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“Whew child, the ghetto!” “Bye, Felicia!” “Aint nobody got time for that!” Thanks to social media, memes, gifs, and reaction videos it is easier than ever to express how you’re feeling without using any words at all. Even with all the different forms of self expression, Black people and specifically Black women have become the epicenter of entertainment in America. Black people can become a caricature of themselves at the drop of the hat. American people have somewhat progressed since the first slave ships were brought here in 1819. Minstrel shows are a thing of the past. Black people are not shucking and jiving for massa anymore. But even still, why are Black bodies still the butt of the joke?

Danielle Dirks and Jennifer Mueller wrote a piece titled “Racism and Popular Culture.” In this they described race as a fluid concept. To qualify this point they used a quote from E. Guerrero said, “The concept of race in American social life is a concept under constant contestation, giving it no single fixed meaning in defining racial boundaries, hierarchies, and images. (Guerrero, 1993) Though by and large race is a fluid concept, it still comes with real world effects and repercussions. Even with the “fluidity” of race, modern media still pushes the ideas of “white superiority and Black inferiority.” Since its inception, different forms of entertainment have “had centuries old equences—economic, psychological, and otherwise. Popular culture has had a centuries-old history of

communicating racist representations of blackness in Western societies, giving it the power to distort, shape, and create reality, often blurring the lines between reality and fiction (Baudrillard, 1981, 1989; Pieterse, 1992)."

Media is something that is largely ingrained in our society. Whether it's through a television screen, a phone screen, or stage we are constantly taking in content. Social Media has evolved our society in a way where entertainment is literally at our fingertips. Modern media plays a large part in the way that we view the world and how we view one another. It asserts different power dynamics and can become a vehicle for the spread of stereotypes and racism. There is a concept known as social creativity that was coined by Imran Awan in which "people shape their online behavior to try to position their in-group as dominant in society (Awan, 2020)." Basically, social media creates a highschool lunchroom dynamic. The "in-crowd" or the more dominant group sets the pace for the room. They control the narrative for the room. One of the dangerous parts about this dynamic is that the less powerful groups lose control of how the room sees them. This power dynamic perpetuates stereotypes and leaves the powerful as the inaccurate voice for everyone in the room. This is a common occurrence in modern media. Black people's narrative is controlled by non Black people leaving Black people to become objectified, commodified, and voiceless. Guerrero said, "Blacks have been subordinated, marginalized, positioned, and devalued in every possible manner to glorify and relentlessly hold in place the white-dominated order and racial hierarchy of American society." (Guerrero, p. 2). Everyone participates in Black culture, but social media intensifies the interactions.

Minstrel shows are a form of entertainment that first originated in the early 1830's. There is not a definite location where the shows began, but historians closely pin it to New York. Thomas Dartmouth Rice came across a Black stable hand singing and dancing for passersby on the street. The performer was singing a unique song and danced with a limp. This was particularly entertaining to Rice and so he decided to adopt this person's performance into a character that he could use for his own performances. He mixed together burnt cork and water to make a black face paint. He accompanied the face paint with a tattered, ill-fitting suit and created a caricature out of the stable hand. He named this character "Jim Crow." (Rosenburg, 2013) In his show he would depict Black people as lazy, stupid, angry, hypersexual, and ignorant, among other things. His performance started to gain traction in the United States and eventually became the most popular form of entertainment by 1845. By the end of the Civil War, minstrel shows became increasingly more popular. White people from all over the country would paint themselves black, throw on some tattered clothes, and mock enslaved Africans on Southern Plantations. This form of entertainment was primarily used by people in Northern and Midwestern cities. In these cities, residents had little to no interaction with real Black people. (NMAAHC)

Minstrel Shows went from a one man show to a form of "defined theatrical entertainment (NMAAHC)." Performers would have well known routines, costumes, and sheet music to accompany them on their tours. It became a symbol of American culture. It was inexpensive, entertaining, and reconfirmed the power balance of society at the time. Historian Dale Cockrell said that this gained so much popularity so fast because "poor and

working class whites who felt squeezed politically, economically, and socially from the top ,but also the bottom” of society needed a way to express the oppression that marked being members of the majority ,but outside of the white norm. To put it simply, it was a way for whites to authenticate their whiteness. Minstrelsy also created a “homogeneous popular culture in all regions of the country (NMAAHC).” Smithsonian historians discuss this concept by stating that when someone from out of town would come to another city, they could easily “sing a tune or share a joke” that they picked up from a minstrel show to create a sense of white belonging. (NMAAHC) Much like social creativity and the high school lunchroom dynamic, whites wanted to be a part of the powerful group. It created a “white in-group” of people who participated and consumed minstrelsy.

New Media picked up minstrelsy and ran with it. It was now seen regularly on stages, radio, and television. Popular actresses like Shirley Temple and Judy Garland regularly participated in minstrel shows. Though the shows excluded Black people, they did not ignore Black culture.

After some time, Black people began to participate in minstrel shows as a way to break into the entertainment industry. Karen Sotiropoulos said that “for Black Americans, the 1890’s ushered in a decade of shrinking possibilities, and artists and activists alike desperately sought any avenue for advancement.” Black people from the South began to move to the North and formed minstrel groups, with the selling point being their authentic Blackness. Even though the narrative was false, Black people still wanted to attempt to take some power back and have some control of the narrative.

Minstrelsy became less popular by the 1930's and was virtually unheard of by the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. Though people were not painting their faces with black shoe polish anymore or singing "Jump Jim Crow" for the masses; the seeds had already been planted. Minstrelsy was and is still engrained in modern media.

In modern forms of entertainment, we still see nods to minstrelsy through the use of the same negative stereotypes from the first Jump Jim Crow show. Black people are still being hyper-sexualized and seen as aggressive, ignorant, and lazy. The images are shaped by the media, which creates the narrative that Black people have never progressed past the state of slavery. These stereotypes have found their way onto stages, tv screens, and even in the palms of people's hands on social media. The recycled remnants of minstrel shows are still ravaging the Black community like a cancer.

What is digital Blackface? Digital Blackface is a term first coined by Adam Clayton Powell. He first used the term to describe the "racial stereotyping of Black people in video games. (Wong, 2019)" The term was popularized by Lauren Michele Jackson, a feminist writer and doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago. She describes the term as "the practice of white and non-Black people making anonymous claims to a Black identity through contemporary technological mediums (Jackson, 2014)" In a journal called Memes and Misogynoir, Jackson describes digital Blackface as "white and non Black people making anonymous claims to Black identity through contemporary technological mediums like social media (Jackson, 2014)" This can also happen through memes, gifs, emojis, and even Blaccents. Digital Blackface creates a more seamless transition from whiteness to Blackness, since it requires no physical altering of the body and it has a layer of anonymity.

The problem with digital blackface is its close similarities to minstrel shows that happened in the early 19th century. People would darken their skin, put on a costume, and use black people as a caricature for their entertainment. These performances are rooted in racism and hatred. They were used to push a false narrative about black people, while also creating a divide between the races. Digital Blackface is seen all over social media, but it is more easily evaluated on Twitter. In most cases, there will be an account that has a Black person (either fictional or real) as their profile picture, it will have a traditionally Black name, and the account will be filled with the improper and excessive use of AAVE (Jackson, 2014) Digital Blackface most commonly happens with the overuse of Black people in gifs and memes. Minstrel shows are not as prevalent anymore, but their influence is still heavily ingrained into modern entertainment. Nods to minstrel shows are often seen in film, cartoons, and now social media.

Black people have been and continue to be exploited by the media for entertainment purposes. Ali Gleaves said, "Black bodies, and minds, no matter what they are doing or if they have consented to having their likeness humorized, are put into Gifs and tweets that are used to express sass or the attitude of the poster (Gleaves, 2020)."

Blackfishing is the newest online trend that stems from its sister term catfishing.

Catfishing is when someone will create a fake online persona for fame, money, or identity theft. This includes using fake pictures and creating a fake personality on the profiles.

Blackfishing is when "a person on social media who is not of color changes their physical appearance (e.g. hair texture, skin color, etc.) in order to be perceived as a specific person of color (e.g. African-American, Mixed, and Afro-Latino) (Bullock, 2019)." Some frequent

perpetrators of this are Ariana Grande, Addison, and pretty much all of the Kardashian/Jenner family. This can be achieved by using heavy bronzer, excessive self tanner, photoshop, or in some extreme cases people will undergo plastic surgery. The problem with this is that non Black people are treating Blackness like it's a costume that can be removed at any given time.

Oftentimes, people with large followings on social media will participate in blackfishing. Blackness or racial ambiguity can be seen as means of social currency. It can generate social media followers, likes, and overall engagement. People view Black features as something that sells and can eventually act as a vehicle to fame.

A blaccent is when a non Black person uses an accent that is typically used by African Americans . It can be seen often on social media ,but different celebrities have been known to participate too. Awkwafina, the Asian-American actress, has been known to brandish her blaccent in films and interviews. Most time blaccents are created with the absence of Black culture. Non Black people will pick up on AAVE from another non Black friend or colleague and completely eliminate all the Blackness that came with it. (Jackson, 2014) Most times Blaccents are inserted in spaces for comedic relief. The similarities between digital blackface, blackfishing, and blaccents and minstrelsy are uncanny.

Reaction pictures, memes, and gifs have become a part of the textbook social media experience. Now more than ever, users have access to hundreds of thousands of ways to express exactly how they are feeling in any moment. Even with all these options, black people are at the center of it all. Sa'iyda Shabazz put it best when she said "It is hard to wade into the comment section of a social media thread without seeing some of the same

GIFs over and over. The eyeroll of *Real Housewives'* star NeNe Leakes somehow becomes the symbol for millions of white women who just can't even." Over and over black people are mocked and overused for the sake of a joke. (Jackson, 2017)

TikTok is a video sharing social media platform that was first created in 2016. The app launched in the United States in 2018 and quickly gained traction since then. The platform allows users to create 3 to 60 second videos where they do anything from dancing to cooking. TikTok's true claim to fame came from the ability for users to dub over their videos with the sound of another creator's video. The platform now has been downloaded over 80 million times in the United States and has over 2 billion downloads across the world. TikTok has become one of the most popular apps to date. It has become a platform with its own following and viral trends (Parham, 2020).

In the wake of George Floyd's unlawful murder by Minneapolis police, black creators decided to take a stand. They planned a black out where all black creators would change their profile pictures to the black power fist and any content posted throughout the day had to be related to the current political climate and tagged with the black lives matter hashtag (Parham, 2020).

TikTok has been known to shadowban or take down content that goes against their community guidelines. Creators started noticing that all content that included the black lives matter hashtag was shadowbanned, which prevented it from getting exposure, or taken down completely. The problem with this is that it was almost exclusively happening to black creators.



Earlier this summer, a group of black creators were interviewed by Time magazine about the mass shadowban on BLM. The overwhelming majority of the group said that “they have either experienced noticeable declines in viewership and engagement on their videos after posting content in support of the Black Lives Matter movement or noticed recent instances where they felt that TikTok’s community guidelines weren’t being fairly applied to Black creators.”

Following this, Tiktok pledged to make the platform more conducive for black creators. Even with all of the statements released and pledges signed, all of it was just performative. Black content creators are still seeing the same levels of mistreatment on the platform. Due to the nature of shadowbanning and how the algorithm works on this platform, you can outright say that only black creators and the Black Lives Matter movement is being silenced.

Since users can use the sounds from other videos as the background of their video, it makes it easy for digital blackface to run rampant on the platform. Nene Leakes of The Real Housewives of Atlanta is commonly used on TikTok. The problem is that she is not popular on the platform but her voice, words, and mannerisms are. A video of her saying “Whew child the ghetto” went viral years ago ,but recently it was re-discovered by TikTok and white suburbia. Soon after there was a trend of non-black people using NeNe’s voice in the background of their videos while they displayed their first world problems. On the surface many people do not see a problem with this. They would use this sound to demonstrate how things are sub par and have room for improvement. The problem is that the overwhelming majority of the videos using this sound do not just stop with just the use

of the sound. In these videos, people would mouth the words to NeNe's video while also attempting to "act like a black woman." Some people would put on synthetic, tangled, and mangy wigs; Other people would put pillows in their pants and shirts to mimic a more curvy body. Things like this push the stereotype that all black women are unkempt, have outrageously unproportional bodies, and say everything with an attitude. This is no different than minstrel shows from the early 1900s. These types of instances just further the practice of digital blackface.

Giphy, a database of over 1 billion gifs and 30 million users, has recently released a statement stating that they know their platform has aided in the popularity of digital blackface. The company claimed to have even attempted to modify different features to make sure they are not promoting racist messages. This still does nothing to stop the line of thinking that black people's looks, mannerisms, and accents can be exploited for mass entertainment. Gifs of black women are often used and push the stereotype of them being "angry" or "sassy." They also allow non black users to adopt black culture as an "extension of themselves." Now they can use AAVE safely, with limited backlash. These types of things reduce black people down to a joke and take away from their humanity. This also brushes off the severity of the racism that black people face daily. The hypervisibility of black people through memes and gifs puts them at an even higher risk of harassment and violence (Jackson, 2018).

Appropriation is a complicated topic to address in 2020. It is hard to say who owns what and what people can and cannot participate in. The fact of the matter is that even though

the topic is clouded, Black people are still allowed to police their likeness and control the narrative that includes them. After years and years of Black people being commodified, memeified, and humiliated for the sake of entertainment, it is time to find a new butt of the joke. Scholar Sianne uses “animatedness” to describe Black people. Lauren Jackson describes Black people as a “walking hyperbole” because of it. The common denominator of all these things is the concept of black adjacentness. Just like the minstrel shows in the 1930’s, non Black people want Black culture without Black people. Non Black people want to bottle up Blackness and only engage when it is convenient for them. This diminishes the Black experience. You cannot have the Black experience and try to erase Black people.

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