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FEATURES

The problem with putting Hillary's head on a black woman's body

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After the final presidential debate, the country came alive with the fire of a [Nasty Woman](#). Donald Trump casually threw the [sexist insult](#) at Hillary Clinton while she described her policies on social security taxes. Clinton continued speaking without blinking an eye, and suddenly [Hillary supporters](#) had found the perfect new moniker for their candidate. There were the hashtags, hastily made [merch](#), and the inevitable nod to the lyrics of Janet Jackson's 1986 single "Nasty."

As the Jackson comparisons rolled in, so did the accompanying art. Creators put Clinton's face over Jackson's dancing body in a clip from the *Nasty* music video. A white Clinton supporter superimposed Clinton's face onto Jackson's figure on her album *Control*, the singer's curls spilling over the politician's face with the Clinton campaign logo now in the top right corner.



Another Clinton meme showed Clinton as Angela Bassett in the movie *Waiting to Exhale*, strutting away as a car she set fire to burns in the background. Bassett's character was cleansing herself of an ex, but the car in Clinton's version is marked with the names of Vladimir Putin, Trump, and his running mate Mike Pence.

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In both cases, Clinton's resilience was equated and celebrated with the imagery of successful black women. But these memes ignored the longstanding connotation of the word "nasty" in regards to sexuality, which is important given how easily our culture turns the black body into a sexual one. Adding insult to injury was Clinton's own missteps with black Americans, dating back to her husband's presidency.



If we don't question the meanings embedded within this art, we don't create any opportunities to do better in the future.

Progressives employing black and brown culture to boost their candidate isn't unprecedented. Earlier this year Latinos for Hillary, a microsite of the Clinton campaign, chose San Antonio artist Cruz Ortiz to showcase his art as part of efforts to connect with Latinx voters. He created prints and T-shirts for the Texas Democratic Convention in San Antonio in June. His work throughout this election season focused on encouraging Latinx people to register and vote Democrat. One of his more popular pieces places Trump's grinning face above the word *pendejo*, or "asshole." Another of Ortiz's political artworks is a sticker that couples Clinton's smiling face with the word *chingona*, a once-derogatory word that now means "badass."

Those Janet memes and Cruz's art may have had good intentions. But when we see images of, say, a white politician's face on a black body—done by white people as a political joke, shared over and over again—we have to acknowledge that humor created for one specific audience can alienate another. When an artist of color does it, like Ortiz, it instills a notion of community support for a politician who has in many ways failed to support that community. If we don't question the meanings embedded within this art, we don't create any opportunities to do better in the future.

The group Where Are The Latinx Artists? [asked](#) on their Facebook page on October 18 if it was possible to create ethical political work in conjunction with a campaign. "Can your work truly be for your cultura by your cultura when you label Hillary Clinton as a Chingona?" they asked. The group's critique was met with harsh opposition.

For Latinas, taking hold of the word "chingona" with pride and power was a long, communal process. Hillary hasn't earned that.

"We should be supporting our own, even if we don't agree, instead of tearing them down for all to see," one commenter wrote. "How is that true brother and sister hood?" Another wrote: "Not sure when using a language became cultural appropriation. If that's true, you might be guilty of it by using English." Some commenters even worried criticizing the art would be encouraging votes for Trump.

But wanting something better than Clinton's face marked with a reclaimed word is not a vote for Trump—especially if the candidate in question has made some questionable choices when it comes to people of color. After all, Clinton is the same politician who supported policies like cutting public welfare aid, used "super-predators" to describe young black kids and justify the three-strikes law that helped to fill up America's prison system, said in an [interview](#) that she carries hot sauce in her bag like Beyoncé, and tried to give Latinx voters seven reasons why she's [just like our abuelas](#). Throwing around the use of *chingona*, even lightly, for a white woman whose political support has hurt communities of color—even as she panders to them—just doesn't sit well. For Latinas, taking hold of the word *chingona* with pride and power was a long, communal process. Hillary hasn't earned that, even if the idea did come from a Latinx artist.

To their credit, some meme creators have acknowledged this. But not until people of color expressed their discomfort:

On October 24, Ted Rutherford, creator of the Clinton-ified *Control* cover art, [issued](#) an apology statement after it was shared by *People Magazine*, the Today Show, and celebrities like Rashida Jones, George Takei, and Angela Bassett. "In the moment of inspiration, I didn't see the harm in making and sharing the image," he said. "I only saw the benefit to me. My perception as a white man prevented me from seeing the potential for harm to people of color whose detriment has long been for the benefit of white people like me."

Issues of perception extend beyond just Hillary; quick-fire internet commentary has allowed for other racially awkward memes. Take feminist icon Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg or, as she's known on the internet, Notorious R.B.G. She's on T-shirts and coffee mugs, which inspired an eponymous biography. She *gets* it! Or at least she did. In an [interview](#) with Katie Couric, Ginsburg said San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick and other NFL players' decisions to kneel during the national anthem was "dumb and disrespectful." Days later, she said she should have declined to [respond](#), which isn't the same as agreeing with Kaepernick's right to protest. Our idols aren't perfect.

Clinton and Ginsburg—white women who shine as a supposed symbol of inclusivity and progressivism—can't stand in for every woman. These political figures, through their legislation or their own personal faults, have at some point failed to see people of color as fully human. No attempt at humor or connection, however artistic, will ever separate them from their whiteness. Our political art, and how we depict these political figures, shouldn't try to divorce them from their race, either. Clinton doesn't have to be appropriate pop culture to be culturally relevant. Let her exist as the successful white woman she is. She has her own laurels to rest on; she doesn't need Janet's, too.

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