

Community Update on using fake dreadlocks in festival costume

Agreed by the Board and Blues on behalf of the BFS membership, 2025

Ten years ago, in 2015, BFS members and witnesses raised an uncomfortable truth - that performers using mainly black face and body paint were reminiscent of a harmful racist tradition. Whether or not we meant it like that, to the outside world it looked like we either didn't know that [blackface](#) was a racist issue, or that we didn't care. Stopping using mainly-black makeup was clearly the right thing to do, so we stopped.

In more recent times, we've learned as a community that performers using fake dreadlocks as part of their costume has a similar effect. Some of our audience, some of our existing and potential community members, and some of the wider world look at us and think "do they not know that looks racist, or do they not care?" Some of our friends have told us that seeing fake dreadlocks being commonplace meant they didn't think BFS would be a safe and empowering place for them. We can't know how many potential audience members and community members have had the same thoughts and turned themselves away.

Even while we lean in hope towards a future without racial inequality, we acknowledge that in this moment our choices can cause or reduce harm. We accept that real harm can be caused without harmful intentions. There is a widespread perception that performers wearing artificial dreadlocks as part of costume are doing so to try to look wild, uncivilized, nonhuman, or unworldly. Whether or not this is the intention, we accept that this plays into harmful stereotypes about Black people. Now that we recognise our tradition of using fake dreadlocks as part of Beltane and Samhuinn costumes is causing real harm, stopping using them is clearly the right thing to do.

We are aware that members have many reasons for wearing costume dreads. Some of us have precious sets that have been passed down from friends, or ritually worn every year. Some of us rely on them for warmth in otherwise skimpy costumes. Putting them on together has been a special occasion. But we can't justify continuing now that we know what message it sends.

We are also aware that some members of BFS wear real dreads as part of their day-to-day life and may feel judged for that choice. Please be reassured that this policy decision is about fake dreads as costume, not anyone's authentic presentation. You are still welcome here.

For the last two years the Blues have heavily recommended people don't use fake dreads as costume, but left it as personal choice rather than an outright rule. This has given the community time to talk, think and build the consensus that we might need to let go of using fake dreads in costume. However it has also unfairly pushed the burden of explaining the problem and educating the community onto our BME members.

We want to lift this burden by clearly stating that this decision comes from the Board, Blues and Safeguarding Team, guided by our community and a commitment to anti-racist action. If you want to talk it through to gain a deeper understanding or ask questions, the Blues and Board are happy to be contacted. We also invite the community to own and feel good in this decision, which is in line with the [Safer Spaces Policy](#) we already uphold. In that, we

acknowledge that we live in a world suffused with systemic racism and we commit to being open to listening and learning how we can do better. We have listened, we have learned, and now it is time for us to do better.

Exact wording to be added into guidance on costuming within BFS:

Performers should not wear fake wool-roving dreadlocks, or other things that look like dreadlocks, as part of their costumes.

A volunteer who arrives to a festival or getting-ready-space wearing them should be asked to remove them or turned away.

Acceptable alternatives can include braiding of materials into hair, chunky wool artificial braids, hats, fire-safe wigs, or using fire-safe products like egg-white or wire to reshape your natural hair.

Although we acknowledge a long tradition of wearing wool roving dreads in BFS without harmful intent, we've learned that putting on costume dreads as part of a masquerade of wildness/otherness/non-humanity has caused deep racial harm and sent an exclusionary message.

Now we know that, we don't do it any more.