Renouncing 'the Magic Negro' urge

By [Drew G. I. Hart](#)
October 2, 2014

I refuse to be "the Magic Negro" of any organization. Common, you know what I am talking about. Many Christian organizations in the U.S. have a myriad of ways of tokenizing black people. It is only appropriate to think about what it means to be "a black face in a white space" right now as a constructive conversation around race will hopefully jump off after the debut of the movie *Dear White People*. Tokenizing black women and men in white Christian spaces is an old practice. And while most people of color tend to hate being tokenized in general, there still are particular lures to being a community or institutions "Magic Negro".

Most often though, tokenizing is done with the expectation that minorities will be a ***"Submissive Negro"***. This poor soul is merely expected to quietly enter into white space without affecting in any capacity the way white dominant cultural space performs and operates. The key habit expected of them is to pursue success through the practice of assimilation. The "Submissive Negro" must not disrupt the culture, values, practices, beliefs, customs, or perspectives that they enter. If change must occur it must be solely thrust on the backs of women and men of color. No mutual transformation is acceptable. The "Submissive Negro" must quietly die to, or at least hide, their cultural, social, and historical distinctiveness. **They should be able to be told "we don't think of you as black" as though that were a compliment.** While certainly black people, and minorities in general, find themselves out of necessity and survival, playing this role at times, the truth is that no one desires this life. It is humiliating and its acceptance subtly denies the beautiful marks of a life made in the image of God.

Of course the "Submissive Negro" will always be used as a foil to shame what many dominant cultural communities have portrayed and stigmatized as ***"the Angry Negro"***. The "Angry Negro" may indeed actually be angry, often for justifiable reasons, but they can just as easily fall into this category without being angry in the

slightest. The "Angry Negro" merely needs to question in any capacity the path of assimilation as an option for their life. Basically the "Angry Negro" does not fit into these dominant cultural spaces well. They straighten their backs, uphold their human dignity, and affirm their own community's insights, wisdom, and ways of being in ways that causes friction to those that take for granted that black people should be happy and content, since they have access into these inner circles that were originally intended to systematically advantage white people in society. That the cost of losing oneself in pursuit of the American Dream is not valued to some people, seems to be taken as an offense to many people in the dominant culture. **Rather than taking time to really listen and have a human encounter filled with questions and curiosity, empathy and patience, dialogue and even disagreement in pursuit of growth and understanding, most situated within dominant culture have been more tempted to find reasons to dismiss those that refuse to live lives playing by hegemonic rules.** The label "Angry Negro" is an outright dismissal of anything someone says, without trying to first seek understanding, by matter of fact that they fit this caricature. In truth, most often the person cast as the "Angry Negro" is usually just someone that is trying to live honestly and truthfully before themselves and God.

With that spirit, many black people go forward in life seeking to make a difference in whatever spaces we find ourselves in. However, another temptation remains that is much more subtle and mischievous in its capacity to entice people of color. Black people have always negotiated and leveraged systems that were not originally intended for their benefit. This is the African "trickster" spirit at work. However, while leveraging these systems there is also the possibility that one can fall into a place in which the dominant cultural institution itself has pulled a quick one over their eyes by putting them on a special platform as the black hero of their community or institution.

Some white institutions want multiculturalism, but often practice it in a way in which the core life of the community still runs on white normativity, in relation to assumptions, culture, and practices. In these spaces, black people specifically, but certainly all people of color in general, can become banners for organizations to wave proudly. We can become the one black person seen among all white male faces over and over again at every single evangelical conference. **We can become *the one person* systematically advantaged people can point to as evidence that they truly wrestle with minority perspectives. While to some this has**

obviously evolved into tokenism, usually this black flagship leader begins to enjoy this privileged position too much. They offer insight that will barely challenge folks, but never willing to speak truthfully and boldly in a manner that risks real consequences for disrupting the status quo. The system stays perfectly intact, but messages about racism and oppression are delivered in cute ways that popularize him or herself, but reorients no one towards another way of being human. In many ways, they operate very similarly to the "submissive negro" but rather than doing so out of necessity and survival, this person does so because they love the exclusivity of being **"the Magic Negro"**.

This temptation will always remain when we are willing to blindly benefit from and represent a system that is working well for us, without the concrete concern for others that are silenced or stigmatized by that very same system. In the name of making a difference, we can actually begin to help the system be sophisticated in its ability to point to its "change makers" (even though they are merely exceptions to the rule) as evidence of its commitment to anti-oppression. When we are the evidence rather than an inclusive system that is concretely working towards ridding itself of all hegemony, then we have a problem. When we never speak truthfully about the injustice we see regularly within the communities and organizations we benefit from, we succumb to the urge to be "the Magic Negro". The reality is that we will always be living and working within unjust systems. **So yes, we must continue subversively and creatively leverage these systems, but it ought to be for the betterment of all oppressed and marginalized people, not just for ourselves.** I always seem to be compelled by the witness of Jesus in Luke 13:31-35. It's not just Jesus' defiant stance before empire when he calls Herod "that Fox", though that certainly does inspire me. **What ignites a subversive and courageous faith for me is Jesus' resolve to keep working, no matter what, for the most oppressed and most vulnerable in society, until he is crushed by the Jerusalem establishment that he eventually clashes with and confronts.** In seeking to live Jesus-shaped lives, we can renounce "the Magic Negro" urge and opt for courageously subversive faith that has taken on the form of Jesus Christ in our bodies. May our negotiations within dominant cultural spaces reflect that Jesus story more and more.