

Previously Non-Participating Parties Progress Prom Past Problematic Presentation

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If you are above age eighteen and graduated from a public high school, it's more likely than not that you remember the night of your prom. It is becoming increasingly popular for students to skip the event of prom itself and rather attend parties that take place either after or during the dance, but regardless of whether one attended the high school sponsored event itself or chose to sit out, odds are good that the memory of the nights remains strong. The Prom came into existence towards the beginning of the twentieth century as an event with similar cadence to a debutante ball. It was originally a middle-class ritual that promoted the etiquette and formality of traditional promenades to the younger generation. Since creation, the – traditionally senior-prom has become thought of as a rite of passage for those who are between childhood and adulthood, in limbo between their educational past and their future career. This tradition has lasted over a century and remains relevant but was not necessarily designed for those who are currently participating. The prom was created by and for well-off white Americans, leaving little space for other cultures. As the prom evolves over time, cultural communities are figuring out how to make themselves present and visible and alter the narrative of the prom to include a variety of cultural backgrounds rather than solely western.

When the idea of prom was thought up, segregation was rampant throughout America, meaning a new event for high schoolers would inherently be segregated. Today there are no segregated proms in America, but the history of the separated nights is alarmingly recent. Prom culture also revolves around a late night. This “night to remember” as many think of it typically ends no earlier than 10pm, with dinners, parties, and other festivities causing the event to generally range from 7pm to 2am. Although this time range is not a specific cultural restriction, there are cultures that value teenagers remaining in their homes during late hours, especially on weekends. Prom has become more accessible and many norms across the country are more relaxed than in the past, but the prom itself has not changed much to welcome cultures other than western, but rather simply to accommodate them.

The integration of prom came with the overall integration of schools in the late 1960s-early 1970s. At a school in Rochelle, Georgia however, prom was not fully integrated until 2014. The dances for white students and black students were run privately, one called the “white prom” and the other the “black prom”. The “white prom” was organized through meetings at the school where students worked with a teacher to plan. The “black prom” was organized solely by students on their own as the event was not even recognized by the school. Representatives from the school district and community defended this separation by saying “Our school doesn't have a prom - we just have private events. They're just private parties where certain people are invited; they're not official proms!”. In 2013 the students fought the administration and 2014 was the first year the prom was fully integrated.

In Rochelle, Georgia black students are now allowed to dance alongside their white classmates and enjoy a shared experience together. The logistics of the night remain centered around what was once “white prom”, with no attention given to black cultural points of prom. The black

students are not displaying “black presence” while at the prom, and their culture is in no way celebrated by the event. One way that African American families have begun to make the American prom their own is through “send-offs” or “send-off parties”. These parties take place right before prom, sometimes lasting the duration of the dance if the student is not interested in attending. Family, friends, teachers, coaches, community members, etc., are welcomed into the home of a graduating senior to share congratulations and memories. The event resembles a graduation party which are popular across cultures, but is more focused around the shared joy of the community rather than the singular student. It is not uncommon for the senior to head to their prom and the community to continue the celebration, sharing stories of their own proms, relating about upbringings, and generally enjoying a moment of reminiscence together. There is the sentiment that the families participating have experienced a long history of tragedy and are now going through a shared healing process. The past in terms of racism and segregation is so recent, but the African American community is still able and excited to express joy when joy is due and lift one another up when there is accomplishment or achievement. Families will often spend the same amount as they would on prom for one child on an event that involves those they care about and value. These send-offs are an opportunity for African American people and communities to rewrite the dominant narrative to include them and their culture by altering prom to be focused on their values.

African Americans were removed from the narrative of prom through segregation, while other cultures were silenced more discretely through historic repression and exclusionary tradition. Asian Americans face complications around prom as certain aspects of the night contradict cultural values. Many immigrant parents from East Asia fear judgement or backlash from their communities back home if they are to let their teenagers stay out as late as is normal on prom night. When asked what they expect prom to look like, many immigrant parents will recall scenes from *American Pie* and other high school movies, referencing wild parties, binge drinking, etc. The Asian American students attending school in America are able to separate those films from life and recognize that their experience will likely not be some off-the-chain-rager, but for parents who are less immersed those lines are less clear between media and reality. Many East Asian cultures also frown upon dating in youth, making the tradition of finding a date for the big night inherently negative. Even having a friend act as one’s date for a night can seem ingenuine or unbelievable for parents who then force their children to stay home.

Over recent years it has become more common for seniors to attend prom in groups with friends rather than with a romantic date. The night which initially resembled the debutante ball, an event for young women to be presented to bachelors from high society, has evolved to a celebration that doesn’t require romance or a date in any real sense. This shift has allowed Asian Americans in traditional households to live the experience without letting down their families, friends, or selves. Bollywood and other foreign film industries have also accomplished quite a bit in terms of normalizing American behavior and expressing actions of teenagers as acceptable in society. Immigrant parents from East Asia are typically familiar with Bollywood and are more willing to open their minds when their media shows examples of such.

Like African American communities, although Asian Americans are now becoming more present and accommodated for within the world of prom, they do not have their own space in the event. To amend this lack of visibility, Asian Americans, especially women are more frequently spotted in traditional Asian styles and fashion. Asian Americans are often placed under a microscope, constantly being seen as a representative of their culture even when they are not actively attempting to do so. An article written by Angela Chan, an Asian American whose parents both immigrated from China, described growing up in a community of predominantly Cuban immigrants in Miami: "Where I grew up, it's normal to be an immigrant or child of immigrants, but because it was a Cuban community, as an Asian American, I felt like a minority within a minority community". Asian American communities face the duality of feeling singled out as minorities yet being grouped into the single marginalized title "Asian" that somewhat erases the distinction between specific Asian cultures. Wearing traditional Asian apparel allows Asian Americans to define themselves in the way they desire, that conforms to the formality of prom but represents their culture how a typical prom dress could not. Cheongsams and Qipao dresses are becoming more popular as prom attire for women as the prom becomes an event that values and supports Asian American culture.

The demographics of the high schools in America have changed drastically, and the acceptance and recognition of cultures other than western has evolved dramatically. With all these political and social changes, it is necessary for the nationwide prom to adapt. The prom that high school seniors attend today before starting their lives as adults is not and should not be the same prom that was invented in the early 1900s for middle-class white families to display their wealth and parade their children around. The values of the 1900s white family do not align with the mix of values the variety of cultures today are bringing to public high schools, so communities that were previously silenced and underrepresented are changing the narrative of prom to not only include but celebrate all cultures.

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