

**INSIDIOUSLY SOPHISTICATED:
FROM BLACKFACE TO BLACKFISHING**

by

Benét Burton

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in American Material Culture

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ABSTRACT

A racist form of entertainment that persists through generations, Blackface has evolved with modernity to maintain relevancy, transforming into the 21st century practice of Blackfishing: the process of white women manipulating their features to emulate the physical attributes and aesthetics of Black women to the point of realism. Having only been defined in 2018, Blackfishing has yet to be interrogated through a historical lens, until now. From skin color to hair, my research investigates the different forms of cultural appropriation of the Black female body and how they coalesce in Blackfishing. Applying traditional theoretical material culture studies and historical research methods, my study interrogates the historical dehumanization and fetishization of the Black female body to expose the complex lineage of how Blackface has persevered and transformed into Blackfishing. I interview other Black women and provide a space for them to argue the importance of researching the commodification of the Black female body and to better comprehend the societal effects of this practice has on this demographic. Building upon object based research of nineteenth and twentieth century Blackface minstrel materials, as well as digital material culture, my research demonstrates how white women draw from the aestheticism and attributes of feminine Blackness and disembody actual Black women from their humanity, dehumanizing them to simple physical features that they can pick apart and style on themselves to insidiously sophisticated perfection.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Wanna Thompson, also known as @WannasWorld on Twitter, singlehandedly hijacked Black Twitter the night of November 6, 2018. Scrolling through my timeline, I was met with numerous quoted retweets of her original post; people ‘shook’ from the images contained within the thread and were disgusted by the evidence Wanna, and other Twitter users, compiled in defense of her post. As the night progressed, the tweet gained even more popularity causing #Blackfishing and #Niggerfishing to start trending by the next morning. The iconic tweet that took Black Twitter by storm was as follows:

Can we start a thread and post all of the white girls
cosplaying as black women on Instagram? Let’s air them
out because this is ALARMING.¹

I scrolled through image after image of women in the tweet’s thread who appeared to either be light skinned Black women or racially ambiguous; their skin color close, or even darker than my own, their hair and fashion similar to the Black women I know online and off. At first glance, the pictures of Instagram influencers and popular Twitter users didn’t seem weird. At first glance, I assumed the images were of real mixed raced and/or light skinned Black women, wrongfully accused. That

¹ Wanna Thompson (@WannasWorld), Twitter Post, November 6, 2018, 9:03 p.m., <https://twitter.com/WannasWorld/status/1059989652487069696>

is, until I enlarged the images and realized that there was something inauthentic about these photos of “Black” women. Luckily, the Twitter ‘investigators’ included screenshots of these women’s true white skin tone, juxtaposing them against the images of them with their fake brown skin. Included in the thread were also celebrities, such as Ariana Grande and Kim Kardashian, with users stating that their tans and personal aesthetics were ‘getting a bit too close to Black for comfort’.

Like any controversial claim, there were those, mainly white women, opposing Wanna Thompson and her tweet, believing her to be taking things too far or being hypersensitive. Twitter user, @laurenxbrownlee, tweeted, “Annoying. Now going to have to buy a medium tan cause don’t want to be accused of trying to be black.”² Likewise, @leahmohan11 posted her complaint stating:

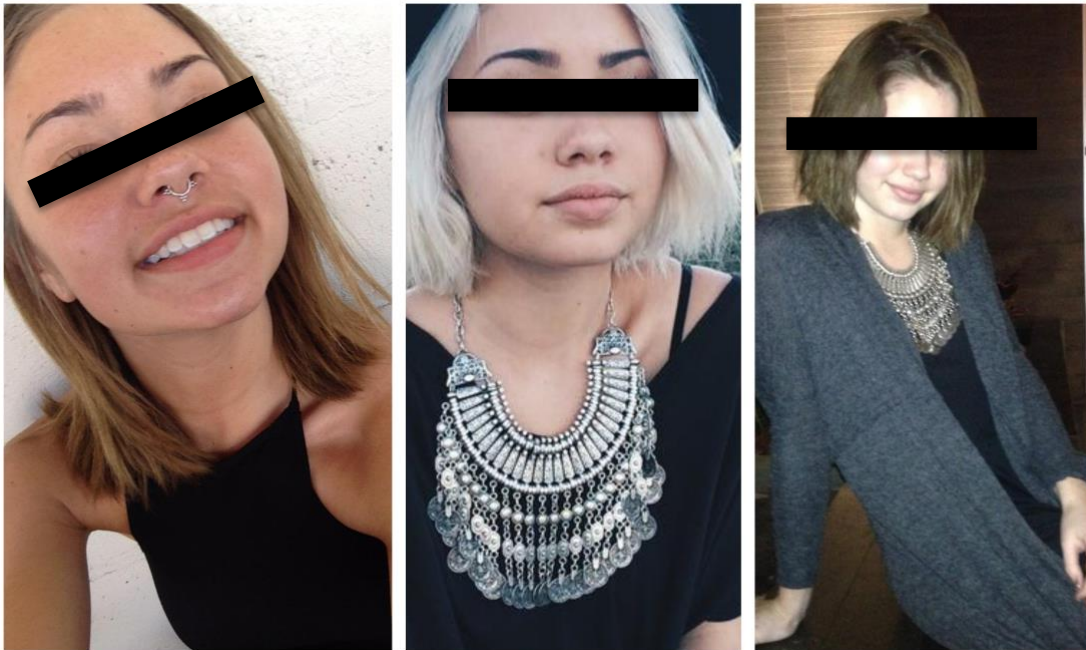
This whole thread is obnoxious. Have you never heard of African Americans “bleaching” their skin to be white? And nobody said anything about that? But girls want to have big lips and get super tan and then they’re targeted because they’re trying to be “black”? Wtf???? YOU REACHIN.³

² Lauren Lee (@laurenxbrownlee), Twitter post, November 9, 2018, 6:43 p.m., <https://twitter.com/laurenxbrownlee/status/1061041704567037954>

³ Leah Mohan (@leahmohan11), Twitter post, November 7, 2018, 9:03 p.m., <https://twitter.com/leahmohan11/status/1060352060321861633>

Those opposing Wanna Thompson's post all held the same claims: these women were not *trying* to be Black. They just happen to like tanning their skin considerably dark and curling their hair. And while these aesthetic inclinations do border on cultural appropriation, these images, in my opinion and others', were beyond excusable. The objectification and commodification of Black women has been a long running narrative since the exploitation of Saratjie/Sara/Sarah Baartman allowing it to evolve into something so insidiously sophisticated like Blackfishing.

One such post in the thread included screenshots of Instagrammer Jaiden Gumbayan.⁴ The first picture in the four-part image post included three separate selfies her with white skin and her hair short and straight (fig. 1).



⁴ @babyheirandfro, Twitter post, November 6, 2018, 11:09 p.m., <https://twitter.com/babyheirandfro/status/1060021431831019520>

Figure 1: Jaiden Gumbayan before Blackfishing (Image from @babyheirandfro)

This first image is then followed by three other pictures of Gumby, three of which showcase her with drastically darker skin, larger lips, traditionally Black hairstyles, such as box braids and cornrows, and dressed in a more sexualized fashion (fig. 2).



Figure 2: Screenshot of @babyheirandfro's Twitter post to showcase the evolution of Jaiden Gumbayan (also known as JaidenGumby on Instagram) from her natural appearance to her Blackfishing aesthetic

When isolated, the last three images of Gumby can be interpreted as a light-skinned, or mixed race, Black woman, as there is no true way to physically distinguish Blackness. Once put into context with her natural skin tone, however, the distinct change in aesthetics and demeanor is obvious. Jaiden Gumbayan was, as Wanna Thompson joked, 'cosplaying' or costumed, as a Black woman. She had deliberately darkened her skin with a fake tan and brown makeup, changed her hair to mimic culturally Black hairstyles, and even adorned herself in a fashion often associated with Black women (i.e. large gold hoops, long stiletto nails, and layered gold necklaces). In fact, all the white women added to this thread had done the same: significantly altered their appearance to be almost indistinguishable from actual Black women. While some viewed this as no big deal, others, me included, recognized the dangerous line this behavior was tip-toeing. @angryblkhoemo articulated the problem best: "This thread...Jesus. Modern-day blackface. 🏠" ⁵. My research will analyze the features Blackfishers culturally appropriate to approach my theory that Blackfishing is a dehumanizing process of cultural appropriation that turns Black women into material

⁵ Angry Black Hoemo, Twitter post, November 7, 2018, 6:46 a.m., <https://twitter.com/angryblkhoemo/status/1060136289142476802>

culture design sources. White women draw from the aestheticism and attributes of feminine Blackness and disembody actual Black women from their humanity, dehumanizing them to simple physical features that they can pick apart and style on themselves.

1.1 Methodology, Positionality, Terminology

Research is not objective. Thus, because this thesis is investigating different forms of cultural appropriation of the Black female body and how they coalesce to create the phenomenon Blackfishing, it is important to note my positionality as a Black woman. Furthermore, as a Black woman conducting research specific to my identities, I found it paramount to center the voices and perspectives of Black women on such a topic. With that being said, my approach to my research is inherently interdisciplinary. In addition to applying methods of material culture studies and historical research to my thesis, my work includes an anthropological approach through interviews with other Black women on their perspectives on Blackfishing and Blackface; how images of people in the makeup make them feel, and whether they can assess when or not a Blackfisher is a ‘real’ Black woman or a just a white woman ‘cosplaying as Black’, as Wanna Thompson affectionately put it. Along with trying to gauge how other Black women feel about Blackfishing, these interviews serve to provide a space to consider *why* the phenomenon exists and how it affects our existences as Black women, in both the digital and the real world. My research and

interviews with other Black women will seek to explain why the Black community would consider Blackfishing as Blackface and why commodification of the Black body for material culture matters. Throughout my thesis, I interject the transcripts from my recordings with these six women as both feedback and evidentiary support on the effects of Blackfishing on Black women. Stylistically these interviews are italicized for the reader's distinction. This thesis will also be accompanied by a glossary of terms use throughout that are a part of African American Vernacular English. A large component of my thesis involves interrogating aspects of Black culture that many are not privy to and thus, the glossary acts a supplementary tool to aid readers in understanding the content.

Chapter 2

GOOD OL' JIM CROW

2.1 Origins of Traditional Blackface Minstrelsy

Understanding Blackfishing means understanding the history and practice of Blackface. An infamous entertainment form, the term Blackface references the specific form of theatrical-makeup which non-Black, mainly white, performers would use to represent a racist caricature of a Black person. American actor and playwright known as the “Father of Minstrelsy,” Thomas Dartmouth Rice, popularized the practice in 1830 with his character, Jim Crow, an impersonation of an enslaved African. In its early formation, minstrelsy started off as brief burlesques or comedic entr’actes and while Rice was not the first minstrel performer, his song and dance *Jump Jim Crow*, first performed in 1828 Louisville, popularized the practice into a distinct American art form. Allegedly inspired by a disabled Black man named Jim Cuff or Jim Crow that Rice had met, the physical manifestation of Jim Crow mockingly distorts the Black male body. When depicted [as] this character, Rice’s body is often posed as if in mid-dance, his left leg outstretched with the foot flexed while his right bends for support. His right arm mimics his leg, bent and placed on his hip whilst his left hand is extended outwards. Threadbare clothing and shoes adorn his figure, a notable marker of the figure (fig. 3).



Figure 3: “American Theatre Bowery New York” (November 25, 1833). Depiction of Thomas D. Rice during his blackface minstrelsy performance as Jim Crow in the New York Bowery Theatre on November 25, 1833. Captioned: View of the stage on the fifty seventh night of Mr. T.D. RICE of Kentucky in his original and celebrated extravaganza of JIM CROW on which occasion every department of the house was thronged to an excess unprecedented in the records of theatrical attraction.

In this illustration of him performing at the New York Bowery Theatre, November 25, 1833 Jim Crow is backdropped by a crowd of white men, reveling in his mockery of dark skin Black men.⁶ With lyrics such as:

⁶ Johnson, Stephen Burge. *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012.

Come listen all you galls and boys
I'se jist from Tuckyhoe,
I'm going to sing a little song,
My name's Jim Crow.

Weel about and turn about
And do jis so,
Eb'ry time I weel about
And Jump Jim Crow.

"Oh I'm a roarer on de fiddle,
And down in old Virginny,
They say I play de skyentific
Like Massa Pagannini

I'm a full blooded niggar,
Ob de real ole stock,
And wid my head and shoulder
I can split a horse block.⁷

This fictitious Black man captivated white audiences, caricaturing enslaved men with his "happy-go-lucky bravado."⁸ Alongside Jim Crow, who exemplified the 'bumbling buffoon,' are other minstrel characters such as, Zip Coon, a caricature of a free Black person. First performed in 1834 by George Dixon, and meant to be a foil for Jim Crow, Zip Coon's speech pattern was purposefully littered with malaprops as a means of showcasing his displacement in high society. Subsequently, as Blackface expanded

⁷ Rice, Tom. *Jim Crow. and Mr. T. Rice as the original Jim Crow*. New York (29 Chatham St., New York): E. Riley, 1819-1831

⁸ Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. Race and American Culture. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013., pg. 5

as an artistry so did its cast of characters; among these are Uncle Tom, Buck, and the Pickaninny. From the overexaggerated movements to the use of bastardized African American vernacular speech or “darky dialect,” these performances relied on performative techniques in minstrel shows founded in the mimicry of enslaved Africans. As W.T. Lhamon Jr. writes in his essay, *Turning Around Jim Crow*, “Jim Crow is the earliest popular construction of blackness that Americans provided themselves.”⁹ This mimicry is based on the white imaginary construction of Black life.¹⁰ Charcoal, burnt cork, and later greasepaint were all used to emphasize a black complexion, with dark rouge applied to the performers’ lips for an oversized exaggeration of the physical feature. Blackface acted as a commodity and manipulation tactic; the imitation and obvious mockery of Blackness acted as social currency for the white actors masquerading as well as a means of tethering the Black population to the bottom rungs of the racial hierarchy. Eric Lott, author of *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy*, demonstrates that the minstrel show existed as a socially acceptable form of institutional control, allowing the white population to safely consume Blackness and Black culture while maintaining their power over the racial demographic through the debasement of their character. These Black simulations, however, hid a deeper distress, a fear of the ‘Other’ by the white population through the Black body. Thus, these minstrels operated as a way “to play with collective fears of a degraded and threatening – and male – Other while at the same time maintaining

⁹ Lhamon, W.T. "Turning around Jim Crow." In *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy*, edited by Johnson Stephen, 18-50. University of Massachusetts Press, 2012., pg. 24.

¹⁰ Ibid.

some symbolic control over them.”¹¹ This mixture of fear and control of the ‘Other’, the Black body, enabled the white population’s inherent fascination with its culture and essence.¹² But, while Blackface maintained social control over the ‘other’, it allowed the white actors to partake in debauchery they otherwise would have forsaken due to their own societal and racial limitations.¹³ The materiality of Blackface makeup, its thick texture and heavy presence on the skin, furthered white actors’ disassociation from themselves to the “grotesque” Black body, allowing them to act on fantasies of the racial ‘other’ and enjoy their Black culture, while concurrently upholding their contempt. “Hatred of their own excess of enjoyment necessitates hatred of the Other.”¹⁴ While the most notable Blackface caricatures portray Black men in a derogatory manner, female Blackface caricatures existed alongside them as their counterparts. The mammy, mulatto, and the jezebel all exist as stereotypes of the Black women. Their portrayal in minstrelsy are most often performed by white men, further dehumanizing their existence.

¹¹ Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. 20th-anniversary edition. ed. Race and American Culture. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013., pg. 25.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., pg. 152

¹⁴ Ibid., pg. 153

2.2 The Female Form in Blackface

Men are the most visible demographic in relation to minstrelsy and thus were the ones most often masquerading as feminine racist caricatures. Their cross-dressing caricatures exemplified stereotypes of sexual proclivities and dehumanization that the white imaginary had in regard to Black women. For Black women, their racist counterparts fell primarily into the categories of the mulatto, the jezebel, or the mammy. Also known as the ‘tragic mulatta’(plural), the mulatto was caricatured often a light skinned to white passing, sexually attractive Black woman obsessed with social climbing who must humble herself by accepting her ‘negro ancestry’. The jezebel was the titular hypersexualized caricature of a Black woman, often depicted partially or fully nude, she is a seductress, crafted in a way to appeal temptingly sexually to men. The jezebel’s foil, however, is the mammy, a dark skinned, large Black woman often adorned in a homely fashion whose only purpose is to serve “massa and his children.”¹⁵ Racial cross-dressing, also known as Blackface transvestism, acted as means for white men to play out vulgarity through caricaturized instances of misogynoir, a term coined by Moya Bailey in 2010 to describe the specific anti-Black racist misogyny Black women experience.¹⁶

¹⁵ Pilgrim, David. “The Jezebel Stereotype.” *Ferris State University: Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia*. 2012. <https://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/links/essays/vcu.htm>

¹⁶ Blackburn Center. “What is Misogynoir.” *Blackburn Center*. February, 12,2020

The most ‘vulgar’ acts of Blackface transvestism included white men masquerading as the Blackface character of the wench, also known as the jezebel. As Eric Lott narrates, these characters would perform “fiendish dances”, parodying Black womanhood.¹⁷ First popularized in the 1840s, the ‘wench’ was a character that actors such as George Christy, Barney Williams, James McIntyre and Thomas Heath would employ in their minstrel performances, enhancing their act with stereotypical sexualized versions of imagined Black women.¹⁸ James McIntyre’s female impersonations in the stage play “Waiting at the Church” exemplifies this hypersexualized version of the Black woman; the groom was manipulated into marriage with an unattractive Black woman, perpetuating the narrative that Black women are “desperate for sexual union, desperate for the security of marriage, oblivious to [their] own ugliness, and potentially violent.”¹⁹ McIntyre’s costume as the bride (fig. 4) depicts him in his Blackface makeup, adorned in with a flower crowned veil as he looks off into the distance.²⁰

¹⁷ Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. 20th-anniversary edition. ed. Race and American Culture. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013., pg.164

¹⁸ Pasternack, Leslie. "The Bride Wielded a Razor: Images of Women on the Blackface Stage of James McIntyre and Thomas Heath." *Comparative Drama* 40, no. 4 (2006): 505-25.

¹⁹ Pasternack, Leslie. "The Bride Wielded a Razor: Images of Women on the Blackface Stage of James McIntyre and Thomas Heath." *Comparative Drama* 40, no. 4 (2006): 505-25., pg. 515

²⁰ Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. "James McIntyre as bride in "Waiting at the Church." New York Public Library Digital Collections.



Figure 4. “James McIntyre as bride in “Waiting at the Church. (1920-1922)” New York Public Library Digital Collections. Photographed by Apeda, New York. This staged photograph of James McIntyre in his female blackface costume implies that the image was meant for re-distribution to fans of McIntyre’s acting, showcasing the popularity he obtained through his minstrel performance

In his gloved hands he holds a bouquet of flowers juxtaposed against a comically large razor. In “Waiting at the Church”, the violence is enacted through the bride’s use of an oversized razor, hidden in her bouquet to threaten her groom, a symbolic gesture of a Black woman’s sexuality being a form of castration of a man’s power and autonomy,

as Leslie Pasternack's article *The Bride Wielded Razor* theorizes.²¹ White men masquerading as Black women depicted white America's incessant habit of degradation of the Black people. However, similar to the male Blackface characters, the perpetuation of this stereotype heightened the fascination with Blackness and Blackface, expanding it outside of its dominant demographic: white men. Heightened popularity in Blackface lead to the inclusion of other demographics interested in performing the racist art form, specifically the inclusion of white women, a population often obfuscated from the narrative.

2.3 White Women in Blackface

Blackness was a profitable entertainment structure, actors such as, Frank Bower, Milt G. Barlow, Eddie Leonard and, of course, Thomas Dartmouth Rice, had themselves lucrative careers through minstrelsy's mockery. Simultaneously, this debasement thrust the white imagined Blackness into the mainstream to be consumed, exacerbating white America's fascination with Blackness and Black culture. Blackface had become an American art form. Paradoxically, the social violence of Blackface led to the "blackening" of the United States, where instances of Black culture and Blackness weaving itself into the fabric of Americana, most notably

²¹ Pasternack, Leslie. "The Bride Wielded a Razor: Images of Women on the Blackface Stage of James McIntyre and Thomas Heath." *Comparative Drama* 40, no. 4 (2006): 505-25.

through its music production.²² In 1845, J.K. Kennard lamented on this ‘Blackening’ of the United States culture in *The Knickerbocker*, a New York daily newspaper, stating:

Who are our true rulers? The negro poets, to be sure! Do they not set the fashion, and give laws to the public taste? Let one of them, in the swamps of Carolina, compose a new song, and it no sooner reaches the ear of a white amateur, than it is written down, amended, (that is, almost spoilt,) printed, and then put upon a course of rapid dissemination, to cease only with the utmost bounds of Anglo-Saxondom, perhaps of the world.²³

With the success of minstrelsy came its accessibility. Thus, white women became active participants in the racist art form of Blackface. An early example of this is the performance of Caroline Fox Howard in her 1854 rendition of Topsy in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (fig. 5).²⁴

²² Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. 20th-anniversary edition. ed. Race and American Culture. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013., pg. 100.

²³ Ibid., pg. 102.

²⁴ Sheet Music, “Oh! I’s So Wicked,” 1854, acc. 79x202-203, col. 240 #8199 John & Carolyn Grossman Collection, The Winterthur Library, Winterthur, Delaware.

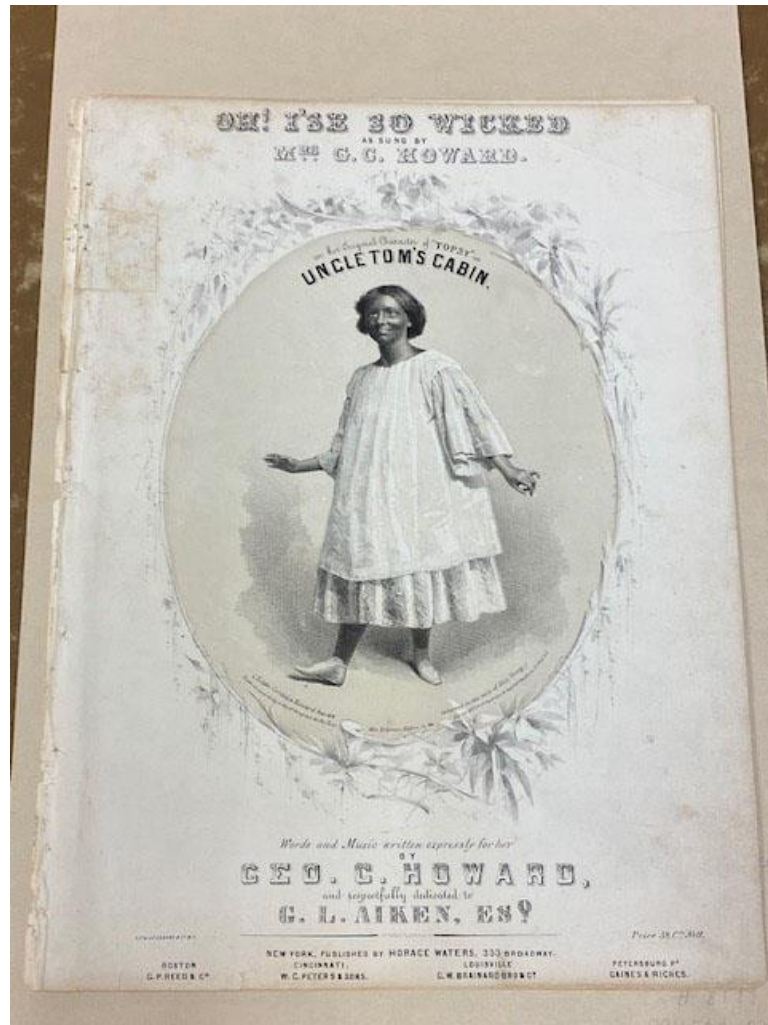


Figure 5: “Oh! I’s So Wicked as sung by Mrs. G. C. Howard”, 1854.

Caroline Fox Howard is depicted in this engraved sheet music cover as Topsy from the performance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Her blackface performance is an indicator that white women also performed blackface minstrelsy during the 19th century

In traditional minstrel fashion, Howard’s performance relied on exploitative stereotypes. As Elizabeth Boyle explains in *‘Twisting herself into all shapes’*: *Blackface Minstrelsy and Comic Performance in Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig*, Howard effectively reduced “the image of a Black woman’s body to infinitely deconstructable

‘othered’ matter”.²⁵ Howard’s image appears on the cover of the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* sheet music of ‘Oh! I’s So Wicked’ (the title a bastardization of African American Vernacular English), and showcases her European features overtaken by burnt cork Blackface makeup and wooly wig.²⁶ But it was not until the 1890’s that Blackface expanded into the amateur theater, allowing white women to craft their own minstrelsies and be involved in both the writing and performing of the shows.²⁷ As minstrelsy progressed and refined with each performance, it soon became popular enough as stand-alone entertainment for an evening, becoming more aligned with performing “‘authentic’ depictions of southern plantation slave culture” than mimicry of stereotypes.²⁸ This expansion into the amateur theater sphere led to the production of how-to manuals for amateur minstrel performers in the 20th century.

Harold Rossiter, author of the 1921 *How to Put on a Minstrel Show*, perfectly captured this progression in his text: As he explains, “A minstrel-show is the one form of entertainment of which the public never seems to tire...”²⁹ Rossiter’s and other minstrel how-to manuals outlined how to maintain the longevity of Blackface;

²⁵ Boyle, Elizabeth. “‘Twisting Herself into All Shapes’: Blackface Minstrelsy and Comic Performance in Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*.” *European Journal of American Studies* (Spring 2014) 9 (9–1).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Recchio, Thomas. “The Serious Play of Gender: Blackface Minstrel Shows by Mary Barnard Home, 1892–1897.” *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 38, no. 2 (November 2011): 38–50., pg. 38

²⁸ Stephen Burge Johnson. *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012., pg. 6

²⁹ Rossiter, Harold. *How to Put on a Minstrel Show*. Chicago: Max Stein Pub. House, 1921., pg. 3

teaching not only how to best safely put on burnt cork correctly but how to look more ‘realistically’ Black with their theatre makeup, and how to perfect a “pitiful” negro accent.³⁰ These manuals were most helpful for women as they dominated the amateur stage venues, and thus their texts often specified that their instructions will aid both men and women, with explicit guidelines for women’s roles. In *When Cork is King* from 1921 (fig. 6) produced by T.S. Denison & Company there are female specific scripts included for women who want to partake in crafting their own minstrel shows.³¹

³⁰ Harold Rossiter, 1921. *How to Put on a Minstrel Show*. (Chicago: Max Stein Pub. House)., pg. 20

³¹ Stratton, Wade. *When Cork is King: New Crossfire Conversations, End Gags and Retorts for Male, Female and Mixed Minstrels; Monologues, Skits, and Stump Speeches*. Chicago: T.S. Denison & Company., 1921.

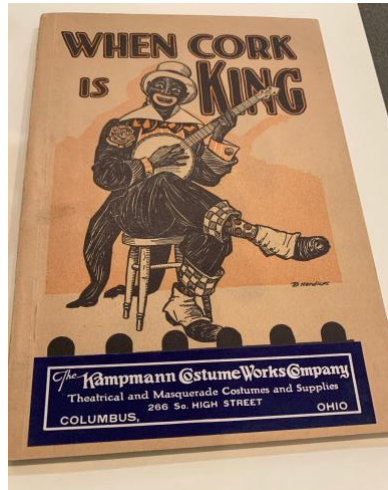


Figure 6: *When Cork is King* by Wade Stratton, 1921. Produced by T.S. Denison & Company this how-to-manual for blackface minstrelsy includes step-by step instructions on how to produce one's own amateur minstrel show at home.

In another T.S. Denison & Company minstrel manual, *How to Stage A Minstrel Show* (1921) by Jeff T. Branen and Frederick G. Johnson, the text explains the growing popularity of women participating in minstrel shows: “One of the most popular forms of amateur minstrel shows in the mixed type, wherein both men and women appear The appearance of ladies on the stage adds a charm that cannot be otherwise obtained.” Moreover, the text acknowledges that even an all-girl led minstrel show would undoubtedly have success.³² White women were creating performances where they would masquerade as racist caricatures much like their male counterparts.

One of the more prolific authors during the late 19th century of amateur minstrel scripts was Mary Barnard Horne of Belmont, Massachusetts. Although she

³² Branen, Jeff T., and Frederick G. Johnson. 1921. *How to Stage a Minstrel Show: A Manual for the Amateur Burnt Cork Director*. Chicago: Denison., pg. 2

did write *Plantation Bitters: A Colored Fantasy in Two Acts for Male Characters Only* (1892), a minstrelsy script for men only, as the title suggests, she also penned, *Jolly Joe's Lady Minstrels: Selections for the "Sisters"* (1893) and *The Dark Town Bicycle Club Scandal: A Colored Sketch in One Act for Lady Minstrels* (1897). In her work, *Jolly Joe's Lady Minstrels*, a minstrelsy she wrote alongside Mrs. H. M. Silsbee, she makes a case for gender equality.³³ In her introduction she states:

Until recently the field of Amateur Minstrelsy has been open solely to the male sex. It was, however, only necessary for the weaker sex to turn its attention to burnt cork, to eccentric costumes, to negro songs, and to fun generally, to draw upon it the attention of the public and the verdict that, in this field as in many others, it could hold its own.³⁴

Similar to other amateur minstrel scripts, Horne and Silsbee's advise their readers that their 'jokes, stories, and conundrums' may include personal additions "by referring by

³³ Recchio, Thomas. "The Serious Play of Gender: Blackface Minstrel Shows by Mary Barnard Home, 1892–1897." *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 38, no. 2 (November 2011): 38–50. Thomas Recchio analyzes Horne's minstrelsy scripts and their racial and gender conceptualizations.

³⁴ Silsbee, H.M., and Horne, M.B., *Jolly Joe's Lady Minstrels: Selections for the Sisters.*, Boston: W.H. Baker, 1893. pg. 3

name to people or localities well known to the audience.”³⁵ However, as Recchio addresses, there is no theme to this script and culminates in a stump speech that directly addresses the ‘gentlemen’ in the audience. Spoken in darky dialect with sentences such as “Dey calls dis yer de age ob reason, an’ dey counts de women out!”³⁶, the Blackface acts as a way to mask Horne and Silsbee’s true intentions, to voice their opinions about gender equality and women’s suffrage.³⁷ For Mary Barnard Horne, and other women, the ability to participate in minstrelsy, write, produce, and act in Blackface, was a sign of gender equality and a move towards social progression. Similar to men, they utilized Blackface as a means to masquerade their socially unacceptable actions and political standings, hiding behind the Black caricature. From Irene Dunne in *Show Boat* (1936) (fig. 7),³⁸ playing a mammy character, or Judy Garland in *Everybody Sing* (1938), acting as a pickaninny (fig. 8), white actresses have always participated in Blackface.³⁹

³⁵ Ibid., pg. 7

³⁶ Ibid pg. 20

³⁷ Recchio, Thomas. “The Serious Play of Gender: Blackface Minstrel Shows by Mary Barnard Horne, 1892–1897.” *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 38, no. 2 (November 2011): 38–50.

³⁸ *Show Boat*, directed by James Whale (1936; New York City, NY: Universal Pictures Video, 2014), DVD.

³⁹ *Everybody Sing*, directed by Edwin L. Marin (1938; Beverly Hills, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc., 2009), DVD.



Figure 7: Screenshot of Irene Dunne as Magnolia from the 1936 film, *Show Boat*. Her character performs the song “Gallavatin’ Around” while in Blackface.



Figure 8: Screenshot of Judy Garland as Judy Bellaire from the 1938 film, *Everybody Sing*. Her character performs as the caricature Topsy while singing “Love’s Old Sweet Song (Just a Song at Twilight)”.

White women have willingly and knowingly played a part in these racist masquerades, but why have they been obscured from most narratives on Blackface minstrelsy?

When discussing the practice of Blackface, I asked my interviewees the following question: “What demographics do you associate with Blackface?” All six of my participants distinguished that, regarding 19th-century minstrelsy, or “traditional” Blackface, they thought of primarily white men. As Ashley René, a dark skin Black woman of Haitian descent stated:

You know, based on history, we kind of think of white males. Cause I guess those are mostly the ones who used to run those minstrel shows. But I think we kind of forget white females and other minority groups in

*America, as well as, you know, the African-American group or Black Americans here in the United States too. Like we don't really ascribe Blackface to them.*⁴⁰

However, as we delved deeper into the discussion, white women were only mentioned when the concept of Blackface moved from 19th-century minstrelsy and into the contemporary. Instead of associating white women with traditional, 19th-century minstrelsy my interviewees associate white women with its more updated form: Blackfishing. Similar to those who agreed with Wanna Thompson's thread, my interviewees viewed Blackfishing as Blackface. "They are one in the same" Britt Henry, another participant of Jamaican heritage stated during her interview. However, unlike traditional 19th-century Blackface, the minstrel performance is not in person, nor on a physical stage. Blackfishing takes its form in the digital sphere as some of my participants articulated:

***Justyce Bennett:** I'm seeing it on Twitter. I'm seeing it on Instagram. I'm seeing it everywhere. Like in high school, Twitter and Instagram weren't what they are now. Like my Facebook was very curated. Like I couldn't just randomly see all of these like Instagram models and stuff who were pretending to be Black for a day.*⁴¹

⁴⁰ René, Ashley. Interview by Benét Burton. Zoom Recording. Newark, November 29, 2020.

⁴¹ Bennett, Justyce. Interview by Benét Burton. Zoom Recording. Newark, October 21, 2020.

Keara Morgan: *I just see it a lot on social media. Not like when you're watching TV and it's like just in the tabloids, it's like actual social media posts. You see it on social media obviously. 'Cause it's kind of where it was bred.*⁴²

Nylah Byrd: *I feel like I associate Blackfishing very much with social media and still images. Right. And, I'm sure you can meet these people and they'd put on a look and like go out into the world, looking the way they do. But I feel like the way we consume that content mostly is through social media.*⁴³

Blackfishing, similar to its predecessor, is a popular practice that has invaded the mainstream, becoming a recognizable practice in social media specifically for white women. Unlike traditional Blackface, this practice is exacerbated by the digital sphere and its complexities, dictated by its own set of rules, rules that ultimately craft the perfect home for Blackfishing to manifest.

⁴² Morgan, Keara. Interview by Benét Burton. Zoom Recording. Newark, November 18, 2020.

⁴³ Byrd, Nylah. Interview by Benét Burton. Zoom Recording. Newark, October 23, 2020.

Chapter 3

INTERNET CULTURE

3.1 Racial Formation on the Internet

Persisting through generations, traditional Blackface has maintained a presence in American society. To paraphrase Rossiter's words once more, Blackface minstrelsy *is* something the public does not tire consuming. Blackface in and of itself is a true American art form. Thus, it must keep itself up-to-date to stay relevant and weave itself into the fabric of the 21st century. Evolving with contemporary audiences, Blackface minstrelsy has done just that, transforming into Blackfishing and finding its home within the internet, the digital sphere adapting into its performance stage. Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, the internet contains different social media platforms through which Blackfishing is perpetuated and performed. With these new platforms comes a multitude of intricacies in comprehending the evolution of Blackfishing that thrives on social media. Social media allows its users to curate their experiences. How people are perceived and the content they consume is dictated by what they produce and interact with within the digital sphere; the images they post, messages they write, content they share, all affect internet users' experience. The rise of Blackfishing reveals the prominent presence of that Black culture is a prominent presence in the digital sphere. And while this is so—the online prominence--the Black culture that is culturally appropriated by Blackfishers is similar to the “Blackness” of Blackface, an

imagined Black identity, a commodity, a costume, a performance and at times a parody.

The internet exists, primarily, as a white space. Whiteness is the default internet culture and identity. As André Brock Jr. articulates in *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*, “the internet should be understood as an enactment of whiteness through the interpretive flexibility of whiteness as information.”⁴⁴ Art, communications, media, etc. are not described as ‘white’ but, understood as an universal that does not need a racial modifier. Inherently, they are white and thus perpetuate the unspoken dominant narrative of whiteness. With that being said, online identity is characteristically perceived as a white person inhabiting whiteness behind the screen, specifically the middle-aged cis, straight, white male form of whiteness. Donna Hoffman and Thomas P. Novak documented the internet’s whiteness in 1999 in their report, *The Growing Digital Divide*, evaluating that it is perpetuated by both a lack of content and ability to access content, creating a racial ‘digital divide.’ As their report addressed, Black homes were less likely, in 1999, to have a personal computer at their disposal due to not only price but not perceiving “the value of the internet.”⁴⁵ Alongside this discrepancy, Hoffman and Novak’s report noted that there was

⁴⁴ Brock Jr., André. *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*. Vol. 9 (New York City: NYU Press), 2020., pg. 6

⁴⁵ Hoffman, Donna L. and Thomas P. Novak. “The Growing Digital Divide: Implications for an Open Research Agenda.” *Understanding the Digital Economy: Data, Tools, and Research* (200): 245-260. pg. 250.

“insufficient content of interest to African-Americans”.⁴⁶ Blackness and Black digital practice, however, have always existed within technoculture, and while Hoffman and Novak’s report may need to be updated for the 21st century, their conceptualization of the digital divide still stands. Often labeled as niche spaces, online Black content is occluded and consequently ephemeral due to the overarching impact of whiteness. This dominance is best signified by the browser, an internet user’s first step into the digital.

General-purpose applications crafted for retrieving and displaying multimedia resources that are linked to User Resource Identifiers/Locators (URIs/URLs). From Safari to Mozilla Firefox or Google Chrome to the (soon-to-be outdated) Internet Explorer, browsers are the means through which a user can access the content they desire. Due to being crafted in a capitalist society, the browser is subject to further personalization and individualization by its users, specifically through advertisements which satisfy the necessity to monetize the internet. Browsers give the illusion of ‘color-blind’ technology as all users believe the browser to be founded in the “the dual experience of universal application and individual preferences”.⁴⁷ However, while one’s browser is seemingly customized by their internet experiences, it is still upholding a commitment to whiteness and not entirely an “color-blind” platform. This

⁴⁶ Ibid., pg. 252

⁴⁷ Brock Jr., André. *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*. Vol. 9 (New York City: NYU Press), 2020., pg. 49.

aligns with Richard Dyer's 1997 definition of white identity. Whiteness is both the standard for individual and universal humanity, as Dyer argues, and includes a component of control over the self, others, and enterprise. Whiteness exists as an identity tied to western imperialism and capitalism, that is founded on its delineation against the 'Other'.⁴⁸ Brock Jr. expands on this through analyzing race as a relational construct and its impact on the browser through technoculture:

...Blackness is not defined solely by being subordinated, nor is whiteness only understood as a subordinating identity. The browser affords an implicitly "unmarked" technological commons even as each internet surfer personalizes his installation to conform to his personal browsing habits...this seeming openness of the platform, coupled with libertarian (and neoliberal) rhetoric about the internet as a cultural-neutral space, obscures the reality that most online content available through the browser and its technological implements still constructs and maintains Western and modern notions of race, gender, and class.⁴⁹

The browser, and furthermore cyberspace, implicitly upholds the racist conceptualization of color-blindness that it is imagined as. A neoliberal construction,

⁴⁸ Dyer, Richard. "The Matter of Whiteness." *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism* (2005): 9-14.

⁴⁹ Brock Jr., André. *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*. Vol. 9 (New York City: NYU Press), 2020., pg. 47

being racially color-blind, is often seen as a “gentler form of racism.”⁵⁰ To speak of race is to create a space where racism cannot be avoided. Consequently, being ‘color-blind’ causes society to be ignorant to the effects racism which ultimately becomes transferred to the online sphere. As Lisa Nakamura introduces in her text, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, the disavowing of race perpetuated digital inequality in regard to access, user experience, and online content. Despite this, the internet has simultaneously transformed into an environment where representations of different identities can be cultivated. Which begs the question: With whiteness being the default, how does Blackness become such a formidable presence in today’s internet culture?

3.2 Black Online Spaces (Black Twitter)

The prominence of Black culture on the internet is not a new phenomenon. But for Black culture to be prominent online, there must be Black communities present. In 2019, 85 percent of adult internet users in the United States were Black, and while this number is still lower in comparison to the 92 percent of white internet users, it implies the considerable presence of Black online digital spaces.⁵¹ However, surveys that

⁵⁰ Prasahad, Vijay *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity*. (Boston: Beacon Press) 2001., pg.38

⁵¹ Pew Research Center, “Internet Use by Race/Ethnicity”, *Pew Research Center*, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/chart/internet-use-by-race/>

quantify internet usage based on race often focus on ‘access’ to the internet, as opposed to the creation of digital visual culture (i.e. memes, videos, blogs, etc.). Consequently, this highlights the overall whiteness of the internet due to the privilege of internet access not reaching communities of color, creating a ‘digital divide.’ The internet usage of racial minorities, specifically Black people, is best quantified by the visual cultures they craft in cyberspace. For Black people the internet is their medium to communicate and develop Black culture as a site of resistance to offline racial hegemonies.⁵² Thus, the percentage of user access [85] does not necessarily encapsulate the influence Black people and their creativity have within cyberspace. Furthermore, the internet is a space where the younger generation of the Black community thrive. As of 2019, 100 percent of 18 to 29 year-olds in the United States are internet users⁵³, their age demographic a powerful force in cultivating popular culture of the 21st century, showcasing that Black youth are a part of influencing popular visual culture online as “youth culture and expressive cultures tend to cross and overlap in numerous ways.”⁵⁴ But where is this digital Black culture being produced? On social media where youth culture thrives.

⁵² Nakamura, Lisa. *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*. Electronic Mediations. Vol. 23. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008., pg. 184

⁵³ Pew Research Center, “Internet Use by Age”, *Pew Research Center*, 2019.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/chart/internet-use-by-age/>

⁵⁴ Nakamura, Lisa. *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*. Electronic Mediations. Vol. 23. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 2008., pg. 184

Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, the 21st century has brought American society a plethora of social media websites and apps to congregate as communities and disseminate information through the internet. Now a necessity for human interaction, social media has become a way to mediate conversations through the Black community, the cyberspace providing an arena for culture specific discourse and creations. In 2014, Aaron Smith, author of *African Americans and Technology Use*, reported that Black people, as a collective, are most prominent on Twitter in comparison to their white counterparts, with 22 percent of Black people online being Twitter users.⁵⁵ At its basic level, Twitter can be defined as an American microblogging and social networking service that revolves around users posting and interacting with messages known as ‘tweets’. Users can post multimedia content such as text, video, images and choose whether to simply ‘like’ a tweet or ‘retweet’ a tweet onto their own Twitter profile. As part of the public sphere, Twitter is open to anyone and everyone, allowing its users to create subgroups and cultures based on who they follow and the posts they interact with. One of the most infamous subgroups on Twitter is known as Black Twitter which, as the name describes, is the subculture within Twitter that caters to Black content creators and their lived experiences. Black Twitter, is the niche collective of Black Twitter users who have coalesced together based on shared Black experience, creating a satellite counterpublic sphere, an independent group unwilling to hide their

⁵⁵ Smith, Aaron., “African Americans and Technology Use: A Demographic Portrait”., *Pew Research Center*, 2019., <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2014/01/06/african-americans-and-technology-use/>

“cultural particularities.”⁵⁶ Most interestingly, Black Twitter is an accepted canon within the broader consciousness of not only the social media platform, but digital culture as a whole; there is an official Twitter page for the subgroup (@BLACKTWITTERHQ⁵⁷), a hashtag (#BlackTwitter), and even pages dedicated to its content on other social media platforms such as r/BlackPeopleTwitter on reddit. Black Twitter, like the Black community, is not a monolith, as it is comprised of a heterogeneous cluster of Black digital practitioners. However, it does exist as a communal space where Black Twitter users can post racial specific content for their enjoyment as well as debate on cultural discourse within the community. Even though, Black Twitters’ posts are inherently for Black Twitter users, often the content will accumulate a massive amount of ‘likes’ and ‘retweets’ allowing it to be exposed to those outside of the subgroup. Such an event happened in 2009 during the Black Entertainment Television (BET) Awards, a televised award show for acknowledging the achievements of Black entertainers in the arts, culture, and sports. The BET awards aired soon after Michael Jackson’s death and thus featured tributes to the late ‘King of Pop,’ garnering the largest audience share for the network ever.⁵⁸ Black Twitter’s response to the event lead to multiple Black specific tweets and

⁵⁶ Brock Jr., André. *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*. Vol. 9 (New York City: NYU Press), 2020., pg. 86.

⁵⁷ @BLACKTWITTERHQ, <https://twitter.com/BLACKTWITTERHQ> (Account has been suspended)

⁵⁸ Brock Jr., André. *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*. Vol. 9 (New York City: NYU Press), 2020., pg. 91.

hashtags trending on the social media platform which in turn lead to non-Black Twitter users to become privy to the existence of Black Twitter. As Choire Sicha noted in his 2009 article “What Were Black People Talking about on Twitter Last Night?”, Twitter’s algorithm for trending topics surfaced the reality that “Black People Twitter was ... the enactment of Black digital identity and practice in a form that was visible to the mainstream.”⁵⁹ Black Twitter, as a case study, exemplifies perfectly the dissemination of Black culture into the mainstream through the internet, and more specifically social media, as it is both the birthplace of Blackfishing’s exposure and where a majority of Black specific cultural content is shared. Showcased through 19th-century minstrelsy, white people have always been entertained by the Black body and its culture, to the point of mimicry. This fascination has obviously been carried over into the digital.

3.3 Digital Blackface

“Black digital practice has become hypervisible to mainstream white culture and the world through positive, negative, and political performances of Black cultural aesthetics and more recently, social media activism.”⁶⁰ This hypervisibility is due in

⁵⁹ Sicha, Choire. “What Were Black People Talking about on Twitter Last Night?”. *The Awl*, November 11, 2009. <https://medium.com/the-awl/what-were-black-people-talking-about-on-twitter-last-night-4408ca0ba3d6>

⁶⁰ Brock Jr., André. *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*. Vol. 9 (New York City: NYU Press), 2020., pg. 17.

part to the appeal that Black culture and Blackness has been given by society. Black people and their identity are often depicted as monolithic and unassimilable because, as Lisa Nakamura explains in *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, “Blackness retains its identity in the face of technological change, white power and privilege, and racism.”⁶¹ Using the film *The Matrix* as an allegory for cyberspace, Nakamura illustrates how Black actors often embody, for white audiences, “a cool, a cachet, an authenticity”.⁶² These Black characters aesthetically align with Afrofuturism, a cultural aesthetic that explores the intersectionality of African diaspora and technology, and showcase their individuality and humanity as opposed to their counterparts whose whiteness embodies the oppressive, assimilative nature of technological culture. In the matrix, the ‘agents’ portray this concept, designed to be carbon copies of each other, highlighting the uniformity of white culture. Alongside this narrative, white people also play the role of surveyors, such as the character Neo whose main job as the protagonist is to survey the Morpheus, the Black male lead, and consume his ‘Afro-futurist mojo.’⁶³ In short, cyberspace positions whiteness as the default; for those who align with the dominant culture to disassociate themselves from that oppressive and uniform identity of whiteness, they must emulate Blackness and

⁶¹ Nakamura, Lisa. *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*. Electronic Mediations. Vol. 23. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 2008., pg. 100

⁶² Ibid., p. 101

⁶³ Ibid.

Black culture, due to its inherent ‘authenticity’ and ‘coolness’. This phenomenon can be understood as a motivation for digital blackface, a practice that I view as a steppingstone to Blackfishing. Popularized by Lauren Michele Jackson in her *Teen Vogue* article “We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs”, the term ‘digital blackface’ explains the practice of non-Black, primarily white, internet users “blacking up” their online persona through the use of Black reaction GIFs, images, videos, and vernacular.⁶⁴ White people are able to mimic Blackness through the anonymity that these social media platforms afford them. From their profile pictures on Twitter, to their status updates on Facebook, non-Black individuals digitally appropriate the Black existence, harkening back to the traditional 19th-century performance technique. Although Jackson writes in her article that “digital blackface “does not describe intent, but an act — the act of inhabiting a black persona,” it is important to interrogate the possible motivations behind digital blackface to better understand it as a precursor to Blackfishing.⁶⁵

Black people are often seen as the arbiters of ‘coolness’ in the digital sphere, their culturally specific online trends and habits become appropriated due to the association with gaining social clout. Through the use of reaction images, GIFs, and videos of Black people, white people distance themselves from their whiteness, and

⁶⁴ Jackson, Lauren Michele. “We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs,” *Teen Vogue*, August 2, 2017, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/digital-blackface-reaction-gifs>

⁶⁵ Ibid.

gain the social currency of being seen as ‘cool’ and ‘authentic’. To be Black, or to even be perceived as such, is to access the “hipness and coolness of black expressive culture itself.”⁶⁶ This appropriation is best noted through the inaccurate usage of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and, as André Brock Jr. describes, ‘ratchetry’ by non-Black internet users. Ratchetry is a term used to describe the habit of Black people expressing themselves and their culture with no filter nor propriety. While ratchet is often used in a derogatory manner, it encompasses the unique forms of expression that Black individuals have crafted for their online experience. Whether it’s through Twitter names such as “Gucci Ma’am” “Auntie Hot Flash Summer” or “coochiechagulia” or through their posts, ‘ratchetry’ is a uniquely Black form of expression.⁶⁷ Thus, it is appropriated through digital blackface as a means to gain followers on social media. Often times, white people will use what Manuel Arturo Abreu defines as Online Imagined Black English. Under the guise of slang, Black vernacular is appropriated by those who are not privy to its syntax and structural rules, creating an inaccurate bastardized version of AAVE, i.e. Online Imagined Black English.⁶⁸ The accessibility of the internet means that outsiders to this language are able to consume content utilizing it and then find “definitions” on websites such as

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 112

⁶⁷ Brock Jr., André. *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*. Vol. 9 (New York City: NYU Press), 2020., pg. 146

⁶⁸ Abreu, Manuel Arturo. “Online Imagined Black English.” *Arachne. Web* 22 (2016).

Urban Dictionary and Genius. Definitions that separate the vocabulary from Black culture turning it into deracialized speech.⁶⁹ This allows for vocabulary found in AAVE, such as ‘sis’, ‘lit’, ‘finna’, and ‘bussin’, to litter the pages of white users and be used incorrectly as a means to bolster their ‘coolness’ factor online. Combining both the Online Imagined Black English with the usage of Black GIFs gives the affect that the internet user is ‘cool’ due to their usage of Black digital culture, allowing them to gain social capital online. However, not all practitioners of digital blackface are concerned with the ‘coolness’ of Blackness online. Instead they partake in the practice with the motivation to deceive their followers into believing they *are* actually Black in real life.

Black profile pictures can easily obscure the racial identities of the actual owners of Twitter accounts. This anonymity allows for non-Black content creators to infiltrate Black Twitter without having to wait for popular posts of the community to make its way into the mainstream. With such access, non-Black users use their assumed Blackness to become a part of intimate discourses within the Black community, often times playing the ‘Devil’s Advocate’ and disagreeing with actual Black people.

LaQueeta Jones was the Black name Mandi Harrington chose for her online ‘Blacksona’, a Black persona she created for her social media platform. Her digital blackface gave her the racial validation on Black Twitter to defend a retreat at a slave

⁶⁹ Ibid.

plantation hosted by the musician Ani DiFranco in 2017.⁷⁰ More recently, former commissioner of Lehigh County, Pennsylvania Dean Browning was outed as a practitioner of digital blackface after he accidentally tweeted:

I'm a black gay guy and I can personally say that Obama did nothing for me, my life only changed a little bit and it was for the worse. Everything is so much better under Trump though. I feel respected – which I never do when democrats are involved.⁷¹

This pro-Trump tweet, was under fire and the while Browning claimed he was trying to 'quote' a message from a follower that he had received, Phillip Bump of the *Washington Post*, claimed to find the burner account of the fake Black homosexual man that Browning had been impersonating, @DanPurdy322. This account was one that replied to Dean Browning's twitter posts multiple times.⁷² With a profile picture of a cartoon Black man and Trump 2020 tweets such as "My gay black ass will be first

⁷⁰ Jackson, Lauren Michele. "We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs.," *Teen Vogue*, August 2, 2017, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/digital-blackface-reaction-gifs>

⁷¹ Dean Browning, @DeanBrowningPA, Twitter Post, November 10, 2020, 10:48 a.m.

⁷² "Dean Browning, Dan Purdy, and Patti LaBelle Twitter Drama, Explained - Vox." Accessed December 16, 2020. <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2020/11/10/21559458/dean-browning-dan-purdy-by-l-holte-patti-labelle-twitter-gay-black-man>.

in line on Tuesday when I RE-ELECT DONALD TRUMP!”⁷³ and “I love the taste of black girl fear. Always so laughable 🤪🤪.”⁷⁴ For Harrington, “being” Black validated her opinion that having an event at slave plantation was not racist, as a Black person has the most authority over what is or is not anti-Black as opposed to a non-Black person. In Dean Browning’s case, pretending to be a Black gay man allowed him to validate to others the idea that Black people were pro-Trump, countering the narrative that the Black community did not support him. Both Dean Browning and Mandi Harrington weaponized digital blackface to gain access discourse within the Black community where being an actual Black would place their opinions at the forefront. By being perceived as Black online, they were able to forward their own personal agendas, validated by the digital blackface that kept their whiteness anonymous.

Keith Obadike explained best this phenomenon while being interviewed by Coco Fusco for his “Blackness for Sale” net performance where he attempted to sell his Blackness on eBay. With a description that titles his Blackness as an heirloom that can only be guaranteed to function within the United States, Obadike summarizes benefits and warnings of buying his Blackness. Highlights include: 1) making jokes about Black people, 2) rights to use the words ‘sista’, ‘brotha’, and ‘nigga’ in

⁷³ Dan Purdy, @DanPurdy322, Twitter Post, October 30, 2020, 2:30 p.m.

⁷⁴ Dan Purdy, @DanPurdy322, Twitter Post, October 20, 2020, 1:41 p.m.

reference to Black people, and 3) the ability to instill fear.⁷⁵ A commentary on the objectification and commodification of Black bodies and their culture his performance piece echoed his statement: "Surely the net space just makes the same old burnt cork blackface routine easier."⁷⁶ The internet has been crafted into a space where both Black culture and the Black identity can be consumed absolutely by non-Black individuals. As Blackness is disseminated through the digital, it becomes an existence to be coveted as social media can only show so much of the 'real life' Black experience. The 'hip' and 'cool' existence of Black people online has led to the manifestation of digital blackface, allowing non-Black individuals to transform their identities into an imagined Black one. However, with the perpetuation of idealized Black culture, those who have consumed this identity through digital blackface will ultimately covet and pursue the physical materiality of Blackness to fully obtain the online social clout it is believed to bring.

⁷⁵ Keith Obadike's *Blackness* (Item #1176601036), August 08, 2001. <https://obadike.tripod.com/ebay.html>

⁷⁶ Abreu, Manuel Arturo. "Online Imagined Black English." *Arachne. Web* 22 (2016).

Chapter 4

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

Blackfishing, since Wanna Thompson coined the term in 2018, has been widely accepted in the Black community as a form of Blackface and the main argument for such is that both are charades, costumes, or cosplay (to use Wanna Thompson's wording) that can, at any point, be removed at will. However, while Blackface, on and offline, is associated with drastic, exaggerated caricatures of Black peoples and their likeness, Blackfishing is more sophisticated with, specifically, white women aiming for realism. Instead of the burnt cork and wooly wigs, the 21st century has brought an upgrade to the Black costuming, with tanning lotions, foundation, hair manipulation, and purposeful body augmentations. Similar to its linguistic inspiration, catfishing which is defined as a deceptive activity where a person creates a fake identity on a social networking service, that may be used for financial gain or wish fulfillment, Blackfishing entails that its practitioner maintains a facetious façade of fictional Blackness exacerbated by their online use. The digital persona that Blackfishers upkeep is perpetuated through images of them mimicking the aestheticism of Black women on social media platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, or even TikTok. Coupled with digital Blackface, this online presence gives the perception that the Blackfishers are actual Black women.

Despite these women denying a desire to *be* Black, they make no effort to indicate their actual racialization unless prompted by exposure through a 'call out post', such as with the original 2018 Blackfishing Twitter thread. Instead, they claim

that they are simply enjoying an aesthetic that's obtained through manipulating their physical appearance similar to Black women, further indicating that their appearance is a costume of attributes pilfered from Black women. Through cultural appropriation white women are able to successfully hoodwink their followers on social media, which are often Black women believing they are supporting other Black women as a means of racial and gender solidarity. The fashion, hair, physical features and, most notably, the skin tone, of Black women are stolen by white women whose deceptive Black identity often leads them to influencer positions, thus allowing them to make money on their fabricated persona. Cultural appropriation is not a new phenomenon, and as Lauren Michele Jackson, author of *White Negroes: When Cornrows Were in Vogue* notices, it's everywhere and inevitable.⁷⁷ For Black women specifically, it is just a part of life. Historically and contemporarily, Black women have been subjected to their likeness being either demonized or fetishized and then turned into a commodified trend. These trends are the fundamentals of Blackfishing that practitioners must utilize for their costume.

⁷⁷ Jackson, Lauren Michele. *White Negroes: When Cornrows Were in Vogue ... and Other Thoughts on Cultural Appropriation*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2019.

4.1 “Little in the middle but she got much back”

Oh, my, God Becky, look at her butt.
It is so big, she looks like
One of those rap guys’ girlfriends.
But, ya know, who understands those rap guys?
They only talk to her, because,
She looks like a total prostitute, ‘kay?
I mean, her butt, is just so big
I can’t believe it’s just so round, it’s like out there
I mean gross, look
She’s just so, black.⁷⁸

This racist monologue is spoken by an unnamed white woman to her friend Becky in the iconic 1992 “Baby Got Back” by Sir Mix-A-Lot. Both white women look upwards in disgust and bewilderment as a slim Black woman in a yellow bodycon dress sensually dances on a pedestal, her movements highlighting her ‘big, round butt’ as the two onlookers described. These judging words are then followed by Sir Mix-a-Lot’s declaration while standing on a platform shaped to appear as a buttock:

⁷⁸ Sir Mix-A-Lot, “Baby Got Back,” recorded 1992, track 1 on *Mack Daddy*, American Recordings, LLC, compact disc.

I like big butts and I cannot lie
You other brothers can't deny
That when a girl walks in with an itty bitty waist
And a round thing in your face
You get sprung...⁷⁹

One of the most popular songs to come out of the early 1990s, “Baby Got Back”, while seemingly your average rap song and music video, is actually a titular example of the fetishization and demonization of the Black female body. “Baby Got Back” is a subversive song that counters the ‘heroin chic’⁸⁰ aesthetic popularized in 1990s fashion, with Sir Mix-A-Lot rapping “I’m tired of magazines sayin’ flat butts are the thing.”⁸¹ In another verse, however, the song highlights the harmful stereotypes against Black woman perpetuated by white supremacy. The unnamed white girl’s monologue that opened the song is a narrative all too familiar; Black women, specifically curvaceous Black women, are sexual deviants. This random Black girl is a prostitute to these white women, not because they have proof of her engagement in sex work but because her Black body is curvy, with ‘big, round butt’. Stigmatization against thick, Black female bodies is one that runs deep within western beauty

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Evolving from grunge and also known as ‘drug chic’, ‘heroin chic’ is characterized by having pale skin, dark eye bags, and skinny body with angular bone structures. Often used to describe more androgynous runway models of the 90’s.

⁸¹ Sir Mix-A-Lot, “Baby Got Back,” recorded 1992 track 1 on *Mack Daddy*, American Recordings, LLC, compact disc.

standards and that is most noticeable with the fascination of the body of Saartjie/Sara/Sarah Baartman.

A young Khoisan woman from South Africa, Saartjie/Sara/Sarah Baartman was exhibited for entertainment purposes after being sold by David Fourie to Cornelius Muller. Due to the ‘unusual’ shape and size, i.e. steatopygia⁸², of her buttocks and thighs, Baartman was a physical spectacle for her natural form when she was brought to England in 1810.⁸³ Thick women have always been a focal point of fascination, however, even before Baartman. Large buttocks, thick thighs, big breasts, abundance of fat and flesh on the feminine form have been praised throughout history. . Sabrina Strings, author of *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, highlights the various cultures which artistically admire the abundance of thickness that can be found in the feminine form, equating a beautiful buttocks with the goddesses of love, beauty, fertility, and pleasure, such as Aphrodite, or the Roman equivalent, Venus. From the original *Callipygian Venus* dated to be carved around the late 1st century BC to show Venus admiring her own backside to Peter Paul Rubens Venusian portraits portraying full bodied women in aesthetically luxurious situations with works like his 1614 oil painting of *Venus in Front of the Mirror*, the curves of the

⁸² Defined as the accumulation of substantial levels of fat on the buttocks and thighs. The fat extends to the outside and front of the thighs, tapers to the knee and provides a curvaceous figure.

⁸³ Osha, Sanya. “‘Venus’ and White Desire.” *Transition*, no. 99 (2008): 80–93, pg. 80.

feminine form have always been adored. But, with Black women this adoration becomes abhorrence due to the stereotypes surrounding darker skin.

Racial classification systems directly impacted conceptions of Blackness and whiteness, drastically reconfiguring the beauty standards surrounding thickness. French physician of the 17th century, François Bernier was one of the first scholars to market his racial theories which exposed how central ideas about feminine aesthetics were affected by racial classification. In his essay, “New Division of the Earth by the Different Species or ‘Races’ of Man that Inhabit It” (1684). Bernier’s research was narrated to legitimize physiological racial differences however, Bernier also included his judgments about feminine loveliness. Bernier’s race-specific female attractiveness discredited the stereotype of the “Hottentot,” a Dutch derogatory term for KhoiKhoi in South Africa. In his work he theorized that the stereotypical depiction of Africans is an anomaly amongst Blacks and that the description of Africans as “little, low, and foul” was not an absolute.⁸⁴ While other race theorists disregarded his consideration for the beauty, Bernier’s work was expanded upon by French scholar Comte de Buffon in the 18th century. Comte de Buffon’s characterization of races, while based on skin color, was also heavily affected by the size and shape of bodies. He formulated a new physiology of Black Africans classified by their ‘plumpness’, equating physical large bodies to their environment which, bountiful in pasturage, allowed for Black Africans

⁸⁴ Strings, Sabrina. *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*. New York: New York University Press, 2019, pg. 71

to stay well-nourished and making them “well fed but simple and stupid.”⁸⁵ Buffon’s theorizations were then furthered by Julien-Joseph Virey, 19th-century French anthropologist and naturalist whose race theories were founded in bile theories.⁸⁶ Black skin was the product of a great abundance of black bile, which also coincidentally caused gastrointestinal disorders and weight gain. Thus, Virey concluded that weight directly correlated to eating habits, stating that Black people were self-gratifying drones who succumbed to gluttony and were incapable of thinking. Black skin became a symbol of inferior savagery and white skin that of refined superiority. Virey inadvertently changed the narrative of the “Hottentot” from slender to stout, which was only furthered by ‘the discovery’ of Sarah Baartman who became touted as the “presumed archetype of Hottentot female beauty”.⁸⁷ Her body shape was used as a tool to further the idea that fatness and thickness are intrinsically Black traits.

Baartman’s legacy on stage went from being a sexual object for the sick and dying men of Cape Town looking for sexual entertainment before death to an “ethnographic freak show” when Alexander Dunlop coerced her previous owner into allowing him to take her to England. Her natural body fat and shape thus became

⁸⁵ Strings, Sabrina. *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*. New York: New York University Press, 2019.

⁸⁶ Ibid., pg. 91

⁸⁷ Ibid., pg. 92

fetishized, commodified, and exoticized due to not aligning with the western ideal of what a woman should physically look like. Displayed on stage for hours, Baartman was spectated by white crowds and titled the Hottentot Venus, the Black version of the feminine ideal. Her natural physique became caricatured transforming the Hottentot Venus into a minstrel character, as showcased in Hendrick Cesar's 1811 engraving, "Sartjee, the Hottentot Venus" (fig. 9).



Figure 9: “Sartjee, the Hottentot Venus” (1811). An engraving published by Hendrick Cesar, this illustration of Baartman depicts her as the Hottentot Venus caricature, exaggerating her physical features.

The image depicts Baartman as the Hottentot Venus caricature, her buttocks exaggerated as she smokes a pipe. Alongside her public debut, French anatomists would research her ‘peculiar’ physical attributes, declaring her the missing link from

ape to man, a curious title as she was also viewed as a sexual temptress, a jezebel, a biological deviance sexually provoking to European men: “She was simultaneously grotesque and exotic: a sexual specimen with a peculiar racial identity.”⁸⁸ White women even demonized her, fearful for their male counterparts who may succumb to the desire of the Black Venus, a fear justifiable as Black femininity often exists in tandem with white sexuality what with the sexual violence and exploitation of Black women during, and after, slavery.⁸⁹ In contrast to Black women being associated more with thicker and fatter bodies, the beauty standard for white women became closely tied with what Sabrina Strings titles the “ascetic aesthetic”. The codification of etiquette in the 18th century lead to eating and drinking becoming an act based around restriction and discipline, allowing for a slimmer physique to indicate a woman has mastered such traits. Thus, the Black feminine physique became the antithesis to the white feminine beauty standard; the thick Black greedy, sexual jezebel vs. the socially refined thin white socialite.⁹⁰

Sarah Baartman’s fetishized larger and curvier body furthered the sexualized perception of Black women in general, a concept that has persisted through generations as was noted with the Sir Mix-A-Lot rap verses. In comparison to the two

⁸⁸ Hobson, Janell. *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (Second Edition.). New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018, pg. 57.

⁸⁹ Ibid., pg. 60.

⁹⁰ Strings, Sabrina. *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*. New York: New York University Press, 2019.

white women at the beginning of the music video, the Black woman who appears in the beginning of the music video is not actually fat nor, what we as a society would dictate as today, thick (fig. 10).

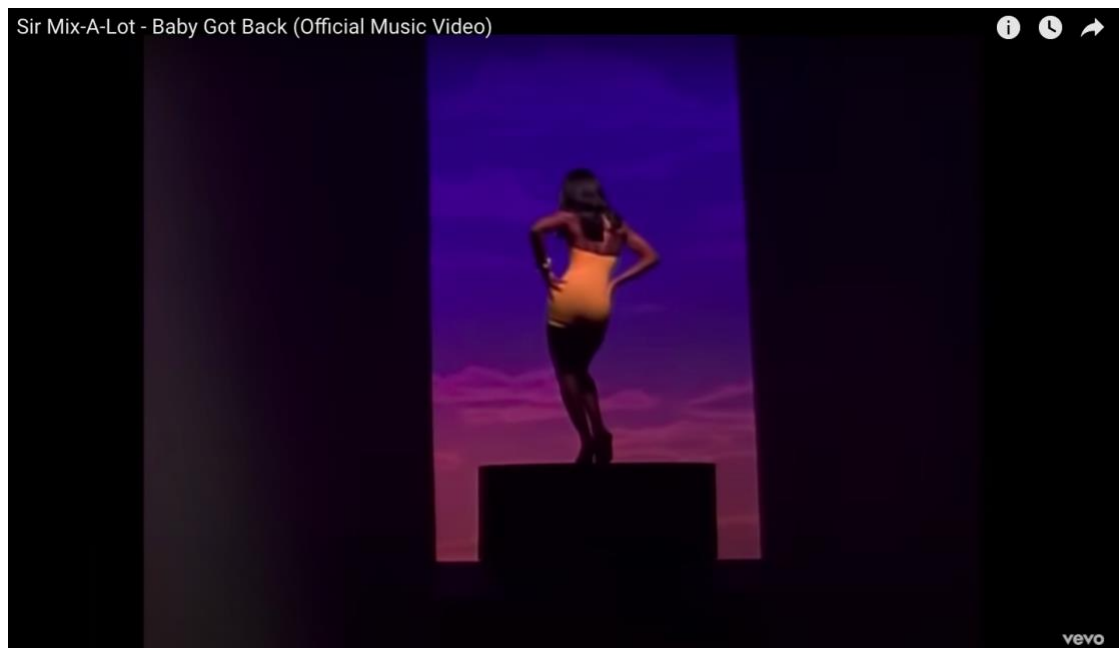


Figure 10: Screenshot of Sir Mix-A-Lot's 1992 music video "Baby Got Back". Unlike the unnamed white women's comments in the beginning of the song, the Black woman pictured is not drastically curvaceous.

Her butt is only exaggerated in size due to the presumptive viewing attitudes of society; to be Black is to be fat and thus, a sexual deviant or prostitute as "Baby Got Back" implied. Sir Mix-A-Lot's song praising fuller figured Black women can be seen as commentary about the 90's and early 2000's beauty standards. These two decades

saw significant use of the ‘does this make me look fat’/‘does this make my butt look big’ trope, where white women in movies, sitcoms, etc. would analyze themselves in the mirror asking a friend or male partner whether an outfit made their butt look big in fear that the answer would be ‘yes’.⁹¹ Such a narrative has drastically transformed over the decade, with celebrities such as Kim Kardashian and Jennifer Lopez being admired for their big rear ends, popularizing the body type ‘slim thick’. A narrow waistline with exaggerated breasts, exaggerated hip line, and protruding buttocks comprises this new beauty trend in female bodies with white women looking to emulate the curves and thickness Black women had been demonized for having naturally.⁹² Desiring curves is nothing new; during the 19th century the Victorian bustle dress was a popular trend from 1810-1815 used to achieve a figure with “exaggerated breasts, narrow waistline, and exaggerated hip line with protruding and jutting buttocks” (fig. 11)⁹³ a physique that Black female scholars have theorized is influenced by Sarah Baartman.⁹⁴

⁹¹ “Does This Make Me Look Fat?”, *Tv Tropes*, February 26, 2020, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/DoesThisMakeMeLookFat>

⁹² Mastamet-Mason, A. “The Saartjie Baartman’s Body Shape versus the Victorian Dress: The Untold African Treasures”. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, **2**, (Spring 2014). 113-120, pg. 115

⁹³ The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. “Evening Toilette.” New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed April 1, 2021. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e1-029e-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

⁹⁴ Mastamet-Mason, A. “The Saartjie Baartman’s Body Shape versus the Victorian Dress: The Untold African Treasures”. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, **2**, (Spring 2014). 113-120, pg. 115



Figure 11: “No. 9. Evening Toilette.” (1883). Newspaper advertisement for an evening toilette. Caption: Pink brocatelle and plain pink silk. The tablier is mounted in spaced platings. The brocatelle tunic is draped with flowers, and the pointed bodice, which is square-cut in front, has short puffed sleeves of the plain silk. The upright collar matches the sleeves, and is plaited at the back, Bodice, 2s. 1d.; skirt, 3s. 1d.”

Even Black Twitter users speculate this association with @WhatThatJessDo gaining over a thousand likes for her tweet:

Those Victorian dresses was the original diaper booty ...

They saw those beautiful African queens slay them

dresses and decided to add couch cushions 🍑⁹⁵

Likewise, waist trainers and shape wear, such as Kim Kardashian's new product line SKIMS⁹⁶, are used by women of the 21st century to sculpt and contour their body to obtain the slim thick physique. Even body augmentation surgeries like the Brazilian Butt Lift (BBL) are considered by those who want their butt to be more pronounced.⁹⁷

The narrative has been subverted; thickness is "in". Consequently, Black women *should* be "in" as well, but that is not the case. It is white women, such as Kim Kardashian who posed nude on *Paper Magazine* and subsequently 'Broke the Internet' to show off her slim S-curve body in direct reference to Jean-Paul Goude's photograph, *Carolina Beaumont, New York 1976*, an image of a Black woman in the same pose (fig. 12)⁹⁸, for which thickness is acceptable.

⁹⁵ itsJess! (@WhatThatJessDo), Twitter Post, December 26, 2020, 11:25 a.m., <https://twitter.com/WhatThatJessDo/status/1342869151321362432>

⁹⁶ "Skims". *Skims Body, Inc.*, March 01, 2021, <https://skims.com/>

⁹⁷ Hannan, Catherine. "Everything You Need to Know About the Brazilian Butt-Lift (Fat Transfer) Procedure", *Healthline*. July 15, 2019, <https://www.healthline.com/health/brazilian-butt-lift>

⁹⁸ Alter, Charlotte. "What Does It Mean to 'Break the Internet'?", *Time USA, LLC*. November 12, 2014 8:11 p.m., <https://time.com/3580977/kim-kardashian-break-the-internet-butt/>

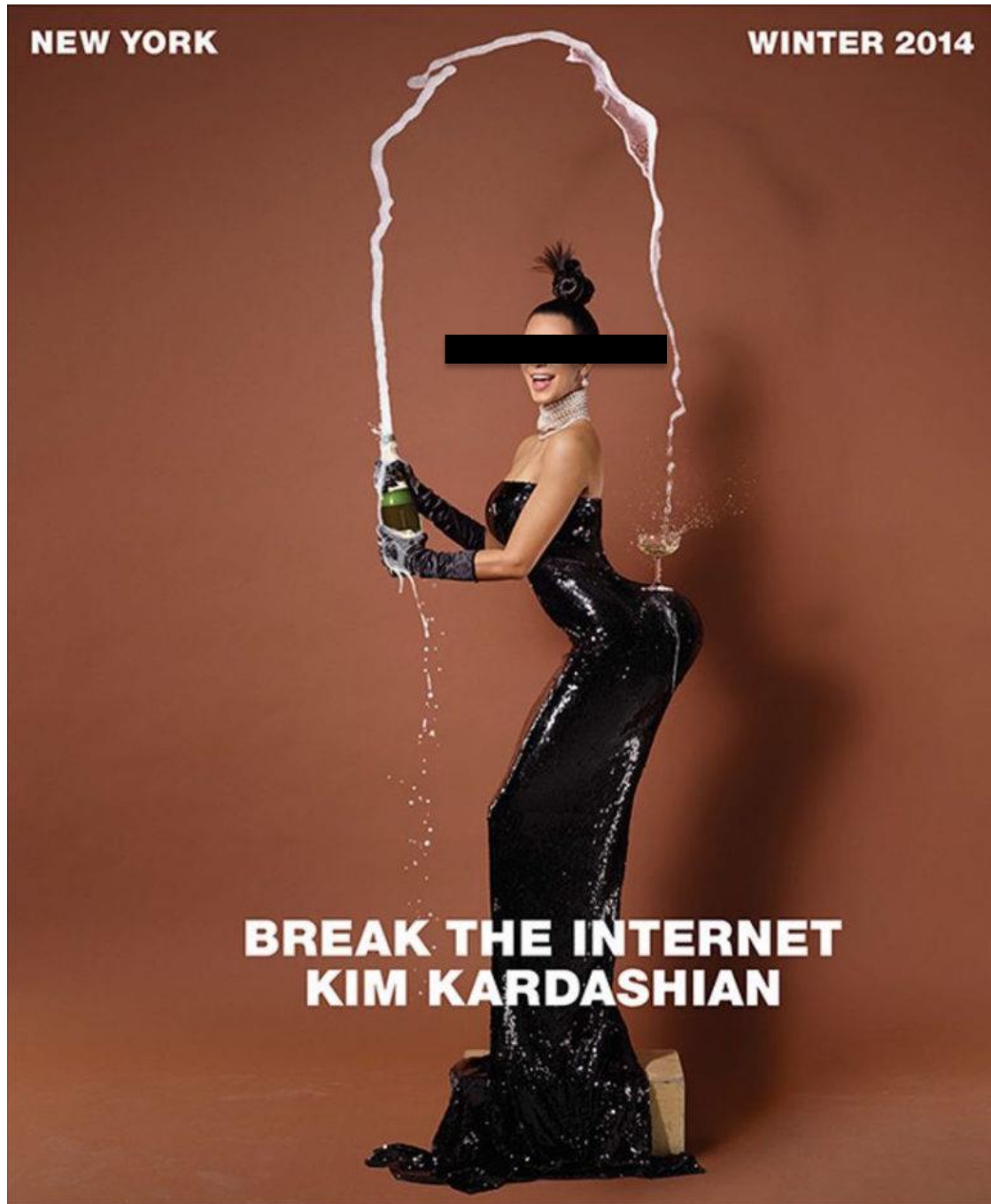


Figure 12: Kim Kardashian's *Paper Magazine* cover for the Winter 2014. Inspired by Jean-Paul Goode's *Carolina Beaumont*, *New York 1976* photography, Kim Kardashian is photographed in a manner to extenuate her famous buttocks and S curve body.

Although Black women have historically been associated with this body type, they do not get the accolades that comes with it being in vogue contemporarily, as their skin color is what hinders them from gaining adoration from society. As Renee Cox's 1994 *Hot-En-Tot* self-portrait photography suggests, Black women are still the imagined Hottentot Venus. Wearing string tied oversized breasts and buttocks, Cox appropriates the exaggerated physique of Baartman, illustrating the "caricatured depictions of black female sexuality prevalent in the dominant culture's imagination".⁹⁹ Skin color is the defining factor in what bodies are considered attractive or not. White women, such as Kim Kardashian are praised for their curves whereas Black women are harshly critiqued, like the backlash Nicki Minaj faced after releasing her song "Anaconda" due to the cover album depicting her squatting pink two piece that accentuated her large buttocks. As a response to this backlash, Minaj posted several images of white women in similar outfits, highlighting the racist double standard.¹⁰⁰ Although darker skin is the defining trait in what bodies are deserving of being shamed it has also become a physical trait to be appropriated.

⁹⁹ Hobson, Janell. *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (Second Edition.). New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018., pg. 73.

¹⁰⁰ Duca, Lauren. "Nicki Minaj's 'Anaconda' Cover Reveals Something Way Bigger Than Her Butt." *HuffPost*. December 6, 2017. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/middlebrow-nicki-minaj_n_5635394

4.2 “Ok, someone turn me into Jada Pinkett-Smith.”

Women exposed for Blackfishing, specifically Emma Hallberg (fig. 13), Aga Brzostowska (fig. 14), and Jaiden Gumbayan (please refer to figs. 1 and 2), all claim that their intentions were not to become Black, nor be perceived as such.



Figure 13: Screenshot of Emma Hallberg from ABC News depicting her with and without her Blackfishing makeup.



Figure 14: Aga Brzotowska, an exposed Blackfisher. She is most known for her ‘slim thick’ body type. During my interviews, all of my participants believed her to be an actual Black woman.

However, their skin tones and physical features were so drastically altered by their ‘tanning’ that multiple people were not aware of their lack of Black ancestry until their exposure. Even one Black woman on Twitter admitted that she had been a follower of Hallberg and “honestly thought Emma Hallberg was half black lol 🧐”.¹⁰¹ In fact,

¹⁰¹ Mrs. (@MxssKerry_), Twitter Post, November 7, 2018, 3:35p.m., https://twitter.com/MxssKerry_/status/1060274033093173248?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1060274033093173248%7Ctwgr%5Eshare_3%2Ccontainerclick_0&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fw

most people, me included, assumed that these Blackfishers were light skinned and/or mixed race Black women. As I have noted previously, Black skin is not an attribute to covet. Socially, to be Black, and furthermore to be a Black woman, is to be demonized, fetishized, and mistreated by society solely based on your melanin. And yet, these Blackfishers have self-tanned themselves into foundation shades that are not their natural shade range to the point where they are almost indistinguishable from actual Black women. With the Black women I spoke to, we viewed images of both Black women and Blackfishers, a chance to gauge if they too would have trouble distinguishing between an actual Black woman or a white woman Blackfishing. While some did fail to see the difference, they all noted that the biggest indicator of a Blackfisher was that they likened their skin tone to appear light skinned and *never* dark skinned.

While tanning itself is not an act of cultural appropriation it is the boundaries that Blackfishers push with darkening their skin that makes the practice disconcerting. However, tanned skin has, in the past few decades, become an admired physical attribute by the white population. Despite ultraviolet radiation (UV) having adverse effects on human health, the tanning industry has been profitable due to being shaped by social construction of tanning being equated to the image of a “healthy, attractive,

www.papermag.com/2Fwhite-women-blackfishing-instagram-2619714094.html%3Frelltitem%3D10relltitem10%3Frelltitem%3D10

and fashionable” person.¹⁰² Tanned skin being appealing is a contrast to the previous beauty standards that touted pale skin as the aesthetic supreme. Fascination with pale skin has manifested as a hierarchy within cultures of color, establishing ‘colorism’ within these communities that indicate the closer to whiteness one is, the more attractive they are, maintaining that whiteness is the ideal.¹⁰³ However, just as with body types, the narrative surrounding skin tone has been subverted, starting with the industrialization of the American workforce, pushing the working class to spend long hours indoors and contracting “sunlight starvation” which caused one to succumb to ‘diseases of darkness’ such as rickets or tuberculosis, and ‘moral depravity’ such as alcoholism and suicide. Thus, pallor became a low-class complexion, and the ability to have tan skin indicated one of high status. A “Sun-kissed face and bronzed body” became the symbol of affluence, a symbol further popularized by Coco Chanel after being seen with a deep tan while cruising and declaring in *Vogue* “The 1929 girl must be tanned ... a golden tan is the index of chic”.¹⁰⁴ The message that ‘tan is beautiful’ proliferated as the decades passed and industries catering to tanning products increased greatly, advertising tanning lotions, oils, and even indoor tanning beds.

¹⁰² Hunt, Yvonne, Erik Augustson, Lila Rutten, Richard Moser, and Amy Yaroach. "History and culture of tanning in the United States." In *Shedding light on indoor tanning*, pp. 5-31. Springer, Dordrecht, 2012., pg. 6

¹⁰³ Ibid. pg. 8

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. pg. 26

Unsurprisingly, this sun-kissed narrative works in tandem with the colorism that communities of color, and more specifically the Black community face. Colorism is maintained by white supremacy which is founded on the racial classification system explained earlier; to have dark skin is to be the inferior savage, and to have white skin is to be a civilized beauty. While skin tone variation in Africans is not an anomaly, colorism within the United States prevailed due to the sexual assault against enslaved African women by white slave owners. Forced miscegenation during enslavement produced lighter skinned Black people which furthered the color based hierarchy and thus, light-skinned enslaved Black people would be given occasional privileges, such as opportunities for education or manumission, due to their proximity to whiteness.¹⁰⁵ The closer to mixed race an enslaved Black person appeared, the more privileges they could obtain, allowing them to experience economic and social uplift in comparison to their darker skinned counterparts. Consequently, this preferential treatment light skinned Black people have been afforded has become a fixture of culture in the Black community as seen through the popular oral history of the Brown Paper Bag Test many Black children, me included, have been told; a colorist discriminatory practice from the 20th century, the test would indicate the privileges a Black person could have

¹⁰⁵ Hunter, Margaret. "The Persistent Problem of Colorism: Skin Tone, Status, and Inequality." *Sociology Compass* 1, no. 1 (2007): 237-254.

if their skin tone was equal to or, preferentially lighter than, the color of a brown paper bag.¹⁰⁶

When combined with the rise in popularity surrounding being tan, the hierarchy of skin color has produced a fascination with light skinned Black women. From Beyoncé to Zendaya, the Black women who are publicly loved and coveted for their beauty are most often than not light skinned, their skin tone and Anglo features allow them to be seen as beauty ideals to emulate, as opposed to their darker skin counterparts. While they are obviously brown in skin tone, they are light enough to be seen as attractive because they align with the white standard of Black beauty; light skinned with Anglo features. The desirability of brown skin is seen in many popular culture narratives such as in the 2015 satirical horror comedy, *Scream Queens*. In the pilot episode of the slasher series, Melanie Dorkus, portrayed by Brianne Horway, is one of the many caricatures of white American sorority girl stereotypes. During her introduction scene, she is seen in her underwear, preparing to be spray tanned by her sorority members. Even though the spray tan goes horribly wrong, it is the phrase she states that is most interesting: “Ok, someone turn me into Jada Pinkett-Smith.”¹⁰⁷ Although Melanie ends up severely burned from the sabotaged spray tan, her desire

¹⁰⁶ Pilgrim, David. "[Brown Paper Bag Test](https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/question/2014/february.htm)". *Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia* (blog), February 2014, <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/question/2014/february.htm>

¹⁰⁷ *Scream Queens*, Episode 1, “Pilot,” directed by Ryan Murphy, aired September 22, 2015, on Fox <https://www.fox.com/scream-queens/>

was to manipulate her skin tone to match that of the well-known light skinned Black actress, Jada Pinkett Smith (fig. 15).



Figure 15: Screenshot of Jada Pinkett-Smith from her Red Table Talk which she hosts with her daughter, Willow Smith, and mother, Adrienne Banfield-Norris.

The *Scream Queens* scene acts as a social commentary on the aggressive tanning that white women often partake in, indicating that said demographic is aware that a ‘sun-kissed’ tan is no longer the end goal, but rather looking similar to a Black woman is, particularly a light skinned Black woman. Self-tanning creams of today even market pushing the boundaries of a regular tan, with products like ‘Paint it Black’ by

Millennium Tanning which promises the user that the product has a “50x auto darkening tan technology” that will give them “extreme dark bronze” results (fig. 16).



Figure 16: “Paint It Black 50x” by Millennium Tanning. It’s extreme tanning results spurred a TikTok trend of white women showing off their drastic ‘before and after’ skin tones during summer of 2018.

And for those looking for an even more drastic melanin upgrade, there’s a ‘Solid Black’ option producing upwards “100x auto darkening tan technology”. Even though the products are designed with a Gothic aesthetic, one cannot sever the colloquial

connection of titling a self-tanner with the words Black and the product's function to turn pale skin significantly darker.

Even outside of social media influencers, white woman who have aggressively tanned themselves beyond their natural shade range have been under scrupulous speculation for Blackfishing. Singer Ariana Grande has been repeatedly called out for her ever darkening skin tone, especially during her MTV performance of her hit song, "Side to Side" with rapper Nicki Minaj. As seen in a still of the performance showing both women standing next to each other, their shade of skin matching identically. However, Nicki Minaj is an actual Black woman whereas Ariana Grande is not (fig. 17)¹⁰⁸.

¹⁰⁸ Hussain, Sara. "Ariana Grande's Excessive Use of Fake Tan is 'Blackfishing', and That's a Real Problem". *The Tempest*, March 7, 2019. <https://thetempest.co/2019/03/07/entertainment/ariana-grande-fake-tan-blackfishing/>



Figure 17: Screenshot of Ariana Grande and Nicki Minaj during their 2016 MTV Music Video Awards performance of “Side to Side”. Grande’s darkened skin ton matches that of Nicki Minaj.

White women have taken tanning to the extreme, appropriating the natural shade range of the Black counterparts to the point where their skin tone is almost indistinguishable from actual Black women who do not need to tan. To maintain these tans, white women also utilize ‘full body foundation’ such as the Dermablend Leg and Body Makeup Foundation or Kim Kardashian’s Skin Perfecting Body Foundation. These products guarantee their customers that they will “blur imperfections, enhance skin tone and provide a flawless finish for any look.”¹⁰⁹ Full body foundation allows for

¹⁰⁹ KKW Beauty. “KKW Beauty: Skin Perfecting Body Foundation.”, March 01, 2021. *KKW Beauty*. <https://kkwbeauty.com/products/body-foundation?variant=30996667203686.com/skin-perfecting-body-foundation?productId=pimprod2015085>

these women to darken their skin as is seen in a Coco and Eve self-tanner advertisement posted on Twitter by @supreme_kass.¹¹⁰ The Snapchat advertisement shows a white women rubbing the self-tanner all over her body, staining her skin to become at least three shades darker than her natural hue. This sophisticated method of skin darkening has sparked the TikTok series of “Melanin or Melanoma” by @summerroshea where she posts various images of both white and Black women, who have similar skin tones, with their faces obscured and asks for her audience to guess whether the image is of an actual Black woman or a white girl with an aggressive tan.¹¹¹ Similar to @summerroshea’s TikTok series, during my discussions, my participants and I played a game of “Black Woman or Blackfisher”. While results varied, all six women noted that the brown skin tones of the Blackfishers precariously bordered on realistic, making their guesses difficult. Britt Henry when analyzing an image of Emma Hallberg (please refer to fig. 13), a known Blackfisher stated: “She looks like if I was at the beach and I got tan.” Based on that observation she deemed Hallberg to be an actual Black woman.¹¹² Needless to say, Britt was shocked at finding out that Hallberg was not actually Black and that her original skin tone was considerably lighter than the images shown. In Emma Hallberg’s YouTube video,

¹¹⁰ · (@supreme_kass), Twitter Post, January 14, 2021, 12:15 p.m., https://twitter.com/supreme_kass/status/1349767205127397378

¹¹¹ @summerroshea TikTok Video, October 4, 2020 (saved November 5, 2020): “Episode 9: Is it a Black Girl of a White Girl with an Aggressive Tan” <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMeBC1Rne/>

¹¹² Henry, Britt. Interview by Benét Burton. Zoom Recording. Newark, November 20, 2020.

which I showed to all my participants, one can even learn her signature “Instagram Highlighter Makeup Look”. Her routine requires her to paint her skin with a foundation shade significantly darker than her natural skin tone (fig. 18)¹¹³, a process eerily similar to the images in *Denison’s Makeup Guide* that depict Mr. Ward McDonald putting on his greasepaint for a minstrelsy (fig. 19).¹¹⁴



Figure 18: Screenshot of Emma Hallberg’s “INSTAGRAM HIGHLIGHTER MAKEUP LOOK” YouTube makeup tutorial. In this scene she is seen painting her skin with a brown foundation darker than her natural skin tone.

¹¹³ Emma Hallberg, “EEMMAHALLBERG INSTAGRAM HIGHLIGHTER MAKEUP LOOK,” YouTube, October 28, 2018, YouTube, video, 7:31. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mcv1j_kjlc

¹¹⁴ T.S Denison & Company. *Denison's Make-Up Guide, Written for the Amateur Actor and Containing Information of Value to Professionals in the Art of Making Up for Stage Parts*. Chicago: T. S. Denison & Company, 1926.

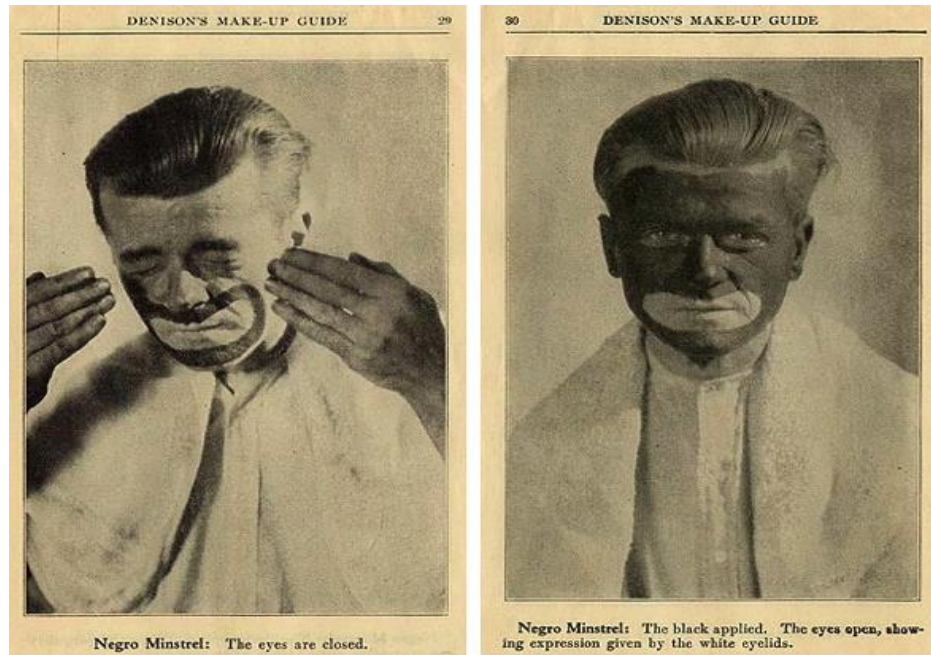


Figure 19: Ward McDonald photographed for T.S. Denison & Company's *Denison's Make-Up Guide* (1926). In this sequence, McDonald is painting his face with greasepaint for his Blackface makeup, illustrating to readers how to best cover the skin with the black greasepaint.

Unlike the minstrel makeup guide, Hallberg teaches her audience how to seamlessly blend the browner foundation to look more natural, giving her the appearance of a mixed race or light skinned Black woman. These skin darkening tools, the auto-tanning products of the 21st century and the greasepaint of the 19th century, are both used to create a Black effect allowing white people the ability to costume themselves in Blackness.

4.3 “You know this hair is my shit.”

Black hair has always been a contentious ground of discussion in relation to cultural appropriation, with many arguing, both non-Black and Black, that it's 'just hair'. Due to the fragility of Black hair, protective styles are a necessity for Black women who want to ensure their hair grows healthily without fear of damage or breakage to their delicate curls and kinks. Cornrows, box braids, plaits, weaves, and au natural curls, are all popular protective hairstyles for Black women to not only maintain healthy locks but to showcase their pride in their culture. For Black Americans the significance of these hairstyles, and their ability to be able to wear them with pride is founded in the generations of its oppression. Before colonization and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, hair grooming in African cultures signified a variety of identities within the community, from marital status to wealth to even ethnic identity.¹¹⁵ However, after the forceful migration of millions of Africans into the United State, African hair was subject to western beauty ideals, with white people viewing their hair as 'ugly and savage', referring to it as wool as means to further dehumanize them. Claiming sanitary concerns, the hair of enslaved Africans was shaved from their heads by slave owners further debasing them and removing cultural signifiers.¹¹⁶ However, despite being stripped of a physical connection to their home, enslaved Africans maintained their hair dressing skills styling themselves and others in

¹¹⁵ Byrd, Ayana D, and Lori L Tharps. *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*. 1st ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001., pg. 21

¹¹⁶ Byrd, Ayana D, and Lori L Tharps. *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*. 1st ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001.

plaits, braids, and cornrows once their hair grew back as convenient styles for working. The cornrows, also known as cane rows in the Caribbean due to their resemblance to sugarcane fields, would be braided into elaborate patterns as methods of resistance and reclamation of their dignity.¹¹⁷

After enslavement, Black hair, specifically Black women's hair, was further persecuted for not aligning with the white beauty ideal. Laws and restrictions on Black hair were put in place as a means of control of Blackness. Louisiana's Tignon Laws, put in place by Spanish governor Esteban Rodríguez Miró, in the 18th century, forced Black women to wrap their natural hair in tignon headscarves to both indicate a visible sign of being enslaved and impede miscegenation as their hair was attracting the attention of white men. Regardless of whether they were free or not, Black women were subjected to censoring their physical appearance to appease the white demographic.¹¹⁸ With emancipation, Black women were forced to assimilate to the white beauty ideal of straight hair. Wigs, flat irons, hot combs, and even chemicals were all used on the curls of Black women, damaging their hair, to obtain the straight hair that came so naturally to their white counterparts. By having straight hair, Black women were able to exist in United States' white supremacist society with one less worry of discrimination. Having straight hair meant they were assimilating; they had

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Kein, Sybil. *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000.

become respectable under the white gaze.¹¹⁹ Although the 1960s brought a reclamation of natural hair in contrast, with the Civil Rights era being the decade of the afro, a symbol of both Black power and Black pride most notably identified with activist Angela Davis who normalized the style for the white perception, the natural hair of Black women and their protective styles are still persecuted in the name of professionalism.¹²⁰ Hair discrimination laws and biases affect the lives of Black women and children today. Rooted in racism, the notion that Black hair when it is kinky, naturally curly, or in protective styles is unprofessional, garners unfair treatment to Black people in both their place of work and school life. A young girl at Christ the King Elementary School in Terrytown was sent home from school in August 2018 due to her braided hair with extensions thus making it ‘unnatural hair’.¹²¹

As was documented with the slim thick body type and brown skin, however, these hair styles that cause Black women to be discriminated against are seen as aesthetically pleasing when outfitted on white women and rebranded as fashion trends. In the movie *10 Bo Derek* appears in a scene running as a carefree beach blonde, pale

¹¹⁹ Byrd, Ayana D, and Lori L Tharps. *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*. 1st ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ O’Kane, Caitlin. “Video Shows Girl in Tears After She Was Told to Leave School Because of Braided Hair, Family Says.” *CBS News*. August 22, 2018, 11:10 a.m. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/video-shows-girl-in-tears-after-she-was-told-to-leave-school-because-of-braided-hair-family-says/>

skin wet and glistening in the sun after getting out of the ocean.¹²² To complete her look, her hair is cornrowed (fig. 20).



Figure 20: Screenshot of Bo Derek from the movie *10* showing off her blonde cornrows which was the impetus for the culturally appropriated trend, “Bo Braids.”

After its release, white women began to title this hairstyle, Bo Braids, with no cultural knowledge of the braiding technique existing in the Black community long before the 1979 movie’s debut. This practice of bastardizing Black hairstyles to appeal to white women has yet to cease, what with Kim Kardashian being seen as the new trend maker

¹²² Blake Edwards' "*10*". Warner Home Video, 1997.

of cornrows and said hairstyle being renamed ‘Boxer Braids’ in 2016.¹²³ On white women, braids are trendy and cute, a way to switch up their appearance. Yet, in 2017 a Black Banana Republic employee was told she looked “too urban” by her manager for wearing box braids to work.¹²⁴ For Kylie Jenner donning faux locs in 2015 was an “edgy” decision that could possibly spark a trend¹²⁵ whereas Zendaya looks like she “smells like patchouli oil. Or, weed” when she wore the same style at the Oscars that same year.¹²⁶

Blatant acts of discrimination against natural Black hair has spurred Black women to vocalize the importance their hair has for them. Solange’s “Don’t Touch My Hair” from her album *A Seat at the Table* encompasses this significance greatly. In her music video she features multiple Black people all fashioned in various Black cultural hair styles, from finger waves to elaborate three dimensional braids (fig. 21), to showcase the versatility and complexity of Black culture expressed in hair.

¹²³ Danielle, Britni. “This Hairstyle Is Not Called ‘Boxer Braids’ and Kim Kardashian Didn’t Make It Popular | Teen Vogue.” *Teen Vogue*. n.d. Accessed October 25, 2020. <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/boxer-braids-hairstyle-history>.

¹²⁴ Samotin, Perrie. “A Banana Republic Employee Says She Was Told Her Braids Looked Too ‘Urban’.” *Glamour*. October 27, 2017, <https://www.glamour.com/story/banana-republic-employee-destiny-tompkins-says-she-was-told-box-braids-looked-too-urban>

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Bryant, Taylor. “Zendaya Responds to Rude Comments About Her Dreadlocks.” *Refinery29*. February 25, 2015, 12:30 p.m., <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2015/02/82786/zendaya-giuliana-rancic-dreadlock-comment>



Figure 21: Screenshot from Solange Knowles' "Don't Touch My Hair" depicting the various forms of hairstyles that Black hair can be styled.

With lyrics as follows:

Don't touch my hair
When it's the feelings I wear
Don't touch my soul
When it's the rhythm I know
Don't touch my crown
They say the vision I've found
Don't touch what's there
When it's the feelings I wear

Solange is explicitly stating the empowerment she finds in her hair as it connects to her cultural and racial identity. Multiple times she equates her hair to totems of power, calling it her 'pride', 'crown', and her 'soul', and furthers a narrative of how she must

protect said hair and identity stating that “You know this is hair is my shit/Rode the ride, I gave it time/But this here is mine.” indicating the passage of time it takes for Black women to become comfortable with their natural hair in a white society who she implies is not cognizant of the cultural significance of Black hair with the verse:

They don’t understand

What it means to me

Where we chose to go

Where we’ve been to know¹²⁷

Solange’s lyrics indicate that Black women are, obviously, aware of the cultural appropriation of their physical attributes. The physical attributes that they have been, time and time again, discriminated against for having naturally being praised on white women has been cause for concern long before Blackfishing gained its title. In April of 2016, poets Crystal Valentine and Aaliyah Jihad performed “Hide Your Shea Butter” at the College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational hosted at the University of Texas. Opening their spoken word in unison with: “Attention Black women. I said, attention all Black women. We are entering a state of emergency.” They go on to narrate how white women, Kylie Jenner specifically, have been

¹²⁷ Solange, “Don’t Touch My Hair”, recorded 2016, track 4 *A Seat at the Table*, Columbia Records, compact disc.

studying Black women to learn their culture and subsequently turn into them “right before our eyes” (fig. 22).¹²⁸



Figure 22: Screenshot of Crystal Valentine and Aaliyah Jihad performing their spoken word “Hide Your Shea Butter” for the 2016 College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational (CUPSI) at the University of Texas.

“Hide Your Shea Butter” speaks to the necessity to gatekeep this cultural knowledge as white women will take the creations of Black women and then bastardize them, as was seen with boxer braids and Bo braids, while claiming them as their own. Jihad and Valentine continue their poetry by voicing their concerns with the extremes cultural appropriation has been taken and climatically state “...it’s not that we don’t trust white

¹²⁸ Solange Knowles, “Solange-Don’t Touch My Hair ft. Sampha (Official Music Video),” YouTube, October 2, 2016, video, 4:24. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzcwWMqRjI8>

people, it's that y'all really think my Black looks better on you."¹²⁹ This is a common sentiment shared by many Black women, with even my participants indicating to me that they are aware that they are not as desirous as a white women with Black features. As even Justyce stated an adage often expressed by Black women: "They like the Black girl body, but on a white girl", a claim that gains more clarity when expanded upon in my interviews.

¹²⁹ Button Poetry, "Crystal Valentine & Aaliyah Jihad – "Hide Your Shea Butter"," YouTube, August 14, 2016, video, 3:08. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzcwWMqRjI8>

Chapter 5

CANNIBALISM AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Pinpointing the specific physical attributes of Black women that are appropriated is an easy task, however, understanding the reasoning behind why they are appropriated can be difficult. While shaping my research, I realized that without the input of other Black women, I would not be able to fully comprehend the practice of Blackfishing and its root causes. As I noted in my introduction, as a Black woman I must be transparent in the biases I have on my thesis topic due to my own racialized experiences. Biases aside, my racialized experiences, as well as those of my participants (interviewees), are substantial to this research as they introduce implicit insight into the possibilities of why Blackfishing is practiced and how it ultimately affects Black women. During our discussions, my participants, or rather collaborators, and I held conversations surrounding our reactions to Blackfishers and thoughts on what motivates them to pursue such mimicry. Beginning the conversation with the simple question of “why do you think Blackfishing is a phenomenon?” we delved deep into the complexities of Black womanhood to theorize the incentives of Blackfishing and to paraphrase Justyce Bennett, why society likes the Black girl body on a white girl.

5.1 The Male Gaze

Despite my earnest attempt to center Black women in my research, all six of my discussions ended up focusing on how men and the male gaze play a significant part in the proliferation of Blackfishing. In my conversation with Nylah Byrd, she explicitly brought up the male gaze and its effect on how white women perform beauty:

Nylah Byrd: *I understand it [Blackfishing] because I think to a certain extent, men really have made a point to say they liked Black features, but on on-Black women. And so, these women are like, “Oh, I'm hot shit. ‘Cause I got Black features, but I ain't Black. Like I'm a white woman with a big ass. Look at me!” kind of a thing. And it's like, that's great. But can you just be a white woman with a big ass and not try to be Black?*

Benét Burton: *So, it's because they're not actually Black, but they have Black features, that's what makes them sexy to the men? They have tan skin. They have big butts. They have plump lips. They're using black women's fashion and aesthetics, but at the end of the day, they're not actually black...so it's okay?*

Nylah Byrd: *Yes. But I think at this point it's like bleeding into colorism in my head. Cause I'm a dark skin Black woman. And so that's like a very specific point of view. And so, in my head, it's very much “We like light skins. We like red bones. We like*

yellow bones. We like these light people with Black features.” But, as soon as you have dark skin, fuck you.

Benét Burton: *Colorism strikes again.*¹³⁰

Colorism and the male gaze go hand in hand both within and outside the Black community. As I explained earlier in chapter three, the skin pigment hierarchy is birthed from anti-Blackness and proliferates the notion that the lighter in skin tone you are, the more privilege you have. As a consequence, the male gaze is thus situated to view light skinned and white skinned women as more attractive, sexually and romantically. This often manifests as hostility towards darker skinned women, as Nylah described in her interview. Dark skin Black women are often not seen as sexually nor romantically viable, a perception rooted in centuries of racism and prejudice. While all Black women experience anti-Blackness, those with more melanin in their skin experience significantly more aggressive prejudice due to their dark skin, often being equated to gorillas or roaches. In an episode from the TV show *Shark Tank*, Melissa Butler and Rosco Spears, two dark skin Black women pitching their business idea of The Lip Bar mobile to sell unique lipstick colors, were called

¹³⁰ Byrd, Nylah. Interview by Benét Burton. Zoom Recording. Newark, October 23, 2020.

‘colorful cockroaches’ by Kevin O’Leary.¹³¹ Even Cardi B, a popular light skinned Black female was under fire in 2017 for having called dark skinned women ‘monkeys’ and ‘roaches’.¹³² Such dehumanizing commentary furthers separates dark skin Black women from their femininity as they are masculinized by society due to the notion that to be feminine is to be of a lighter complexion, or preferentially white. Serena Williams, a well accomplished athlete has constantly been accused of being born a man.¹³³ Black women’s feminine identity does not align with the hegemonic beauty standards of whiteness, forcing them into a position of being less desirable to men. Such a concept is exacerbated on social media as exemplified in @jimmitattoo’s TikTok video of him, a Black man, in bed with his white female significant other (fig. 23)¹³⁴.

¹³¹ The Hot Scoop Report, “Two Women Get Called CockRoaches on Shark Tank,” YouTube, February 1, 2018, video, 1:16. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Q1P9LVtN6U>

¹³² Rosario, Richy. “Was Cardi B Being Racist When She Called Dark-Skinned Women “Roaches”?”, *Vibe Media, LLC*. August 10, 2017, 10:50 a.m., <https://www.vibe.com/features/viva/cardi-b-twitter-comments-racist-531317/>

¹³³ Olaleye, Fope. “Dear Cis Black Women, Transphobia Will Never Serve Us or The Goal of Black Liberation.” *Gal-dem* (blog), July 18, 2020, <https://gal-dem.com/dear-cis-black-women-transphobia-will-never-serve-us-or-the-goal-of-black-liberation/>

¹³⁴ @jimmitattoos, TikTok Video, March 4, 2021 (saved March 5, 2021) <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMeBC2Eyd/>

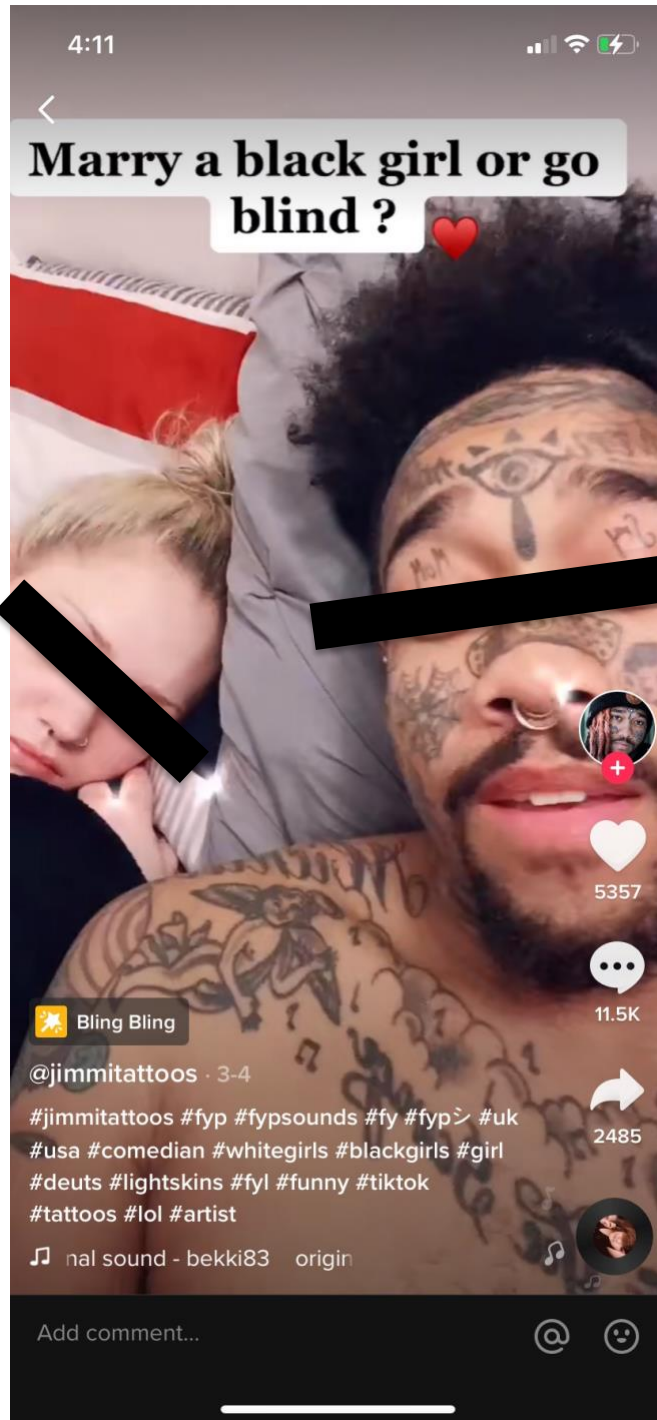


Figure 23: Screenshot of @jimmitattoos TikTok video negatively speaking about Black women.

In the video, he has the caption “Marry a Black girl or go blind?” and lip syncs to Beyoncé’s cover of “I’d Rather Go Blind” in response to the question posed, indicating that he would rather be with a white woman, as he shows in the video, or be disabled, than be romantically or sexually involved with a Black woman.

In our discussions, the male gaze played a significant role in our theories surrounding Blackfishers and their motivations. Justyce furthered the conversation of the male gaze when she addressed how colorism played a role, concluding that viewing light skin Black women as desirable was rooted in not perceiving them as a people but rather status symbols for men.

Justyce Bennett: *Like how many Black men, athletes and rappers, I'm thinking even Kevin Hart. Where there is a dark skinned Black man with like a white or mixed race younger girl. It's that whole stereotype. Kanye even talks about it he “has light skin girls now like that”. It is a status symbol. And I wonder if this whole “I've got light skin girls thing” that trophy thing, do white women also want to be a part of it? Do they want to be fetishized? Is that something they want because they can have it. It's not for me.*¹³⁵

¹³⁵ Bennett, Justyce. Interview by Benét Burton. Zoom Recording. Newark, October 21, 2020.

Both dark skin and light skin Black women are dehumanized based on their association to men, Black men specifically. Whereas dark skin Black women are viewed as animals or bugs, light skin Black women are trophies that raise a man's status due to the fetishization of their identities. In a Twitter post, writer Myles Johnson surmised that "Black men are constantly told only one type of woman is successful, worth valuing, and desirable" as an analysis to an image of Hip-Hop icons with their significant others who were all either light skinned or non-Black.¹³⁶ Aligned with Justyce's comments, this fetishization is due in part to the popularity of hip hop and rap culture. In 2018, Hip-Hop/Rap was the most consumed music genre at 21.7 percent in the United States based on music album consumption.¹³⁷ At such high sales percentage in comparison to other music genres, the colorist lyrics written primarily by Black men are sure to influence the perspectives of those who listen to their music. Lyrics like: "My first addiction, GI Joes and icies/After that it was light skinned girls and Nikes" from Jadakiss's "Feel Me",¹³⁸ or "Nothin' like the light skinned Mamacita in H-Town/They got them porn star big booties" in "Mamacita" by Travis Scott¹³⁹,

¹³⁶G., Andre. "On Hip-Hop's Intersection of Colorism and Misogyny." *Impose Magazine*. Accessed March 2, 2021. <https://imposemagazine.com/features/on-hip-hops-intersection-of-colorism-and-misogyny>

¹³⁷ Statista Research Department, "Music Album Consumption U.S. 2018, By Genre", January 8, 2021. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/310746/share-music-album-sales-us-genre/>.

¹³⁸ Jadakiss "Feel Me", recorded 2001, track 19 on *Kiss Tha Game Goodbye*, Ruff Ryders, compact disc.

¹³⁹ Travis Scott, "Mamacita (feat. Rich Homie Quan & Young Thug)", recorded 2014, single, Epic Records, compact disc.

even “Yellow big booty, yellow bones” by Gucci Mane in “Lemonade”.¹⁴⁰ Rap and Hip-Hop are culturally significant to the Black community, a creative way to express common themes in the culture. As these lyrics show, fetishizing light skinned Black women and treating them as objects to procure, trophies that symbolize their rise in status, is a notable theme in Black culture. Light skinned Black women are celebrated jezebels. This narrative subsequently becomes disseminated into the mainstream, as all of Black culture does, altering the perception that white people have in association with light skinned Black women. Being a light skin Black woman, or having those physical attributes, inherently means you will be viewed as a sexual entity; you will inherently have sexual currency.

Ariana Grande, mentioned in chapter three, is a perfect example of this sexualization. In her debut music video “Baby I” her skin tone is seemingly her natural color as she sings non-sexual lyrics about being too “tongue-tied and twisted” to tell a boy she likes him romantically (fig. 24).

¹⁴⁰ Gucci Mane, “Lemonade”, recorded 2009, track 6 on *The State vs. Radric Davis*, Warner Bros. Records Inc., compact disc.



Figure 24: Screenshot of Ariana Grande in her 2013 debut music video “Baby I” for her album *Yours Truly*. In this music video she is seen wearing more modest clothing and only lightly tanned.

As her career progressed, however, her skin tone has darkened and she has adopted more Black aesthetics with just recently having released her “7 Rings” music video in 2019 where she parades around a pink trap house, a concept appropriated from rapper 2 Chainz’s “Pretty Girls Like Trap Music” album in 2016 (fig. 25) .



Figure 25: Screenshot of Ariana Grande from her 2019 music video “7 Rings” for her album *thank u, next*. This music video’s main premise is her extravagantly galivanting around a pink trap house filled with luxurious items. From her debut her skin tone has significantly darkened, and she has adopted more Black feminine aesthetics.

Adorned in diamond encrusted bodysuits, fur coats and big hoop earrings Grande coincidentally also adopts AAVE, using terms like “savage” and “flossy” and singing lyrics like “I don’t mean to brag, but I be like put it in the bag/When you see them racks, they stacked up like my ass.”¹⁴¹ Justyce Bennett titles this specific appearance the ‘Fashion Nova’ aesthetic, based on the fast fashion brand known for their racially ambiguous models who have a similar appearance of a slim thick body type, light-skin tone, and full lips (fig. 26).

¹⁴¹ Ariana Grande, “Ariana Grande – 7 rings (Official video),” YouTube, January 18, 2019, YouTube, video, 3:04, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYh6mYIJG2Y>

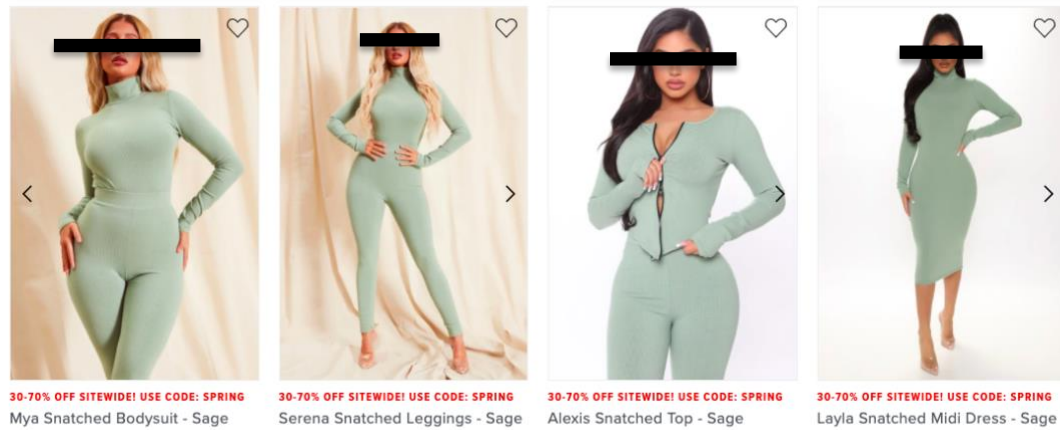


Figure 26: Screenshot of two non-Black models on Fashion Nova’s online store. Along with the two models visibly appearing to be mixed race light skinned Black women, the title of the clothing ‘Snatched’ is a term appropriated from AAVE

Although she is not a light skinned Black woman, Ariana Grande has capitalized on adopting the features and the overall perceived sexual nature of one through darkening her skin tone and evolving her lyrics from “So I’m daydreamin’/With my chin in the palm of my hands”¹⁴² to “Even though I’m wifey you can hit it like a side chick/Don’t need no side dick, no.”¹⁴³ Ariana Grande is one of many case studies where the features of Black women have been commodified in and out of the Black community. The ‘Fashion Nova aesthetic’ is a subversion to the hegemonic beauty standard of whiteness and white women want to be a part of that, as Grace Victoria,

¹⁴² Ariana Grande, “Daydreamin’”, recorded 2013, track 7 on *Yours Truly*, Universal Public Records, compact disc.

¹⁴³ Ariana Grande, “34 + 35”, recorded 2021, track 2 on *Positions (Deluxe)*, Universal Public Records, compact disc.

singer and songwriter of “Black Looks Better on Me”, a song that directly addresses Blackfishing, discussed with me.

Grace Victoria: *I do think it's like...even though whiteness is like still on this pedestal, it's there to stay, there is a legitimate nation crisis around like white supremacy. And I honestly think because people are starting to understand how messed up it is that eurocentrism exists. That beauty standards are the way that they are. They're actually trying to disassociate themselves with the standards that literally still are the standards of beauty. If I really think hard about why Blackfishing exists, it's like white people want to be exotic and they want to be not like the other girls, you know, they want some sort of substance. It's so unfortunate that the way that they're stealing attributes from the oppressed.*

Benét Burton: *It's that need to disassociate from whiteness you think is the problem?*

Grace Victoria: *I think that's fueling the Blackfishing.*¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Victoria, Grace. Interview by Benét Burton. Zoom Recording. Newark, December 12, 2020.

5.2 Disembodiment & Cannibalism

This disassociation from whiteness was further expanded on in my talk with Britt Henry who harkened back to the horror film *Get Out* by Jordan Peele:

***Britt Henry:** Honestly, this reminds me of *Get Out*, which I think this is going to give, what I would assume is an efficient answer. In *Get Out* during the scene where Chris is walking around with Rose and he's like at a modern day auction block because they are auctioning off Black bodies, right? He's talking to this white couple and the guy says the "pendulum has swung back. Black is in fashion."*¹⁴⁵

The scene Britt is referring to is when the protagonist Chris, played by Daniel Kaluuya, exposes the conflict of the movie; Black people's bodies are being sold for white people to inhabit them. The white people auction off Chris to the highest bidder who is then drugged and almost has his brain replaced with that of an older white man. Britt's association of Blackfishing with this movie exposes a broader narrative of disembodiment and consumption of the Black female body that can only be understood through cannibalism.

As Frantz Fanon so eloquently wrote in *Black Skin, White Masks*, "I came into this world anxious to uncover the meaning of things, my soul desirous to be at the

¹⁴⁵ Henry, Britt. Interview by Benét Burton. Zoom Recording. Newark, November 20, 2020.

origin of the world, and here I am an object among other objects.”¹⁴⁶ My thesis is one centered on material culture, my research based in objects. Thus, it should not be presumptuous of me to study Black women through a material culture lens. Their body, skin, and hair; all of their physical attributes are disembodied from their humanity and based solely on how palatable they can become to white beauty standards, thus turning Black women into objects themselves whose purpose is to act as a design source for white women, a material culture design source. Similar to Thomas Chippendale’s 1762 *The Gentleman & Cabinet-Maker’s Director*, a design catalogue of all his furniture designs that allowed craftspeople the opportunity to pick and choose components of furniture designs they found aesthetically pleasing enough to reproduce,¹⁴⁷ is the Black woman’s body to white women; their disembodied attributes are put on display. As though they themselves were the furniture designs, white women cherry-pick the most aesthetically pleasing parts of Black women and materialize them on themselves. Faithe Bey’s art series, *WE ARE THE BLUEPRINT*, exemplified this appropriation of Black women’s features. Created with oil and acrylic, Bey’s series features the disembodied features of Black women illustrated to

¹⁴⁶ Fanon, Frantz, and Anthony Appiah. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox. First edition, New ed. Get Political. New York: Grove Press, 2008., pg.89

¹⁴⁷ Chippendale, Thomas. *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director: Being a Large Collection of the Most Elegant and Useful Designs of Household Furniture, in the Most Fashionable Taste. ... by Thomas Chippendale* (Version: The 3rd ed.). Eighteenth Century Collections Online. London: Printed for the author, 1762.

appear as though they are painted on blueprint paper. In relation to her work, Bey stated on her website:

From our curvaceous looks to our catchy slurs and mannerism, Black women unintentionally and effortlessly gifted pop culture in America what the average girl wants to look and sound like... What were once considered ghetto or ratchet have swept the nation's average female body faster than you could say "on fleek". Or "yass bitch". Or "girl bye".¹⁴⁸

With five different versions titled *OUR BODIES* (fig. 27), *OUR HAIR* (fig. 28), *OUR LIPS*, *OUR STYLE*, and *OUR WAVE*, Bey's artworks speak to the cultural appropriation that affects the Black community and the broader narrative that white people do not view Black women as whole being but rather as disjointed physical attributes to be consumed so that they may obtain the new beauty standard.

¹⁴⁸ Bey, Faithé. "WE ARE THE BLUEPRINT", *Faithé Bey Art*, October 2019. <https://faithebeyart.com/collections/we-are-the-blueprint>



Figure 27: *OUR BODIES*, “WE ARE THE BLUEPRINT” 2020 series by Faithe Bey. Oil and acrylic on paper (image size not provided)



Figure 28: *OUR HAIR*, “WE ARE THE BLUEPRINT” 2020 series by Fairthe Bey. Oil and acrylic on paper (image size not provided)

White consumption of the Black body is not an outlandish concept. The late Vincent Woodard in his text *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within U.S. Slave Culture* tracks such beastly notions to enslavement, using anecdotes from enslaved Black people to better understand the ingestion of Black people both figuratively and literally. Woodard asserted in his work that “U.S. slavery was a form of social cannibalism and that whites were becoming, unbeknown to themselves, the very cannibalistic types that they feared...”¹⁴⁹ *The Delectable Negro* historically illustrates the ghastly obsession that the white population has with the Black body. Engaging with the narratives surrounding Nat Turner’s death and the appropriation of his dead body, Woodard demonstrates how white people have previously sought possession and consumption of the Black body. After Turner’s executed, he was reportedly skinned by doctors who then turned his flesh into grease while a “Mr. R. S. Barham’s father owned a money purse made of his hide.”¹⁵⁰ Regarding Black women he outlines Sojourner Truth’s experience at a 1858 convention in Indiana where she rhetorically welcomed her white counterparts to suckle at her breast as though they were babies breastfeeding from plantation

¹⁴⁹ Woodard, Vincent, Justin A Joyce, and Dwight A. McBride. *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism Within U.S. Slave Culture*. Sexual Cultures. New York: New York University Press, 2014., pg. 66

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., pg. 172

nursemaid.¹⁵¹ Truth's actions exemplify the social consumption of the Black body, inviting the white population to engage in suckling her breasts is a gesture that addresses the fact that a Black woman is an object to be used, and literally consumed. In Blackfishing, this consumption of Black women's disembodied physical attributes is followed by the regurgitation of them onto white female bodies. As I have noted, white women's emulation of Black female aesthetics is based in viewing Black women as material culture design sources. In this way, Black women are perceived as non-human and rather the equivalent to a catalogue that white women can cherry pick the best parts from for themselves. However, unlike actual Black women, white women who Blackfish actually benefit from looking Black as it gives them a form of social capital.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., pg 98

Chapter 6

CONTEMPORARY TRAJECTORY

Blackfishing *is* Blackface. Darkening one's skin tone, manipulating one's body, appropriating Black aesthetics, are all the hallmarks of a minstrel performance and like a minstrel performance, Blackfishing elevates the status of whomever is a practitioner. In chapter four, my participants and I touched on white women being motivated to Blackfish as a means to gain sexual currency; light skinned Black women are seen as sexy and 'exotic' thus, white women Blackfish to fit that narrative. However, this sexual currency white women gain from being Blackfishers benefits them even more so than simply fitting the "new beauty standard". Similar to traditional Blackface, Blackfishing is primarily practiced in the entertainment sector, i.e. social media. To gain followers, these Blackfishers must create content that people want to engage and thus their minstrel stage is now the digital sphere and they must maintain their persona to keep their followers' attention. Keara Morgan and I touched on this capitalist trajectory in response to viewing Emma Hallberg's 'Get Ready with Me' makeup routine video, which was created after she was exposed for being a Blackfisher. In the video, as I noted earlier, it is clear to see that the foundation she is putting on is multiple shades darker than her actual skin tone (please refer to fig. 18):

Keara Morgan: *Why can't she say "You know what I wanted this because I thought it was kind of cool. And I was trying to appear this way. And I saw that I may have gotten a little bit more attention from it." Like admit the fact that you got more attention from it and you liked it and it brought you into a different subcategory and you liked the attention.*

***Benét Burton:** Yeah. You're on social media, of course you want attention. Like, we all want attention on social media in some aspect. You make a post. You want people to interact and like it.¹⁵²*

Social media attention is a big proponent in the popularization of Blackfishing as the women who partake in the practice are social media influencers, people who have established credibility online and have access to a wide audience based on their “authenticity”.¹⁵³ The more attention a social media influencer gets, the more social capital they gain, the more money they make. Through using Black women as a design source, Blackfishers have crafted a persona that gains them attention online as Ashley René articulated:

***Ashley René:** I think the most people that do this are the people that want attention, you know, the Kardashians, the Jenners, some of them really want that exposure. And I think that's why some of those TikToks happen too. 'Cause you know, it's a social media app. Kids want to blow up if you see how other people blow up and it's the same*

¹⁵² Morgan, Keara. Interview by Benét Burton. Zoom Recording. Newark, October 23, 2020.

¹⁵³ “What is a Social Media Influencer.” *Pixlee*. Accessed March 13, 2021, <https://www.pixlee.com/definitions/definition-social-media-influencer>

*way, it's been happening so many times that some person can make a video and they'll be famous on Twitter overnight.*¹⁵⁴

And they are successful in gaining attention. Emma Hallberg has approximately 451,000 followers on Instagram, averaging about 20,000 or more comments on each post. Jaiden Gumbayan is a verified Instagram user, her name sporting the signature blue check. Both of these women, despite being exposed as Blackfishers, have still managed to maintain the social capital they have gained from appropriating Black women. They are afforded opportunities to make money for simply looking like Black women, as opposed to being Black women, taking potential social media influencer prospects from actual Black women, which has already happened. Over the past year, Beyoncé's athleisure clothing line, Ivy Park, was under fire for hiring two models and representatives of the brand who were not Black. Just like with other Blackfishers, at first glance, the two models look like light skinned Black women with their curly hair and box braids, thick lips, curvy bodies, and brown skin (fig. 29)¹⁵⁵.

¹⁵⁴ René, Ashley. Interview by Benét Burton. Zoom Recording. Newark, November 29, 2020.

¹⁵⁵ Sinelschikova, Yekaterina. "Russian Models Accused of Racism for Resembling African-Americans (PHOTOS).", *Russia Beyond*. December 16, 2020. <https://www.rbth.com/lifestyle/333147-russian-models-accused-racism>



Figure 29: Screenshot of Alena Biuni and Anastasia from the “WeAreIvyPark” Instagram

But even Queen Bey and her team must have been duped because they are not Black, Alena Biuni and Anastasia are both white Russian women whose Instagram pages are littered with images of them in the ‘Fashion Nova’ aesthetic emulating Black women. While this is only one case of white women gaining a lucrative business deal and merchandise from being perceived digitally as a Black woman it is cause for concern as it forges a path for a new trajectory stemming from the dehumanization and disembodiment of Black women. If Black women are always already material culture design sources to be picked a part, at what point will they completely be stripped of

their humanity and obsolete in society? Already we are seeing a trend in Blackfishers and ‘Fashion Nova’ aesthetic women capitalizing on looking like Black women for companies, but will there come a time when they are not even needed?

The accessible and everchanging format of the digital has birthed a new form of social media influencer, one entirely devoid of humanity. Computer-generated imagery (CGI) influencers are now the next generation of internet personalities to capitalize on the aesthetics and features of Black women. Miquela Sousa, also known as Lil’ Miquela, (fig. 30) and Shudu (fig. 31) are two of the most famous CGI social media influencers.

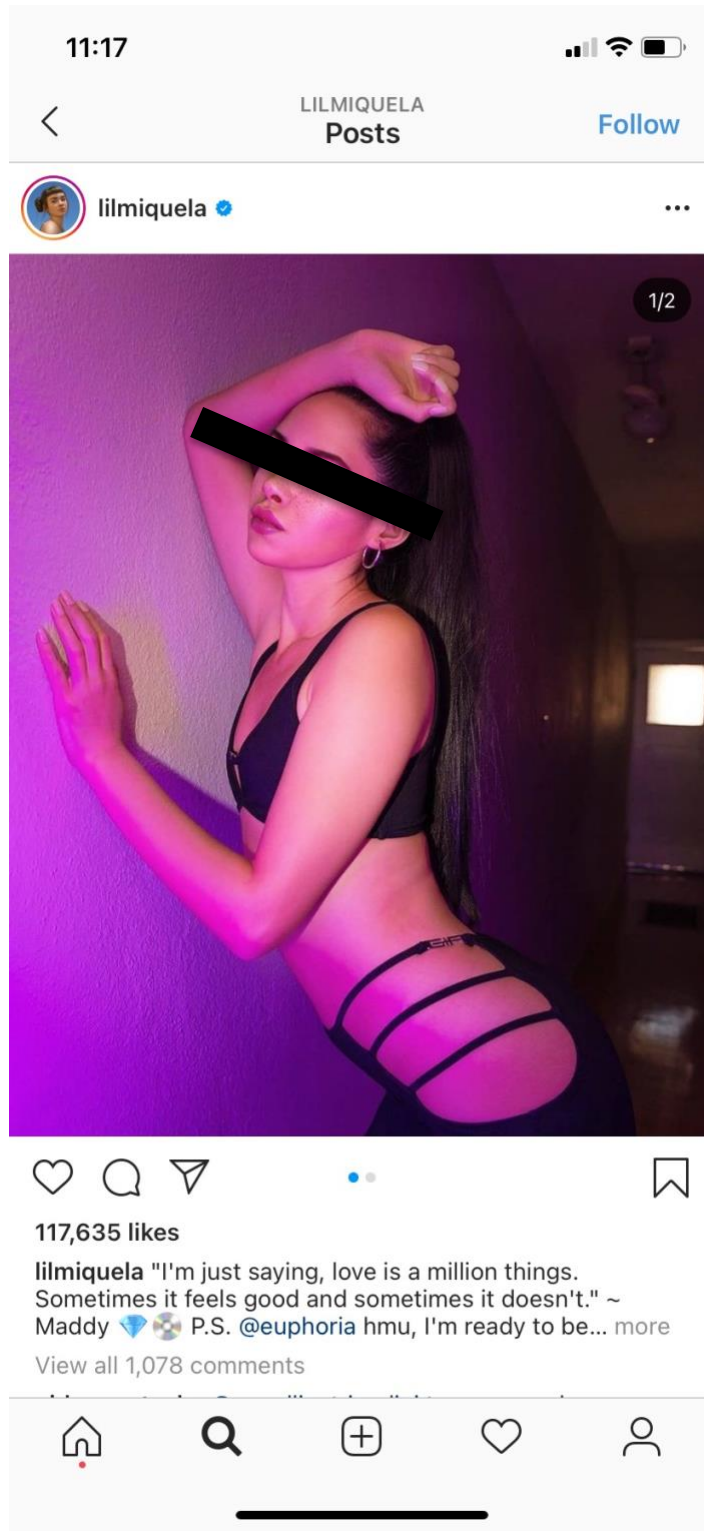


Figure 30: Screenshot of Lil' Miquela from her Instagram (October 28, 2020)



Figure 31: Screenshot of Shudu Gram from her Instagram (February 8, 2021)

With three million followers Lil' Miquela's appearance is that of a racially ambiguous light skinned Brazilian woman who is employed under Brud Records. Digitally crafted to be a model by Trevor McFredries and Sara DeCou, Miquela lives her life as a celebrity, often photographed wearing street fashion and jovially engaging with other celebrities. Like any other social media influencer, Lil' Miquela habitually engages and consumes Black culture. Her *Paper Magazine* article features her in an artistic shot that "pays homage to *Lil' Kim: Luxury Item*" (fig. 32).¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Weiss, Alex. "Lil Miquela: (Cyber) Girl of the 21st Century.", *PAPER Magazine*. December 5, 2017, <https://www.papermag.com/lil-miquela-2515079250.html>

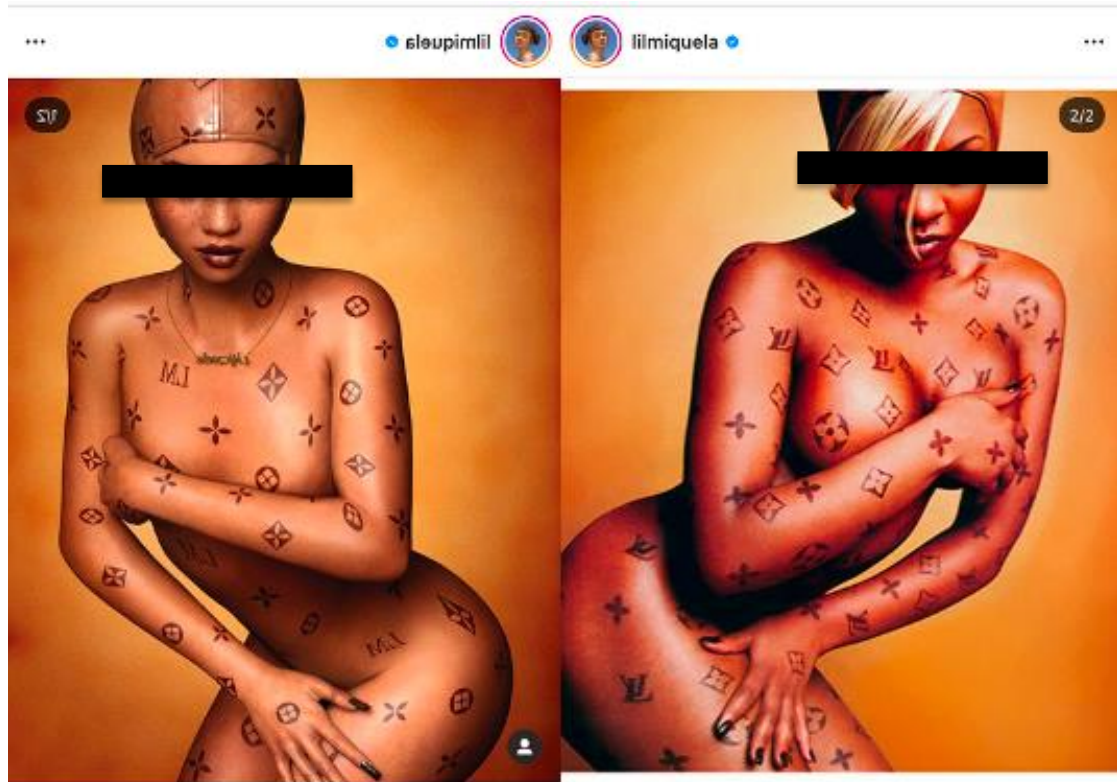


Figure 32: Screenshot from Lil' Miquela's Instagram of her *Paper Magazine* cover where she mimics Lil' Kim's *Luxury Item* photoshoot (December 5, 2017)

Her digitally pale skin has been altered to match the original image of Lil' Kim, a Black female rapper. Alongside this, many of Lil' Miquela's Instagram posts are littered with AAVE, using "if you come for him, you can catch these hands", a common AAVE phrase in reference to her 'uncoupling' from her ex-boyfriend. Even her nickname, 'Lil' Miquela' is an indicator of her being immersed in Black culture as 'Lil' is a popular moniker additive for rappers. Similar to Lil' Miquela is Shudu Gram, a dark skin African who was digitally created to be a high fashion model. Although

Lil' Miquela phenotypically fits 'Fashion Nova' aesthetic, Shudu was made by Cameron-James Wilson, a white British photographer, to ethnically appear as an African woman.¹⁵⁷ While Lil' Miquela is seen in everyday wear and constantly surrounded by others, Shudu is solely photographed for aesthetic purposes, her Instagram page filled with images of her in high fashion aesthetics. Most interestingly are the aesthetics that Shudu is photographed in, most often they exoticize her, leaving her scantily clad or simply nude, in jewelry that highlights her emulation of Africans such as her golden neck rings.

Both Shudu and Lil' Miquela are examples of the extremes the commodification of the Black body can be taken. Instead of companies hiring actual Black women to create content and advertise for them as their models, they seek out alternatives who have the look and aesthetics of Black women but are detached from the racialization of Black womanhood, i.e. Blackfishers or even more detached, CGI influencers. The Black female body has been broken down to physical attributes that are programmable and designable allowing companies to circumvent interacting with living Black women. The ease with which Black feminine attributes are culturally appropriated exemplifies how little humanity is ascribed to their existence. Under white supremacy, Black women are not considered people but rather objects that can

¹⁵⁷ Jackson, Lauren Michele. "Shudu Gram is A White Man's Digital Projection of Real-Life Black Womanhood.", May 4, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/shudu-gram-is-a-white-mans-digital-projection-of-real-life-black-womanhood>

be picked apart at and recreated to perfection outside of Blackness. As I write my thesis, there is continued discussion amongst Black women on Blackfishers and their impact on the livelihoods of Black women. Their emulation of Black femininity has become insidiously sophisticated to the point where actual Black women are being accused of Blackfishing and must make social media posts confirming that their brown skin is not makeup and is natural melanin. Popular mixed race Black TikTok creator @ph1girl, also known as Emily, had to make a video explaining how was she was bombarded with racist and offensive comments accusing her of being in Blackface due to not having “stereotypical Black features” as one of the comments in her video suggested (fig. 33).¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ @ph1girl, “...and once again thank u chloe for making ur video while I was gone, ilysm ❤️”, TikTok Video, December 27, 2020 (saved January 19, 2021)

<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMeBCyNmk/>

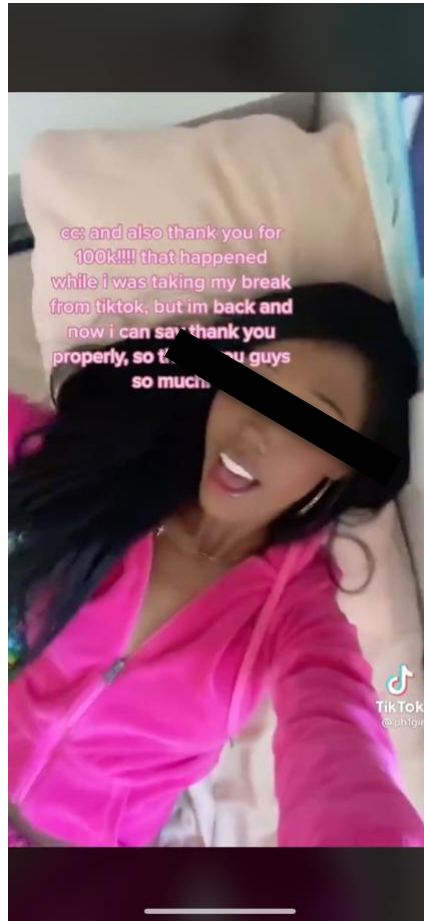


Figure 33: Screenshot of @ph1girl's TikTok video explaining that she is not a Blackfisher but an actual Black woman.

Although there is no true way to look Black, there are phenotypical attributes ascribed to Blackness that turn it into a racialized category. Light skin Black women are being considered 'white passing' due to how well white women have culturally appropriated these stereotyped physical attributes, making them look natural when in fact they are an emulation to allow them to appear light skinned or racially ambiguous. While my research at this point in time is finished, I must still acknowledge the growing concerns Black women have with this phenomenon. As a Black woman

myself, it would be a great disservice to not bring to light the social repercussions Black women are actively facing contemporarily due to their objectification and commodification. With that being said, I hope that the work I have conducted thus far can act as a catalyst for more in depth analysis into Blackfishing and its aftereffects, and perhaps bring humanity back into the lives of Black women.

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MEDIA

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Appendix A

CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Title of Study: Insidiously Sophisticated: From Blackface to Blackfishing

Principal Investigator(s): Benét Burton

You are being invited to participate in a research study. This consent form tells you about the study including its purpose, what you will be asked to do if you decide to take part, and the risks and benefits of being in the study. Please read the information below and ask us any questions you may have before you decide whether or not you agree to participate.

Important aspects of the study you should know about:

- **Purpose:**

The purpose of the study is to understand how Blackface and Blackfishing are connected historically and to gain further insight into how these phenomena are perceived by Black women themselves.

You will be one of approximately 8 participants in this study. You are being asked to participate because:

You identify with the following demographics

- Black and/or African American
- Woman
- Ages 18 and older

- **Procedures:**

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in one semi-structured interview, which may be recorded with your permission. To comply with social distancing and COVID-19 guidelines, the interviews will take place over video messaging platforms, such as Zoom, Skype or any other platform you are comfortable using.

- **Duration:**

It is anticipated that the interviews will take up to 90 minutes.

- **Risks:**

The main risk or discomfort from this research is that discussion of racial identities and racist acts (e.g. Blackface and Blackfishing) may trigger

memories of traumatic experiences for some participants. If for any reason you feel the need to, you may cease the interview at any time.

- **Benefits:**

There are no direct benefits for people who participate in this project.

- **Costs and Compensation:**

If you decide to participate there will be no additional cost to you.

- **Participation:**

Taking part or not in this research study is your decision. You can decide to participate and then change your mind at any point.

- **Contact Information:**

If you have any questions about the purpose, procedures, or any other issues related to this research study you may contact the Principal Investigator, Benét Burton at (302) 588-8866 or bburto@winterthur.org or benetlb@udel.edu

The following signature section is to be removed when no actual signature will be obtained from participants (e.g., electronic survey research, etc.). Protocol form must explain why signature collection would not be feasible.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH STUDY:

I have read and understood the information in this form, and I agree to participate in the study. I am 18 years of age or older. I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions I had, and those questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I will be given a copy of this form for my records.

Name of Participant
(PRINTED NAME)

Name of Participant
(SIGNATURE)

Person Obtaining Consent
(PRINTED NAME)

Date:

Person Obtaining Consent
(SIGNATURE)

Appendix B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Date of Interview:

Location:

Name of Participant:

Research Questions:

1. What are Black women's' thoughts on Blackface and Blackfishing?
 2. How do Black women perceive those who Blackfish?
-

Interview Questions

- Do you know what Blackface is?
 - Prompts:
 - How did you learn about it?
 - Do you think it is still a problem?
 - Where do you see it occur most often?
 - As a Black woman, how does Blackface make you feel?
 - Why do you believe Blackface still happens today?
- Do you know what Blackfishing is?
 - Prompts:
 - How did you learn about it?
 - Where do you see it occur most often?
 - As a Black woman, how does Blackfishing make you feel?
 - Why do you think Blackfishing is a phenomenon?
- From these images can you tell which of the women are actually Black and which are Blackfishing?
 - Can you explain your reasoning?
 - Which aspects of these images affect your reasoning?
 - Do these images contain a sexual component?
- Do you believe there is a relationship between Blackface and Blackfishing?

Appendix C

GLOSSARY

AAVE: African American Vernacular English

Blackfishing vs. Niggerfishing: Both these terms are used interchangeably within the Black community however; I chose to use Blackfishing as opposed to Niggerfishing due to the sensitive nature of the latter

Bussin': (AAVE) Used to describe how something tastes, usually in a positive connotation.

“Catch these hands”: (AAVE) Expression people use when they are about to start a fight. Usually stated as an instigator to imply that someone will be punched in the face

CGI: Computer-generated imagery

Cosplay: The practice of dressing up as a character from a movie, book, or video game. Most often associated with anime and manga but can be used for other forms of media

Finna: (AAVE) Contraction of going to; intending to.

Flossy: (AAVE) Stylish or glamorous

Hot Take: (AAVE) An opinion based on simplistic moralizing rather than actual thought; commentary that is meant to be provocative

Icies: (AAVE) Diamonds

Lit: (AAVE) Term used to describe being mildly intoxicated but has been contemporarily used to describe being excited or having a good time in a social situation

Racks: (AAVE) A term used to reference money. Often used in the phrase “stacking racks” meaning, acquiring a gross amount of money

Ratchet: (AAVE) Stemming from the term ‘wretched’, it is used to refer to someone who is uncouth

Reachin: (AAVE) Term used to describe someone who is jumping to conclusions

Savage: (AAVE) A person who is fierce and confrontational

Shook: (AAVE) Term used to describe being scared or fearful. May also be used to describe the feeling of being shocked

Snatched: (AAVE) A term used to describe someone or something that is beautiful. Also used in reference to a small waist

“Stacked up”: (AAVE) To acquire a lot of money

Timeline: A real-time stream of Tweets consolidated onto one homepage

Trap House: (AAVE) A residence where illegal drugs are made and sold

Yellow Bone: (AAVE) Used to describe the lightest type of light skinned Black person

Appendix D
IRB EXEMPTION LETTER



Institutional Review Board
210H Hullihen Hall
Newark, DE 19716
Phone: 302-831-2137
Fax: 302-831-2828

DATE: September 25, 2020

TO: Benet Burton, BA
FROM: University of Delaware IRB

STUDY TITLE: [1651160-1] Evolution of Blackface to Blackfishing
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
EFFECTIVE DATE: September 25, 2020

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # (2)

Thank you for your New Project submission to the University of Delaware Institutional Review Board (UD IRB). According to the pertinent regulations, the UD IRB has determined this project is EXEMPT from most federal policy requirements for the protection of human subjects. The privacy of subjects and the confidentiality of participants must be safeguarded as prescribed in the reviewed protocol form.

This exempt determination is valid for the research study as described by the documents in this submission. Proposed revisions to previously approved procedures and documents that may affect this exempt determination must be reviewed and approved by this office prior to initiation. The UD amendment form must be used to request the review of changes that may substantially change the study design or data collected.

Unanticipated problems and serious adverse events involving risk to participants must be reported to this office in a timely fashion according with the UD requirements for reportable events.

A copy of this correspondence will be kept on file by our office. If you have any questions, please contact the UD IRB Office at (302) 831-2137 or via email at hsrb-research@udel.edu. Please include the study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

www.udel.edu