

FOCUS SECTION

THIS WEEK'S TOPIC: A history of being Black

TO BE SOLD, on board the Ship *Banco Island*, on Tuesday the 6th of May next, at *Ashley Ferry*, a choice cargo of about 250 fine healthy **NEGROES**, just arrived from the *Windward & Rice Coast*. The utmost care has already been taken, and shall be continued, to keep them free from the least danger of being infected with the **SMALL-POX**, no boat having been on board, and all other communication with people from *Charleston* prevented. *Aubin, Laurent, & Appleby*.

P. Full one Half of the above Negroes have had the SMALL-POX in their own Country.



Black: a color, an attitude or a history?

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The Pendulum

The 20th century was, among other significant milestones, an age of civil rights. It was an age that redefined what it meant to be black every few decades. The century saw the black person as a slave to segregation, then in the 60s, as a person struggling in a world of hate and in the shadow of freedom. Toward the end of the century, to be an African American meant establishing a respected place in society.

Now, at the dawn of the 21st century is black a color, an attitude or a history? The question of what it means to be black is more gray than black and white.

It is a question Elon students must answer as well. And it was a question students and faculty attempted to answer. A forum last Monday night was centered around the question "What does it mean to be black?" The forum was sponsored by Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority and Elon's Finest.

Panelists for the discussion were Dr. Betty Morgan, professor of political science, Linda Poulson, assistant professor of accounting, Anne Cassebaum, coordinator for the non-violence minor, freshman Ablavi Gbenyon and junior Tina Ryals.

Being black around other blacks

The stereotype is that blacks are supposed to act, talk, dress and look a certain way. Otherwise, they are an outcast even in their own race. Several black students at the forum admitted to looking down on other blacks because they had lighter or darker skin.

I can myself remember saying 'she's white skinned,' Gbenyon said. "But we need to remember we're all black and I believe black is beautiful."

Those with different complexions know the familiar terms of ebony, coal black, chocolate and brown sugar. So why is it that blacks frown on being "too black" or not acting "black enough"? It has been institutionalized to think that the whiter, the better. One panelist's answer was that it is human nature to want to stratify a group of people.

If every single person was

the same color, we would stratify people because of eye color," Ryals said. "Racism exists in any country. It's going to be like that as long as we're here."

Being a younger African American versus an older African American

"You cannot begin your future until you know your past" is a quote by Sankofa, but the older generation of African Americans worries that the younger generations will forget their roots and the struggles of their ancestors.

"What people in my generation fear is that some of [the race problems] will return," Morgan said. "I don't see that [younger black people] care about what's happening, but that's because activism is carried out differently today."

Today there are no marches or rallying "I Have A Dream" speeches, but black students still say they are working toward equality.

"The older generation had a tangible problem to deal with," Ryals said. "It is hard for us to clearly define the problem."

Being black in the workforce

Two students on the panel were asked this question: What do you do in the working world if someone says don't do anything to draw attention to your blackness? Drawing attention to blackness would be, for example, wearing braids instead of straightening their hair.

In the 21st century, should black students take this advice or view it as an insult? Gbenyon said she would appreciate the advice. Apparently there is still some merit to the advice "first worry about getting a foot in the door".

Ryals would not welcome the advice.

"I don't want to be there if I have to change my appearance," she said. "I will just go to another company that will accept me."

African Americans are beginning this century able to get a job, but many still feel that they must be substantially better than their white counterparts to get the same job.

"It's still extremely important that we're better than the next person when applying for a job. We

still have to bring more to the table because we're black," Ryals said.

Being black at Elon

The first black student graduated from Elon in 1969. Only 31 years removed, blacks still make up only a small percentage of Elon's student body.

Poulson stressed that black students should take advantage of the opportunity to go to Elon. She spoke of remembering the time when white and black students could not go to school together.

"In a predominantly white school, you are allowed to sit beside white colleagues and study beside white colleagues," she told the black students. "Take advantage of that opportunity."

Because of the small number of black students, Morgan also pointed out that it was a natural thing for the black students to stick together. As a white professor, Cassebaum noticed the sense of community African Americans seem to have.

"To be black means to be connected," she said. "As a white person, that's what I noticed."

One black student thought that the perception of a strong community was as much an appearance as an accurate depiction.

"It was interesting to hear that you see community," Ryals said.

"It's that whole on stage, off stage thing. We're keeping up appearances for things that count like the Million Man March. There is a strong black community at Elon, but we don't necessarily always like each other."

What it means to be black has changed with history and has been shaped by figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Nelson Mandela and even sports greats like Jackie Robinson and Michael Jordan. But it has also been shaped by the average African American.

"My being black is not defined by my outside features," Ryals said. "It is defined by the love I have in my heart and the struggles that's brought me here."

"You cannot begin your future until you know your past."

--Sankofa