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Why the Afro-Caribbean Diaspora Celebrate Carnival



As a young boy growing up partly on the francophone island of St. Domingue or Haiti as we know it today, few things gave me more pleasure than seeing random festivities making a raucous in my neighborhood. I would later learn that they are colloquially referred to as “raras.” Rara is defined as a festive Haitian musical category, religious ritual, dance, and sometimes a system of political dissent that originated in Haiti.

I remember running to my mother and saying in French : “Maman, il y a un tas de gens qui jouent de la musique et font des bruits joyeux dans les rues ! Et d’autres personnes les rejoignent en chemin ! On dirait qu’ils s’amusent ! Pouvons-nous les rejoindre aussi ? ” Which translates in English to: “Mom, there are a bunch of people playing music and making happy noises in the streets! And other people are joining them along the way! Looks like they’re having fun! Can we join them too? ”

I never asked “why?” I just felt the joy in the deep part of my youthful soul, replete with then a plethora of auxiliary wonderment. It was the few times that the border between adults and children blended and we all became simply humans just being. It never occurred to me that there was a reason why the historical legacies of these prima facie “happy” islanders were rooted in pain, which they would then deliberately mitigate by suffusing their hearts with joy rather than congregate to commiserate in an amalgamation of anger over egregious hurts from their historical past.

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This is the island I remember as a child. Running naked with my cousins in the rain, playing hide & seek during blackouts and flying kites under the perpetual summer sun and of course CARNIVALS: an equally festive but much bigger version of “raras.” A colossal event that encompasses floats of popular bands replete with polemic reciprocal banter all in good fun, lavish costumes and a time when they forget about dictators, and the politics of malicious foreign policies and governmental undermining of bigger more powerful countries that seemingly condemns them to a state of perpetual hardship and political unrest.

It wasn't until I came to America on a student visa that I learned about America's relationship with Haiti, which was and still is not so good. As I watched the American news media portray the Haitian people as sorrowful, pitiful peasants who “need” to be “rescued”, an ideology that conceivably corroborates “the white savior complex.” Even after over one hundred years of genetic research from top universities like Harvard have traced the VERY first human civilization back to the deserts of sub-Saharan Africa from which all other civilizations evolved 50,000 years ago! According to generative artificial intelligence, this is defined as: a mentality where a white person supposes they need to rescue or “save” people of color, often by belittling or meddling in their lives, while concurrently denying agency and authority to those they claim to help; fundamentally portraying themselves as the generous force needed to uplift demoted communities, which is often seen as a detrimental typecast and a form of racial despotism.

Key points about the “white savior complex”:

Patronizing attitude:

A white person with this complex may view people of color as incapable of solving their own problems and needing white intervention.

Performative actions:

Their actions might be more about self-image and gaining praise than genuinely helping the communities they target.

Ignoring systemic issues:

This complex often fails to address the root causes of inequalities, focusing instead on individual acts of charity that may not create lasting change.

Examples of white savior complex behavior:

A white person starting a charity in a developing country without consulting local leaders about their actual needs.

A white individual taking credit for the achievements of people of color they are “helping”.

A fictional narrative where a white character is the only one who can solve a problem faced by a community of color.

Why is the “white savior complex” problematic?

Perpetuates stereotypes:

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It reinforces the notion that people of color are helpless and need white people to save them.

Disregards agency:

It denies people of color the ability to advocate for themselves and solve their own issues.

Centering whiteness:

It puts the focus on the white person's actions and motivations, rather than the needs of the marginalized community.

When it comes to Haiti and other predominantly "black" nations, the scenarios above are what I've come to know as an adult through the American media and personal interactions with fellow Americans across all racial and cultural backgrounds. What America fails to tell the world is that despite Haiti's people being enslaved and brutalized for over a hundred years by the French, Haiti managed to single handedly secure its freedom by becoming the FIRST BLACK REPUBLIC in history in 1804 after the pivotal Battle of Vertières. From the authority of generative AI:

The Battle of Vertières was the final major battle of the Haitian Revolution and the establishment of Haiti as the world's first independent Black republic:

When and where

The battle took place on November 18, 1803, near Cap-Haitien in northern Haiti

Who fought

The Haitian army led by General Jean-Jacques Dessalines fought against Napoleon's French expeditionary forces led by General Rochambeau

What happened

The Haitian army stormed the French-held Fort Vertières and eventually defeated the French troops

Significance

The battle was a critical blow to Napoleon, forcing him to focus on building an empire in Europe. It was also the first time an army of enslaved people led a successful revolution for their freedom.

Monument

A monument was constructed on the site of the battle in 1953

And it was money from the then richest island in the Americas that France used to supplement the American Revolution against the British, in the late 1700s, Haitians came to fight off the Brits in Savannah, Georgia for which they are memorialized in a colossal monument erected in 2000 (better late than never, eh?). Not to mention that it was a Haitian American trader by the name of Jean Baptiste Point du Sable who is regarded as the primary permanent non-Native colonizer of what we now know as Chicago, Illinois, and is documented as the city's founder.

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Despite all these accomplishments, Haiti is still being portrayed in the media as pitiful underachievers who need to be “rescued” by the self-proclaimed superior powers that be.

So why does the African diaspora celebrate by throwing lavish “fetes” or “parties” in the form of Carnivals? As an adult, I had to research and educate myself about “my story”, no thanks to my American “His-story” classes of yore. The carnivals represent a joyous middle finger to their oppressors, much like when during the tempestuous epochs of the civil rights movement, black people used to sing negro spirituals as they were being arrested to reclaim their individual power, joy and dignity. The idea of “the carnival” was conceived to celebrate the liberation of the Afro-Caribbean Diaspora from slavery...something I didn’t know when I was child in Haiti.

It is a reclamation of the Afro-Caribbean power as a people, to tell their OWN story. I once read that until the lions possess their own historians, the history of the hunt will always extol the hunter. Hence the carnivals represent the formation of the hunted “lions’ historians” and they are “glorifying” themselves by telling their OWN stories through song, dance, fabulous customs and costumes!

Dedicated to my brother, Dr. Guy Claude Fleury for his inspiration and advocacy for Afro-Caribbean culture.

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