

Halloween, you're cancelled

PHOEBE MALTZ BOVY - SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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If you peruse family photo albums from 10 or more years ago, you have to brace yourself for the dress-up photos. Chances are that something someone was wearing would be deeply problematic by 2023 standards. Some of the culprits are obvious, namely headdresses or other appropriated Indigenous attire, or ([sorry, Justin](#)) blackface. Oh, and dressing up like a Nazi, also not acceptable, although Prince Harry appears to have [redeemed his reputation](#), or just centred himself in enough news cycles since the 2005 incident that it now feels like ancient history. Those costumes are clear-cut. Others, as we shall see, are more subtly fraught.

For post-university-age adults, costumes are not generally a major part of life, and therefore an easily avoided liability. They are, however, kind of a big deal for kids. Halloween is this tricky time when we tell children that they can, at long last, wear dress-up, something many of them would happily do every day if permitted, but only if the costumes meet certain standards.

Is Halloween dress-up a trap? Because the proliferating categories really do up the odds that something someone wears one year could turn out, a few years down the road, to have been unacceptable, for unanticipated reasons. Like in 2028, we'll learn that some politician dressed up as a witch in middle school and, for 2028-specific reasons, witch costumes will be problematic.

Or don't even wait that long. Articles from recent years inform us that witch costumes [are antisemitic](#), which I, as a Jew, ought to find concerning. Vampires too, I suppose, since the history of those mythic creatures also has [anti-Jewish roots](#). Such concerns can seem a bit ridiculous when you consider the more immediately triggering realities of everyday life. Commentator David Frum got at this with his [post](#), "We cannot stress enough how important it is to wear only respectful Halloween costumes at your campus murder-the-Jews rally," part of a thread pointing out certain inconsistencies in university sensitivities.

Mr. Frum mentions [sombros](#) as a garment deemed too culturally appropriative for costume attire, but the net today is cast wider than even the broadest-brimmed hat. Does dressing like an ancient Egyptian constitute appropriation? [Why not](#), although I'm not sure that ancient Egyptians, if surveyed, would care. Last year, Today's Parent [advised against](#) allowing your kid to go as Queen Elizabeth, because she had died too recently, but also because "the Royal Family's legacy is rife with controversy, so it's hard to be tasteful when dressing up like anyone from the British monarchy."

That dressing like a British royal crosses the line for some suggests this is no simple matter of costume etiquette following the same punch-up requirement as comedy. Humour can be called out for bad taste no matter where the target sits on an oppression hierarchy. I think of the 1975 Fawlty Towers episode, "The Germans," itself periodically [under fire](#) for a side-plot moment depicting (though hardly celebrating) a racist character saying a racial slur. The main action involves concussed hotel proprietor Basil Fawlty offending German guests – not, say, Jews – by imitating Hitler. They tell him it's "not funny," not for them nor "for any German people." Basil chastises them for having "absolutely no sense of humour," but is clearly being depicted as someone in the wrong. Point being, sensitivities themselves are nothing new, nor is the multifaceted potential for offensiveness.

That said, these days, dressing as who you authentically are is paramount, but just-for-fun dress-up is suspect. Clothing itself – much to the dismay of office-wear retailers no doubt – is more anything-goes than in previous eras, but there are also more pitfalls. Either you're earnestly expressing yourself, in which case only a bigot would suggest you change your look, or you're imitating and therefore mocking some other group of people.

Along with progressive censoriousness, there is now the bonkers thing, on the right, where it's rumoured that schoolchildren dressed up like animals [are fetishists](#) or convinced they actually are cats. It's why you get the creator of the social-media account Libs of TikTok homophobically [calling out](#) a U.S. government official for wearing a stylish blazer and accessories, as if this suggests something sinister, and isn't just what this man felt like wearing. The possibility that someone would dress up – in costume or otherwise – as an expression of playfulness somehow no longer registers.

We are living in extremely literal times. Actors are now expected to be members of the same identity groups as their characters, so it stands to reason that everyday dress-up would be held to an even higher standard. Or does it? There is, after all, no one profiting in the case of Halloween, except I suppose whoever is selling one-use polyester pirate costumes. Costumes that are doubtless not amusing if your family was murdered by pirates.

But it's not clear that there is a hard-and-fast divide, though, where imitation is concerned, or even what constitutes imitation. Some gender-non-conforming dress is rooted in identity; it's transphobic to suggest a trans woman is in costume. But some is also part of an exploration process, or more casually subversive. Some (here I'm thinking of old-timey comedic cross-dressing, where man-in-a-dress is the joke) is demeaning.

And where culture is concerned, it's clear why you wouldn't want to dress up for Halloween (or otherwise) as a different race. Yet going as a specific famous person who happens to be a race other than your own might well be about your admiration for that individual. Surely we want children to have role models of varied backgrounds. But that sort of dress-up now feels taboo, even if no face paint is involved. How far should "my culture is not your costume" extend?

Halloween is about spookiness, but violent costumes are a no-go. Ghosts and skeletons have a way of making one think about death, and if (during a pandemic or a war, for example) you're not feeling it, maybe those are a bit too much as well? The Hamilton police department [posted](#) some traffic-centric "safety tips," including "aim for costumes with light-coloured material" (thereby ruling out most Halloween costumes) and "avoid costumes with masks as they restrict vision" – an interesting request considering the concurrent calls these days to mask up again, what with COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses.

Dress-up, as is done on Halloween, is not quite the same as comedy, but is comedy-adjacent. It's dressing up for the sake of silliness, perhaps with some scariness or – for adults – sexiness thrown in. It doesn't sit right at a moment when unseriousness is tantamount to offensiveness. In their 2018 Netflix special [Nanette](#), Hannah Gadsby railed against comedy itself – and self-deprecation, in particular – as harmful to marginalized people, and, in doing so, set the tone for much of cultural criticism from that point forward. A good person never laughs, because doing so could be misconstrued as laughing at the oppressed.

Even observing Halloween at all is a little hmm for some. In 2019, one Toronto-area school [contemplated cancelling Halloween festivities](#) because not all students celebrate, and some families cannot afford to purchase costumes. (Nor, presumably, can they spare the time it takes to go the used or crafted route.) Maybe they have the right idea. Maybe fun itself is simply unfashionable, out of step with our times. It could be that we all should just stay home, not even for pandemic reasons any more, in identical grey sweatsuits, and wait for this hyper-serious moment to run its course.