

5-2019

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Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Nordmeyer, Emma. "Jesse Route: Using Style to Signify Injustice" (2019). *Race, Ethnicity, & Religion*.
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Jesse Route: Using Style to Signify Injustice

Jesse Route, the first African-American student to graduate from Augustana College, has been the subject of very little research. At the time of his enrollment, student *Observer* writers were fascinated by his presence. Route generated headlines such as, “Colored Student at Augustana Works Nights to Earn Way Through School” and “Jesse Route, Colored Student at Augustana, Has Life of Interest” both of which reflect his compelling presence at a previously all-white institution. Route was well-known for his musical performances, which reflect his position as a black man in a white majority country. Upon graduating Augustana, he completed an “extensive” tour of the Midwest, performing African-American spirituals and other music at over eighty locations.¹ Later in life, Route made national headlines by wearing a turban, defying racial categories in the Jim Crow era. Wearing a turban, he received far better treatment than most black men would ordinarily receive in the South. From a queer perspective, Route’s clothing choices express his identity in a way that inverts both racial and patriarchal norms, directly confronting power structures of the Jim Crow era. Here, I understand queerness “not as an identity but rather as an interruption of injustice.” When interpreted through a queer lens, Route’s musical and aesthetic choices can be seen as empowering. Queerness as a sociopolitical perspective extends far beyond the realm of gender and sexuality.² In this paper, I use the queer perspective to analyze how Route’s music and dress disrupted the injustice around him.

In an *Observer* article, a student writer describes Route’s graduation recital as a “sensation” featuring a variety of music, including folk, guitar, and popular music.³ By performing various styles of music, Route exposed the ostensibly white population of

¹ “Extensive Concert Tour Made during Summer by Route” *Augustana Observer*, October 2, 1930.

² Michelle Wolff. “Madonna and Child of Soweto: Black Life Beyond Apartheid and Democracy” *Political Theology* 19, no.7 (2018). 1-21.

³ “Jesse Route will Present Graduation Recital on Friday”. *Augustana Observer*, May 2, 1926.

Augustana to elements of black culture, popularizing elements of his culture. Route's musical performance can be defined as a representation of coolness which acts as resistance to other American ideals. According to Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, black culture is a "repository of cool" in the U.S. in which black coolness is a "stance of opposition to and confrontation with dominant social norms." Black cool represents resistance to mainstream American culture and creates an alternative set of rules for black Americans, serving as an aesthetic outlet for political resistance⁴. Coolness in American culture, even when imitated by whites, is implicitly traced to blackness, creating a unique cultural problem in which black people are discriminated against yet seen as desirable. For example, white Americans may listen to hip-hop but denigrate those who use African-American vernacular, even though that language gets used in hip-hop. Jesse Route, by performing African-American songs for white audiences, became an embodiment of early 20th century cool. He expressed the need for a separate set of rules for black folks by expressing black cultural values in his music.

Route's role as an entertainer on a mostly white campus might be framed as merely catering to white audiences. Su'ad Abdul Khabeer cites bell hooks in warning against this performative black male coolness. In *We Real Cool*, bell hooks warns against patriarchal black male coolness in favor of a coolness "that remains life-enhancing," leaving "a legacy of grace" for future generations.⁵ This idea challenges the effects of Route's work -to what extent can it be seen as life-giving to future black students at Augustana College? The concept of *signifyin'* is useful in understanding Route's work as specifically undoing racist ideology in this life-giving way. Signifyin', as used by Khabeer, is a means in which black men use white cultural symbols

⁴ Su'ad Abdul Khabeer. "Cool Muslim Dandies" in *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion and Hip Hop in the United States*, (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 139-177.

⁵ bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2003), quoted in Khabeer, *Muslim Cool*, 142.

in a subversive manner⁶. Jesse Route's music included genres traditionally not performed by black artists. By performing white genres, Route "signifies" his place in white society, entering in white spaces in a disruptive manner. This disruption lead Route to capture much attention from the *Observer* and other media outlets. Later in his career, Route performed mostly music and poetry from black artists. This move builds up on the momentum Route built through signifyin' in a way that directly disrupts injustice. Route later also toured giving lectures on racial injustices that specifically affected African-Americans. He used his existing fame and credibility to build a distinctly black space for himself without conforming to White expectations. His music defies respectability politics and rules of modesty for black men, asserting his blackness through performance. Understanding queerness as a disruption, we see how Route's performances and directly intervene on the timeline of racial injustice. His transformation from entertainer to social justice advocate constitutes a queer timeline in which Route undoes some violences committed against his race. That is, his performance made blackness more popular and therefore accepted in the American mainstream. While initially using signifyin' to establish his place in society, Route later capitalizes on his blackness. Route asserted himself as a black man in a white institution, thus disrupting an injustice.

While wearing a turban on a visit to Alabama, Route was treated not as a black man in the Jim Crow era but as a "visiting dignitary." When asked why he wore a turban, Route stated that he was not trying to deceive anyone, but he was trying to learn⁷ This social experiment came about as a result of prior experiences taking a coach train, when he was assigned to a small, dirty

⁶ Khabeer, *Muslim Cool*, 143.

⁷ "Queens Negro Pastor in a Turban Gets 'White' Service in Deep South". *New York Times*, November 17, 1947.

car and separated from the rest of the passengers.⁸ This challenging of racial categories through stylistic choices is common between African-Americans and Eastern cultures. According to al-Khabeer, this “cross racial borrowing” is part of a larger system of cultural exchange between Muslims, blacks, South Asians and whites. According to historian Paul Kramer, wearing a turban portrayed Route as a “mysterious foreigner” who is expected “to try to conform to your rules” without the expectation of “successfully” conforming.⁹ In this instance, Route’s wearing a turban confused Americans’ understandings of race. This performance was further confused by Route’s use of a Swedish accent. As a result of this performance, Route was treated as non-black individual. Understanding queerness as a disruption, this racial performance can be seen as a direct questioning and confrontation of American racial structures. Additionally, his style pushes gender boundaries by displaying a more flamboyant black maleness which contradicts more traditional, modest Black styles. Route’s turban portrayed a different sartorial image of blackness in a time when “black authenticity [was] bound to an urban aesthetic that [was] criminalized, parochialized, and powerless.”¹⁰ Defying this stereotype, Route dressed in such a way that marked him as a mysterious foreign dignitary; he was seen as an elevated Other, making himself stand out. Route had been educated in the tradition of “Lutheran restraint,” which emphasized humility and maintaining the status quo. Route, however, disrupted racial categories through wearing a turban in a display of “flamboyantly scrambled otherness.”¹¹ He confronted injustice not through “respectable” means, but in a disruptive, controversial manner. This aesthetic choice called into question America’s racialization of dark skin by highlighting

⁸Paul Kramer. “The Importance of Being Turbaned”. *The Antioch Review* 69, no. 2 (2011). 208-221.

⁹Kramer, “The Importance of Being Turbaned”, 209.

¹⁰ Khabeer, *Muslim Cool*, 165.

¹¹ Kramer, “The Importance of Being Turbaned”, 218.

how a style marker, such as a turban, can change the interpretation of one's phenotype and therefore the treatment they deserve.

Route's turban disrupted categories of black, European, and "other," therefore changing the way he was treated. When he rode as a black person on a coach train, Route was hidden from view from the white passengers and treated as an eyesore, stripping him of his power. He was isolated from the mainstream due to his blackness. African-Americans, according to Paul Kramer, were discriminated against not because of their otherness but because of their Americanness. Black people were mistreated precisely because they were expected to conform to White American standards, yet they were barred from being treated as full citizens. Foreigners, however, were not treated in this way, as they were not expected to conform to American standards. Wearing a turban allowed Route to be treated as a guest. Rather than being criminalized, Route was regarded as a foreigner, confusing White Americans who were unable to racialize Route. White people could not discriminate against him because they felt they could not properly classify him. At the same time, wearing a turban portrayed him as a mysterious and alluring Other, attracting the white gaze. By displaying himself as something other than a Black American man, Route defied these expectations entirely, queering expectations based on skin color. This choice helped Route to signify (in the sense of *signifyin'*) his place within American racial diversity. That is, he appropriated nonblack symbols as a way of resisting racial norms, calling into question stereotypes regarding African-Americans and stereotypes of the East. In this moment, Route occupied this separate space in between white, black, and Other. Route evaded discrimination based on his race, calling into question *de facto* discrimination in the Jim Crow era.

Due to its Swedish heritage, Augustana College can be classified as a predominately white institution. Jesse Route, the first black student to graduate Augustana disrupted this racial stability through his musical performances and clothing choices. Route's musical performances created his own black space within a white institution, *signifyin'* his presence at a white institution. Rather than pandering to white audiences, Route used music as a means of establishing common ground with white audiences, later using the platform to elevate black voices. His presence on campus disrupted the racial makeup at Augustana, creating a queer site of empowerment. Later in his life, his decision to wear a turban further mystified white Americans by queering the lines between black, white, and Other. A queer analysis understands Route's life an example of how bodies can symbolize or incite change. In this case, Route's physical attributes troubles stereotypes of black masculinity. Route's presence at Augustana, though brief, merits further investigation as an influencer of campus culture whose impact lasts until today. His story sheds some light on the history of race relations at Augustana. His presence also calls attention to the relations between race, style, and gender in the U.S. and the power of appearance on political discourses.