wronged and imperiled. He was probably a lawyer, and he was likely to have been mustached.

Thurgood Marshall started the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s Legal Defense and Education Fund 80 years ago. (It still exists. Sherrilyn Ifill is in charge.) The L.D.F.’s most famous cases include *Shelley v. Kraemer*, which, in effect, forbade landlords from refusing to rent to Black people, and *Brown v. Board of Education*, the crown jewel in the fund’s many school-desegregation challenges. Marshall was, essentially, the civil rights movement’s legal strategist, and in case after case, he arrived at the Supreme Court in elegant tailoring and sharp haircuts. A decade later Marshall was on the court. And any time he donned that robe and those horn-rimmed spectacles, every time he shined at oral arguments, he did so wearing a mustache. The glasses and jowls emphasized his famous air of wisdom. The mustache bestowed a grounding flourish.

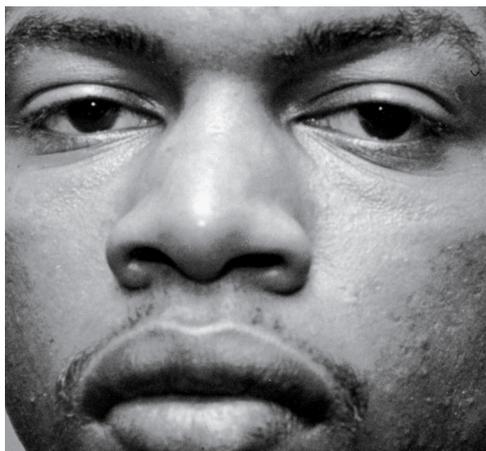
In 1954, when the court ruled in *Brown*, it wasn’t so rare to see a mustached man. They were a common feature among blue-collar jobs. Charlie Chaplin and Errol Flynn had been stars; and the country hadn’t quite finished with Clark Gable. Ernest Hemingway had aligned the mustache with distinctly American ideas of masculine bravado, concision and sport. But a mustache could also be a softener, a grace note. A mustache advertised a certain commitment to civility. On a man like Gable, it embellished his rough edges, gave his characters’ chauvinism a classy place to land.

On Black men, a mustache told a different story. It was fashionable, but it was more than that. On a

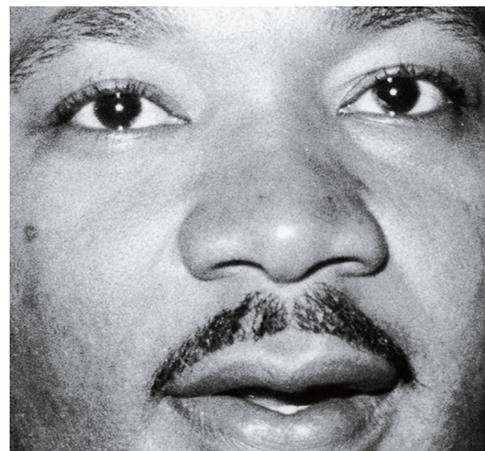
Black man, it signified values: perseverance, seriousness, rigor. Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, Jacob Lawrence, Gordon Parks, Albert Murray, John Lewis, C.T. Vivian, Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy, Bayard Rustin, Joseph Lowery, Fred Shuttlesworth, Julius L. Chambers, Jesse Jackson, Hosea Williams, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Elijah Cummings: mustaches all. Classics. (It should be noted that the superstar ideological iconoclast among the freedom fighters, Malcolm X, did battle accordingly. He was the only prominent American leader, of any race, with a goatee.)

In the days after that congratulations video call, the euphoria of having been tagged as part of some illustrious legacy tapered off. The mustache had certainly conjoined me to a past I was flattered to be associated with, however superficially. But there were implications. During the later stages of the movement, a mustached man opened himself up to charges of white appeasement and Uncle Tom-ism. Not because of the mustache, obviously, but because of the approach of the sort of person who would choose to wear one. Such a person might not have been considered radical enough, down enough, Black enough. The civil rights mustache was strategically tolerant. It didn’t advocate burning anything down. It ran for office — and sometimes it won. It was establishmentarian, compromising and eventually, come the infernos at the close of the 1960s, it fell out of fashion, in part because it felt out of step with the urgency of the moment.

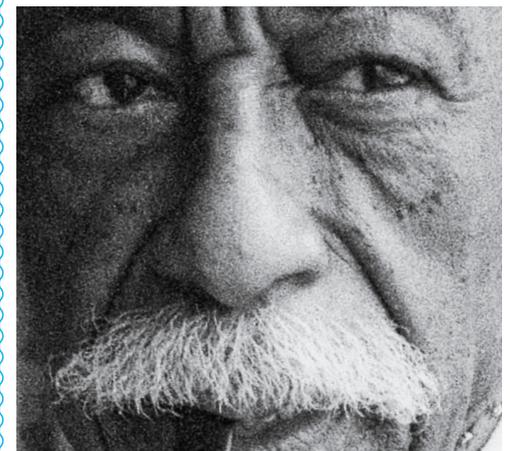
The Black mustache didn’t end with the disillusionments of the post-civil-rights era. Jim Brown, Stevie Wonder, Richard Roundtree, Billy Dee Williams, Lionel Richie, Sherman Hemsley, Carl Weathers, James Brown, Arsenio Hall and Eddie Murphy wore one. It’s just that no higher calling officially united them. Their mustaches were freelance signatures, the mark of an individual rather than a people’s emblem. At some point in the 1970s and through at least 1980, Muhammad Ali grew one you could attach to a broom handle. Donnie Simpson hosted BET’s “Video Soul” with a tapered number and a silky smoothness that could line a tuxedo jacket. Throw a rock at an old Jet



John Lewis



Martin Luther King Jr.



Gordon Parks

From left: Associated Press; Agence France-Press; via Getty Images; Shepard Stribell, via Getty Images.

magazine from the 1980s, you'll hit somebody's mustache. But well before then, the politics of self-presentation had coalesced around grander, less deniable hair. They migrated to the Afro. A mustache might have been a dignified symbol in the pursuit of equality. But there was nothing inherently Black about it. A mustache meant business. An Afro meant power.

I knew before the summer's Black Lives Matter protests that my mustache made me look like a bougie race man: a professional, seemingly humorless middle-class Negro, a moderate, who believes that presentation is a crucial component of the "advancement" part of the N.A.A.C.P. mission, someone who doesn't mind a little respectability because he believes his people deserve respect. It's a look to ponder as the country finds itself churning once again over ceaseless questions of advancement and justice and the right to be left the hell alone. I live a street over from a thoroughfare where the protests happened almost nightly in June and July. I could hear their approach from my living room. One evening, I stood at a corner, moved, as thousands of people passed: friends, colleagues, co-workers, some guy I went on a blind date with a million years ago, chanting, brandishing banners and buttons. Some protesters had their fists raised in a Black-power salute. So I raised mine. Not a gesture I would normally make. But there was something about seeing so many white people lifting their arms that goaded me into doing it, too. Mine kept lowering itself, so I had to jerk it to its fullest, most committed extension. I felt out of control, like Edward Norton throwing himself around his boss's office in "Fight Club"; like the kleptomaniac that Tippi Hedren played in Alfred Hitchcock's "Marnie," trying to palm a stack of cash but her arm. Just. Won't. Pick. It. Up. At some point, I stopped straining. This wasn't the struggle I came for. Plus, a friend told me later that I had made my fist wrong.

The Black-power salute is not a casual gesture. It's weaponry. You aim that arm and fire. I aimed mine in solidarity — *with* white people instead of at a system they personify. And that didn't feel

quite right. But how would I know? I had never done a Black-power salute. It always seemed like more Blackness than I've needed, maybe more than I had. I'm not Black-power Black. I've always been milder, more apprehensive than that. I was practically born with a mustache.

I grew up in Philadelphia in the 1980s. My mother left my father when my sister and I were small. I took the divorce just fine. Except for the stealing. I used to pluck quarters from my mother's change purse and, before class, feed them to the arcade consoles at the 7-Eleven near school. First, though, I would discreetly jam handfuls of 1-cent candy into my pockets. The quarters were never meant to cover that. For two weeks in the second grade, this is how my mornings began — until I got caught. The store manager called my mother, and in the uncomfortably long wait for her arrival, I sat there, wallowing in regret. But she never showed. My father did. She must have phoned him. He walked me home to the house he no longer lived in and spanked me (a first, for us both). Then he calmly walked me to school. On the way, he explained, with uncharacteristic gravity, that because I was Black, I needed to be very careful about my behavior. Nobody should steal. And we especially shouldn't. He was a track coach, and that was one of the few times he ever coached me.

It's perhaps absurd to point to one childhood incident and declare it decisive, but I've always found that story useful. It's rich in disappointment, embarrassment, shame and guilt (my mother needed those quarters; they were carfare; and the kids at school now knew I was a thief). I was so ashamed that I vowed, at 6, that I never wanted to feel like that again. I'd had a moral near-death experience. From there on, I would be good. That was the vow.

"Good" meant trying hard and helping out and listening and being a devoted friend. It meant only the best news for my parents and being liked. But goodness as a personal policy is strange for a child to have. It's for grown-ups; not for kids. Teachers like good kids; some teachers prefer them. The kind of goodness I'm talking about is suspicious

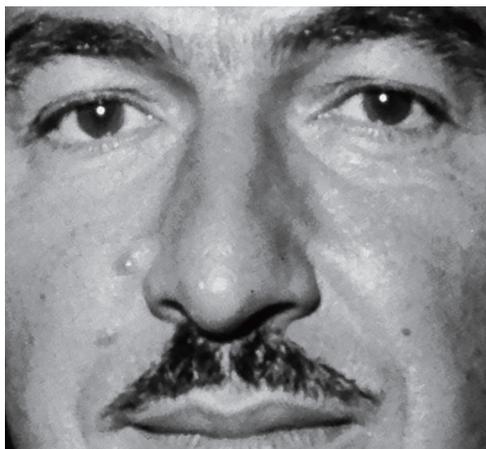
to other kids. Kids don't want to catch you abstaining from trouble or raising your hand or staying behind after school to help out or, worse, to *hang*. I went to the same small, mostly Black private school from third grade until graduation. That kind of goodness sometimes got classified as "white." It wasn't pejorative, exactly. Kids liked me. But we all seemed to realize that now I had a genre.

I don't recall making a conscious equation between goodness and whiteness. But I watched TV and went to movies and devoured comic books and music videos in which most of the people were white. I made identifications. I internalized things. I watched almost every episode of two popular sitcoms in which rich white people adopt Black orphans. Hip-hop had only begun its pursuit of world domination; it was still just rap. But I preferred pop music and liked it when a rap song — "Push It," "Just a Friend," "Going Back to Cali" — crossed from Black radio to everybody else's. The crossing over was validating. Pop was proof not of selling out, but of a kind of goodness.

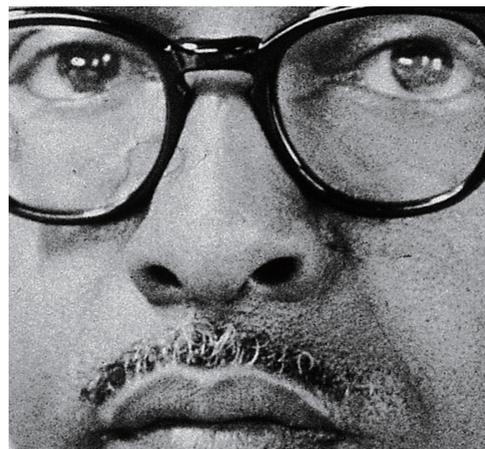
I never suffered any major drama about being Black or being gay. (A stretch of the sixth grade featured me talking like Jackée Harry, who played the flamboyantly congested sexpot, Sandra, on "227.") I just understood that there were strata and somewhere among them were my "proper" diction and pegged jeans. I had made myself an individual and was never tortured too terribly for it. I had a little room of my own in a wider Black world. Then Carlton moved in.

Carlton was Will Smith's rich, conservative cousin on "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air." The show ran on NBC from 1990 to 1996 and was another Black-adoption sitcom, only the rich family was Black. Carlton was the middle kid: bellowingly enunciative, preppy in Ralph Lauren everything, deafened by the setting on Will's Blackness. To Will, Carlton's familiarity with whiteness made him indistinguishable from it. Early in Season 1, when a family friend chooses Carlton and not Will to drive his fancy car to Palm Springs as a favor, a miffed Will asks, "This is a Black thing, isn't it?" On the road, Carlton offers Will a snack:

From left: Leo Rosenthal/Getty Images; Ailyn Boum/The New York Times; Getty Images.



Adam Clayton Powell Jr.



Bayard Rustin



Thurgood Marshall

“What do you say to an Oreo?” Will answers: “What’s up, Carlton?”

Carlton’s erudition and country-club style panic Will, whose own approach to Blackness becomes an overcompensation for his proximity to affluence. His Blackness is a thing he performs — for an audience, but mainly for himself. In Season 2, Uncle Phil tells Will that he’s proud of him, that he’s just like his son. It’s a compliment that induces a nervous breakdown. “I’m turning into Carlton,” Will says. “No more of these sissy sandwiches. No more valet parking. And no more of these preppy parties, man.” He then destroys the \$200 check that he kissed up to Uncle Phil to write him and says, “Yo, the funky fresh is back in the flesh with a vengeance, Holmes!” It’s stunning enough, the equation of intelligence with emasculation and whiteness with lunch (Will: *sandwiches?*). But when he’s finished, the audience erupts in cheers. Nobody watching wanted Will to become “good.” They wanted him to stay Black.

I didn’t know who Carlton was until I was presumed to be him: in school, at my weekend movie-theater job, in the checkout line at the Gap. He equipped the young and perplexed with a shorthand for bright, square oddballs who weren’t quite nerds. (Nerds were easy. They were Steve Urkel, the geek from “Family Matters.”) In high school, there were a few of us oddballs. I, alas, was the lone Carlton. But a crucial part of the equation always felt off. Carlton epitomized the hazardous comedy of racial estrangement. Even his assertions of Blackness were meant in irony. Like the time, in Season 1, when Will bets that his cousin wouldn’t last long in Compton, and Carlton winds up dressed like a gangsta. His sudden abundance of Blackness was supposedly funnier because we were well versed in his alleged lack of it.

But sometimes I wondered, Was he really an exemplar of Blackness’s rigidity or could he have been an exploration of its parameters? Could I? I don’t think it mattered back then. These were teenagers. They weren’t looking for the nuances of who anybody was. They were Will, in search of the easiest path to jokes that distracted from their insecurities. And the path from Carlton to me was, admittedly, not an arduous one to forge. This would

have been asking a lot of a network sitcom, but I sometimes wondered about the Blackness of Carlton’s inner life and its correspondence to mine.

One of the proudest secondhand moments of my adolescence was the Wimbledon tennis tournament in which an unseeded Lori McNeil stopped Steffi Graf’s title defense *in the first round* and almost made it to the final. I liked Steffi Graf, but Lori McNeil? How? Did Carlton catch any of that? Did he love it when a curmudgeon like Stanley Crouch, a reality checker like Julianne Malveaux or a sage like Toni Morrison would show up on some talk show and just go on and on about whatever? The hosts might have seemed prepared for the erudite truth of what they had to say but often seemed taken aback by the precise Blackness of its deployment. The joke of Carlton was that he adored Tom Jones and danced like Belinda Carlisle. But surely he could sense that the 1980s and 1990s were a bounteous age for an anything-goes kind of Blackness: Prince, Whoopi Goldberg, Jermaine Stewart, Janet Jackson, Flavor Flav.

The first time I saw a wet suit was on Corey Glover, who sang in the band Living Colour, four Black guys who built their hard rock on a base layer of rhythm and blues. Rap’s menu had diversified enough to include Afrocentric hippies like Arrested Development and hippie-dorks like De La Soul. Lenny Kravitz was another hippie but nobody in my life seemed to take his funk-rock as spiritually as I did. To them, it was cheesy and ripped off. I inspected this music for a Blackness that comported with mine and every time felt the thrill of pure identification.

Carlton rarely got to make any such discovery. His cluelessness was too useful an asset. He was the bane of my adolescence, but I came to feel for him and despise the trap he was in. Every once in a while, though, somebody involved with that show would let him the littlest bit loose. At the end of Compton episode, this happens:

Carlton: “I never judge you for being the way you are. But you always act like I don’t measure up to some rule of Blackness that you carry around.”

Will: “You treat me like I’m some kind of idiot just ‘cause I talk different.”

Carlton: “‘Differently.’”

The show just kept shaking the Etch A Sketch, resetting Carlton’s self-awareness and Will’s insensitivity to it. But I understood what Will’s ilk ignored. The Oreo had a soul.

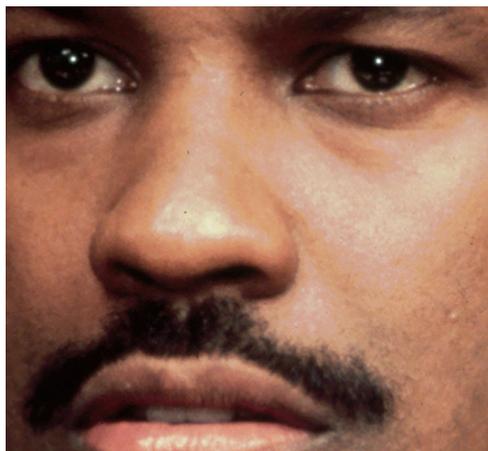
During that stretch in high school, I grew a mustache. It was a classic rite of male puberty: I grew it because I could, kept it because it didn’t violate a dress code and was grateful for it because it probably helped tame the homophobes. Just about every boy in my graduating class had something sprouting above their lip. Wispy, ghostly, “cheesy,” but certifiably masculine. That’s also why people called me Carlton: because I bore the vaguest resemblance to Alfonso Ribeiro, the actor who played him. We both talked funny, dressed funny, danced funny. And we both, it must be said, had a mustache.

On my way to college, I got rid of it, hoping to exorcise Carlton. And it didn’t go with the look I wanted to take with me: baggy T-shirts and baggy pants with either Doc Martens or a pair of Chuck Taylors. I had two beloved T-shirts: Travis Bickle, the “Taxi Driver” psycho, was printed on one; the other was striped thin in red, green, black and yellow, which struck me as in some way African even though it was not. My older cousin Leon bought me a 40 Acres and a Mule baseball cap from Spike Lee’s merchandise shop. No filmmaker mattered more to my teenage self. But I was perpetually concerned that somebody might ask what the 40 acres were all about. Here I was, nervous about the call for reparations atop my head when there was a homicidal maniac staring out from my chest. Even then, I couldn’t. Make. A. Fist.

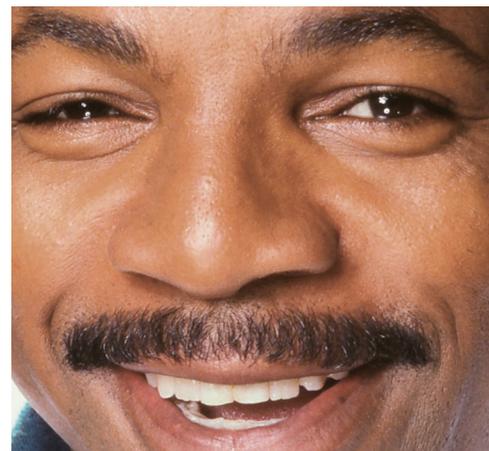
I went to Yale, which, until recently, offered an orientation camp for several dozen nonwhite students to bond. It was a week of sitting around, exploiting the pretext of food and talent shows to luxuriate in the personalities and tastes and lives of potential new friends. It was exciting, finding these kindred souls. Every once in a while, one



Jesse Jackson



Denzel Washington



Carl Weathers

of us would pause our little paradise to laugh at the absurdity of it all (the program's acronym was PROP) and ponder the looming menace: Were we being warned? The program was a rather stunning admission on the college's part: This is a white place; you all are going to need to keep one another from drowning. Lots of us had gone to integrated schools. We could swim. I swam.

But there's a way that, for certain nonwhite people (especially if you're poor), life at a liberal arts college (especially a so-called elite one) can feel like the reward for all of that being good. Maybe you've beaten some odds to get there, and your prize for all of the effort and, let's face it, all of the luck is, yes, a premium education but also living among white people. But first — ha, ha — *first* you must exemplify your people, be a diplomat for them and an ambassador to the white people to whom your ways might seem foreign.

No one ever puts it that way. The structure does the talking. No Black first-year student I knew at Yale had a Black roommate. If a professor put James Baldwin or Toni Morrison or Ntozake Shange or August Wilson on a syllabus, you, as the section's sole Black person, would be gazed at until you got the discussion started, expected to approve your sectionmates' analysis and withstand their insinuations. There were several ways to receive such a position: aghast, aggrieved, in acquiescence, with authority.

I eventually owned the situation. But it created delusions. I, at least, went through a brief, shameful period of high peacock during which my stage name could have been Mr. Black Experience. Prolonged only-ness winds up abutting exceptionalism. The alternatives never felt, to me, like improvements. Take the athlete from Southern California whom I ran into during a terrible evening he was having our first year. The pressure to declare his Blackness had snapped him. He didn't want to be merely some Black guy; he just wanted to be him. There was no consolation. We ran into each other from time to time. He pledged one of the big white fraternities and seemed to enjoy its spoils. I still think about him. What were the rest of his four years like?

Mine remain four of my best. I was happy. Only this summer have I taken any deep stock of the time I had there, how acculturation can breed estrangement, how I ended up with the comfortable life I've got. One urgent demand of this moment is for people, workplaces and institutions to reckon with their whiteness. Why not reckon with mine? Day after day of video calls will do that. I sat there on work meetings, in friend hang-outs and family catch-ups and stared into people's homes, tallying who's in my world, regretting nothing but simply absorbing how solidly white and discretely nonwhite the parties are and how it all feels traceable to a morning I got caught stuffing my pockets with Jolly Ranchers.

After graduation, during the decade and a half I spent working at newspapers in San Francisco and Boston, I embarked on a life that featured increasingly fewer Black people — at the office; in restaurants; on the streets. It was less an ambition than ambition's consequence. Some days it felt as if the Rapture had occurred and taken all the Black people to Atlanta or Houston. Even as I basked in the fortune of my life, loneliness performed its gentle tintinnabulations. San Francisco once had a good, Black-run soul-food place called Powell's. I sat down there almost every month just to have a base to touch. I talked about moving to Oakland but never did. In Boston, I had a couple of weird years with men. After a political convention, in 2004, I took home a guy from South Carolina who seduced me with talk about the difference he planned to make as a Black politician. On the walk to the subway the next morning, I all but asked him to take me to Charleston. That was the end of that.

I wasn't thinking of the people in my life as just white people; these were my co-workers, my friends. One of those friends applied a similar logic to me. The same week that a Minneapolis police officer killed Philando Castile, he found me in grief, and I told him that I've always harbored a murmuring awareness that I could be shot. He was incredulous. How could that happen to *me*? I went to a good school and had a good job. I was Black but not "killed during a police stop" Black. I was good.

I can imagine a version of myself that, having completed Yale and succeeded professionally, would've heard that response and felt relieved. That I was one of racism's carve-outs. I was me. Only, I've always felt more lucky than exceptional. I can now see that my vow of goodness was an existential shift of shape. Having been told, early on, that unreasonable obstacles awaited, I set about finding a form that could easily evade them.

There is, I suppose, an other hand, wherein I take further stock and declare a folly. The entire affair of race is a joke. My life is mine, no strings, no speed traps. Why overthink it? And the mustache. Come on. It's called a pandemic trend. I made bread on my face. One's race is not one's self. I know this and strive to leave it at that. But I never get far. In the United States, a Black self eventually discovers his race is a form of credit (or discredit, as it were). You can't leave home without it.

Yet for as long as Black Americans have been conscious of their Blackness, some public intellectual has cried "hoax." *You, Black person, are free — free to be a Person.* You can Rapture yourself. American literature reserves a corner for characters who've plotted escape: the passing novel, wherein Black people eke out a sad white life. Certainly, a logic for leaving exists. I must admit I do feel free, often in precisely the way that friend of mine insisted I must, because my fears haven't yet come true. I could, in theory, join the Black exit campaign and leave, if not the race, then certainly the sort of thinking that believes racism is a form of determinism, affecting the choices we make as individuals.

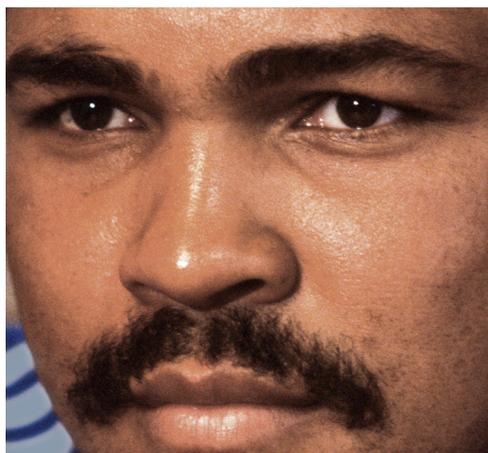
I've tried to empathize with this thinking and am always surprised that I can't close the deal.

You might recall that before he became America's most notorious double-murder acquittee, O.J. Simpson insisted he wasn't Black, either: He, alas, was O.J. Ensnarement within the criminal-justice system has this tragic way of clarifying who you are. Simpson emerged from that national disaster redefined by the Blackness he forsook. Lately and most cantankerously, it's Kanye West who has been daring to level with us. His early musical pushes against Black

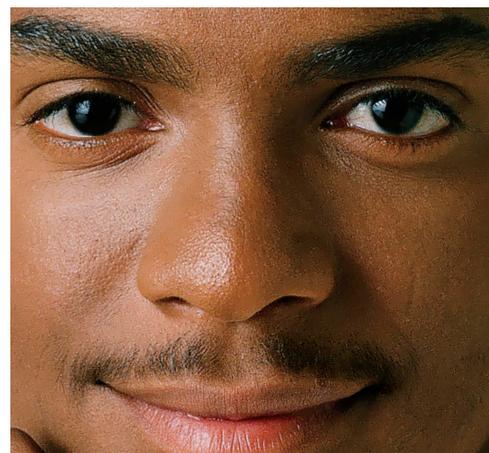
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Donnie Simpson



Muhammad Ali



Alfonso Ribeiro

Mustache

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orthodoxy have mutated, over the last four years, into pleas for Black people to stop it with the racism talk, to get over it, essentially. His vision for transcendence of racism, if not race itself, would be easier to share if it didn't appear to lead straight into the arms of racists.

I don't believe in that kind of transcendence. I'm not a Blexiteer, some person who is still convinced that we live in post-racial times. If anything, I'm a Blexistentialist. I encounter something like Barack Obama's "Dreams From My Father," which is steadfastly the opposite of the passing experience, and feast on his decades-long search for a Black self that suits him. It's a finding book, a story of becoming. As the Black tent expands, the people beneath it can keep doing as they've always done — widening its poles.

I have wondered, though, what kind of spiral I would have taken had the friend on that video call, not said "N.A.A.C.P. lawyer," if she had looked at my face and said, "You look like Clarence Thomas" or Herman Cain or Ben Carson (Carson's goatee has, on occasion, been only a mustache). What if she had pinned me to a bootstraps mentality that rejects racism as a root of injustice, that believes you're your own responsibility? I would have felt cornered, I suppose. Personal accountability isn't nothing. This country just won't let it be all. The extant number of Black firsts, rares, onlys, nevers, not yets and not quites attests to that, as does the chronic too manys, too oftens and too soon.

I like to think that I would have absorbed her "Clarence Thomas" and regaled her with a separate lineage. I would have told her that I hail from a long line of family mustaches. Uncle Gene's made him look famous. Uncle Jack's got bushy after World War II and pretty much stayed that way. My grandmother's last husband, Jimmy, wore his in a style best described as "sharpened." How did she kiss that thing and not need stitches? Her first husband, my grandfather, kept his barely there. Both their sons had one. Her brother Marcellus liked his thin. My mother loved my stepfather's, because, well, she loved him. My father had his phases. Three of his brothers had them, too; the fourth, Uncle Bill, had an ascot — had you ever met Uncle Bill, you would conclude that the ascot essentially was a mustache.

It might just have been simpler to say who didn't have one than who did. I don't know what everybody's politics were, but as a clan, we were a Thanksgiving spread, a little of everything yet nothing so outrageous that the advancement for colored people would ever be off the table. These were workmen, providers, not activists but voters, certainly. Their mustaches strike me now as a generational phenomenon. These people were all born between 1920 and 1950. Of their children, only my cousins Butchie and Kyle are describable as mustache men.

This is why I've kept mine. It's me squeezing my way into a parallel heritage. In this small sense, the work I do caring for it feels connected to a legacy of people who did and do the work chipping at and thinking with this nation. The good work.

Something obvious in just about any photograph taken of Black Americans during the civil rights era is how put-together everyone is. They wore to war what they wore to church. The country was watching. People got dressed up to withstand being put down. They dressed with full awareness that an outfit risked ruin: skirts twisted round, glasses cracked, ribbons undone, hair soaked, fabric stained with mustard, cream and blood. What hat didn't stand a good chance of permanent separation from its wearer? What fine pair of shoes didn't risk meeting its doom? A mustache, though? Hard to mar one of those. It was a magisterial vestige of elegance in defiance. It couldn't be snatched at or yanked. It held its ground, no matter how many times a nightstick or fist might attempt to remove it.

I look at those pictures and wonder about getting dressed — for contempt — about grooming oneself for it. Maintaining a mustache requires a surgical delicacy, a practiced lightness. I tend to save it for last, strenuously avoiding that part of a shave, for as delighted as I am by the sound of the scraping of the blade against my skin, some doubt never fails to creep into the mustache stage. It's a dismount, match point. *Can I close this out? Is this going to be the shave the mustache doesn't survive?* I have dreamed that I've lost it, that it just leapt off my face and I chased it around my house. Destroying it is always possible, but you're more likely just to turn it into something else, something you would be terrified to wear. Mine is actually a pre-emption. I go with the Denzel Washington in "Philadelphia" because I don't trust that I have the hands for the Denzel of "Devil in a Blue Dress."

This is also to say that, for the righteous and wayward alike, the process entails a disturbance of the line between vanity and knowledge of self. In 2018, Martin Luther King Jr.'s former barber, Nelson Malden, spoke to Alabama Public Radio about grooming King: "He was more concerned about his mustache than his haircut. He always liked his mustache to be up off the lip, like a butterfly. He would tell me, 'Make it like a butterfly this time.'"

It's grueling work, the business of becoming a butterfly. Long, ugly periods of churn and slog. But then you have this light, fluttering thing. It might have seemed inadequate — or incongruous, at least — for King to grip the sides of a lectern to tell congregants that they were all striving to bring the nation closer to embodying the hair beneath his nose. But when you know that he thought of his look as bespeaking a kind of weightlessness, you could also surmise that he knew the price of such flight might be life itself. He was trying to align the country with that mustache. We're not there yet. But we're working on it.

Make it like a butterfly next time. ♦

Speech

(Continued from Page 31)

contracts with an independent fact-checking network, which includes both The Associated Press and Check Your Fact, a subsidiary of the right-wing outlet The Daily Caller. Twitter does fact-checking internally. YouTube relies on a network of news organizations, including PolitiFact and The Washington Post Fact Checker.)

Fact-checking and labeling are First Amendment-friendly responses. They counter false speech with more speech, at the initiative of a private company, not the direction of the government. Today the research consensus among social scientists is that some fact-checking methods significantly reduce the prevalence of false beliefs. In print or on TV, journalists can use headlines or chyrons to provide context and debunking in real time — though they sometimes fail to do so.

Until very recently, Facebook and Twitter used mild labeling language. On Sept. 28, Trump tweeted: "The Ballots being returned to States cannot be accurately counted. Many things are already going very wrong!" In small blue print at the bottom of the post, Twitter added a warning symbol — a small exclamation point in a circle — along with the text "Learn how voting by mail is safe and secure." Facebook labeled the same post, suggesting that voters visit its "Voting Information Center" without including a warning symbol.

Kate Starbird, a professor of human-computer interaction at the University of Washington who tracks social media disinformation, called Facebook's label "worse than nothing." Adding a weak label to a Trump post mostly has the effect of "giving it an attention bump by creating a second news cycle about Republican charges of bias in content moderation," says Nathaniel Persily, a Stanford law professor and co-director of the university's Program on Democracy and the Internet.

Facebook has since updated its labels, based on tests and feedback, including from civil rights leaders. "The labels we have now, we have far more than we used to," says Monika Bickert, Facebook's vice president for content policy. "They've gotten stronger. But I would expect we'll continue to refine them as we keep seeing what's working." Facebook updated the label on Trump's Sept. 28 tweet to "Both voting in person and voting by mail have a long history of trustworthiness in the US and the same is predicted this year. Source: Bipartisan Policy Center." On an Oct. 6 Trump post with more falsehoods about voting, Facebook added an additional sentence to that label: "Voter fraud is extremely rare across voting methods." (Other labels, though, remain mild, and plenty of misleading content related to voting remains unlabeled.)

Angelo Carusone, the president of Media Matters for America, a nonprofit media watchdog group, finds the changes useful but frustratingly late. "We went from them refusing to touch any

Contributors

Wesley Morris

“My Mustache,”
Page 20

Wesley Morris is a staff writer for the magazine, a critic at large for The New York Times and co-host of the podcast “Still Processing.” In this issue, he writes about the unexpected personal places his quarantine mustache has taken him. “My friend Brian and I thought it would be fun to see what we looked like with one,” Morris says. “I decided to keep mine. And the longer I’ve worn it, the more attached to it I’ve become, and the Blacker it’s made me feel. I’ve got to laugh, though. A few years ago, I wrote an essay about my penis for the magazine, but I feel more exposed putting the mustache into the world. For one thing, nobody wanted to take my picture for the other essay.”

Emily Bazelon

“Freedom of Speech Will Preserve Our Democracy,”
Page 26

Emily Bazelon is a staff writer for the magazine and the Truman Capote fellow for creative writing and law at Yale Law School. Her book “Charged” won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in the current-interest category and the Silver Gavel book award from the American Bar Association.

Matthew Desmond

“Evicting the Landlord,”
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Matthew Desmond is a professor of sociology at Princeton University and a contributing writer for the magazine. He previously wrote a feature about the American welfare state.

Tejal Rao

Eat,
Page 18

Tejal Rao is an Eat columnist for the magazine and the California restaurant critic for The Times. She has won two James Beard Foundation awards for restaurant criticism and a Vilcek Foundation Prize for her reporting.

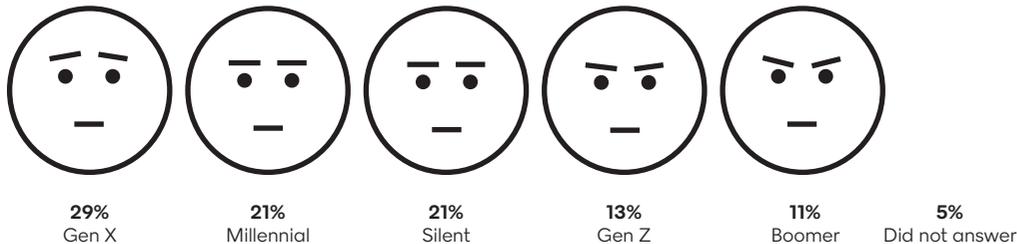
Jason Zengerle

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Jason Zengerle is a writer at large for the magazine. He last wrote about Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin.

Dear Reader: Which Generation, Besides Your Own, Is the Most Tolerable?

The magazine publishes the results of a study conducted online in March 2020 by The New York Times’s research-and-analytics department, reflecting the opinions of 2,250 subscribers who chose to participate.



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