

Beyond Blackface:

Minstrel Shows In Modern America

Far too often, minstrel shows and blackface are described as a dark part of American history that should be forgotten without ever acknowledging how truly horrific this form of entertainment *is* or the impact it *has* on how Black people are viewed. Minstrel shows reduced Black people into one-dimensional caricatures which allowed the white audience to further dehumanize them. However, nothing suggests that the white viewers' connection between minstrel show actors and racial stereotyping has ever dissipated. The residue of blackface has just become a culture norm in America. In modern television and music, aspects of blackface can still be seen. This suggests that America has never stopped seeing the Black community as anything but objects made to entertain. The effects of blackface have far surpassed the last minstrel show.

Because little is known about the origins of minstrel shows, one of the main discourses surrounding blackface that takes place is dedicated to uncovering its history in order to better understand what intentions white people had whenever minstrelsy began. However, the question of the first minstrel performance is widely debated itself. While it was being introduced to America in the 1830s, England had already been accustomed to white men darkening their skins to fit the roles of characters in Shakespeare plays. Charles Matthews, who was a theater manager and went by the pen name "William Breakspeare," would alter Shakespearean plays such as *Othello* performed in 1824 where Othello was played by a white man in blackface, replaced the dialect from "that" to "dat," and his job was to sweep the moors for his master. (Hornback 140). This version of *Othello* strikes a very close resemblance to the blackface performances that would later become popular within the states. However, Hornback excuses Matthew's changes,

as he believed it made it easily accessible and relatable for those belonging to the lower class (Hornback 128). It is understandable that Othello's hard working job would make him more relatable to the white working class, and a simplified version of the script would allow the audience to understand the plot; however, this still does not excuse or give reason to why Othello had to be Black in this version of the play. Othello could have simply been a white working class man, as the work being performed in *Othello* would be more accurately described as forced slave labor. Although, it is also crucial to remember that England's attitude towards slavery was not nearly as harsh or cruel as it was in America which could have impacted the way this performance would have been perceived. Hornbeck's article suggests it is possible that whenever blackface occurred in England during the early 1800s that it had pure intentions.

Some scholars believe that minstrelsy in America began with similar intentions that Hornback believes to be true for England. In the 1830s, the relations between races were quite complex, "Critics of minstrelsy have too often dismissed working-class racial feeling as uncomplicated and monolithic... More attention needs to be given to the multifaceted dimensions" (Womack 1). It is dangerous to believe that every white person at this time was racist because this notion is guilty of generalizing an entire group of people into one stereotype. Therefore, Womack is suggesting that without considering the complexities of the relations of race at this time, those who critique minstrel shows for depicting one-dimensional Black caricatures are hypocritical. The reason that Womack mentions the working-class is because he believes that they related to the hard labor that was oftentimes the punchline for most minstrel jokes. According to scholars such as Womack, minstrelsy was never supposed to be about race, as its main goal was to create a culture of sorts for people worn down by labor.

To prove that there was no ill intent behind blackface in the beginning, Womack delves into one of many versions of the origins that surrounds Thomas D. Rice who is better known under his stage name Jim Crow. Because Rice is often credited with being the first blackface performer in America, scholars look at the beginning of his career in order to better understand how blackface began (Richardson 53). Womack believes that Rice's intent was to bring joy to the white community rather than shame the Black community:

Here is the first meeting of races, the collision of cultures... white man, sees a black man's dance and delivery, hears his dialect and jargon, and is so struck by the peculiarities of his performance that he is convinced that a show made up of only blackface performance would be a big hit for the working-class Americans (Womack 1).

Although it is unknown what inspired Thomas D. Rice to dance and perform with burnt cork smeared onto his face, this version forces scholars to ask the question: did blackface further separate the races by perpetuating racist stereotypes, or did it start as a way to unify the races in culture and tradition? Whenever the working-class saw depictions of white men in blackface working hard, did they relate to it much like the English audience in Shakespeare plays?

Womack describes the working-class without a sense of culture at this time, so they used blackface as a form of escapism in order to feel a sense of belonging, "Masses of working-class, white Americans... flocked to the minstrel stage and helped popularize a new cultural identity... with potentially positive elements of what was portrayed as black culture" (Womack 1). From this perspective, blackface and minstrelsy was a form of comedy and nothing more. Rice wanted the working class to bond with one another over their struggles, despite their race. From Womack's perspective, Blackface did not inherently symbolize African Americans who were

still under the weight of slavery or racism but rather it represented the working class who felt the scrutiny from the upper class.

Womack's depiction of Rice relies on the idea that Rice's intention was to blend white society into Black culture while he ignores the other potential reasons that Rice felt the need to perform as a Black man rather than a white one. Since Rice is such an influential part of blackface's history, it is important to examine as many differing sources as possible that theorize what Rice's intentions were. In another version of the story, Rice stumbled upon a crippled Black man who was dancing and singing. After observing this man, Rice began to mock his movements and songs which is what supposedly inspired him to start performing his very own minstrel shows (Richardson 55). In this instance, Rice did not begin performing in order to bridge the gap in between races because it appears that Black culture was nothing more to Rice than a joke that he could profit off. To further the idea that Rice was not interested in blackface for the cultural aspects, Rice was a part of minstrel shows that oftentimes took advantage of cities where "plantation was a novelty" (Richardson 56). Rice would travel to places where plantations were once considered a cultural norm and create comedic skits based around slavery. In this instance, it appears Rice was diminishing the pain of slavery with comedy. Since there is more tangible evidence of shows like these taking place rather than the word-of-mouth origins stories, it is unlikely that Womack's portrayal of Rice is accurate.

What Womack and Richardson fail to consider when writing these articles is how African Americans responded to blackface. Rice is still an important figure to examine when discussing blackface; however, his intentions are not as important as the way that minstrel shows made actual African Americans feel. Frederick Douglass was a freed slave who used his privilege of being literate to voice his discomforts with blackface in his own newspaper *The North Star* in

1848. He describes those who performed in minstrel shows as “The filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow-citizens” (Douglass 1). It is not worthwhile to examine the lore behind the birth of Jim Crow when Black people such as Douglass have already proclaimed that minstrelsy was offensive. It can also be assumed that Douglass was not the only African American to be offended by blackface, he was just one of few who were able to write about how minstrelsy was in poor taste. Hence, Rice’s intent does not actually matter. In conjunction with slavery, white men were attempting to profit off Black labor (this time song and dance) through minstrel performances. The audience also encouraged this behavior which allowed these shows to continue. It is unfathomable that a community could be insensitive enough to laugh at the oppression that white people were guilty of creating. Even if it was not Rice’s intent, Douglass was offended by the lack of sympathy he witnessed from those who performed in blackface.

However, Douglass’ feelings towards blackface were more complex than simply stating that it was entirely wrong, as he believed that white people could not have imagined how insensitive their jokes could be to the people who had suffered the bonds of slavery. He speculates much like Womack that there could have been a hint of appreciation of Black culture in minstrelsy as a result of white guilt surrounding slavery: “It may be, after all, that he is repenting of his old pro-slavery, and that this is the first fruit of his repentance. We shall therefore let him rest for the present, at least until we have other developments from that quarter” (Douglass 1). Because minstrel shows included songs and dances derived from Black culture, it is possible that these white renditions were supposed to be a way in which white people were able to experience Black culture. However, these performers never reflected on the fact that they

were profiting off a culture that they did not create while the people who did create these songs and dances were struggling to make money. It was a form of theft, but it may not have been intentional. Douglass suggests that this appreciation of culture, no matter how corrupt and morally wrong, could have been the beginning of white people becoming more accepting of African Americans. He did not want to critique blackface too much in fear that it would stunt any progress in unifying races. Although Douglass was ultimately against blackface and the profit that it created, he was also attempting to understand why minstrelsy began while giving white people the benefit of the doubt.

One reason that Douglass may have been understanding but skeptical about minstrelsy is because his own slave narrative was prefaced by William Lloyd Garrison, who was white man that validated Douglass' character with the hope it would reach a white audience. Although Garrison's gesture was not intended to be malicious, Douglass had to rely on a white man to validate his experience as a slave in order for a white audience to read it. Besides offering his opinion of Douglass' character, Garrison's preface adds little to the narrative, "I am confident that it is essentially true in all its statements; that nothing has been set down in malice, nothing exaggerated, nothing drawn from the imagination" (Douglass 305). It is likely that Garrison thought that he was doing a favor for Douglass, yet his motives behind doing so should be questioned. Garrison was able to create his own version of Douglass that was intelligent and honest, so he could possibly use Douglass' narrative to advocate for the abolition of slavery. It is yet another example of a white man providing his own account of Black culture for a white audience.

Therefore, it could be argued that Douglass was a victim to blackface before it even began. John Sekora refers to this phenomenon as a "Black Message/White Envelope" where he suggests that

slave narratives were heavily influenced by what the white audience wanted to hear rather than what the slave wanted to say. Sekora is skeptical of these narratives, “Who is entitled to claim, to possess these lives? In whose language do they appear? What historical conditions permit or demand their appearance?” (Sekora 485). In other words, slave narratives were *allowed* to exist because white people still had enough control over them in order to censor and change the portrayal of African Americans while in slavery. This gesture was a way for white people to create their own perception of Black identity and suffering to appeal to a larger white audience. However, this censored Black voices from speaking with full agency, as most slave narratives required a preface by a white man in order to be published. Even if abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison wrote a preface in hopes that slave narratives would result in the manumission of enslaved people, it signals to the modern reader that a proclaimed freed slave was still trapped by the word and opinions of the white community. Much like blackface’s supposed intentions, it gave white people a glimpse into Black culture through the lens of a white person leading to inaccuracy and a false perception unfounded on any real experience.

Although the debate on whether or not Thomas D. Rice was attempting to embrace or mock Black culture may never reach a conclusion, evidence of minstrel shows still exist as a tool to measure rather or not Rice’s legacy led to a harmful portrayal of Black culture. In the 1950s, almost a century after Rice began his first minstrel shows, Chick and Cotton Watts were continuing to bring blackface to the stage, yet at this time technology had evolved enough to record these performances. It is one of few minstrel shows that exists on film, yet the short three-minute clip contains many of the elements that made up minstrel shows. It is most noticeable in these characters names, as the only performer in blackface is named “Cotton,” a direct reference to the hard labor that slaves once did in plantations. The plot of this minstrel show revolves

around the fact that Cotton cannot get a job because of several misunderstandings which is a fault within his own for not having high enough intelligence. Chick (who is a white actor who performs as a white woman) implies that Cotton is both too lazy and too dumb to work, yet his name pays homage to the hard labor that African Americans were forced into (“Yes Sir”). Instead of accurately depicting Black culture, Cotton and Chick Watts profited off the over dramatization of stereotypes without questioning how harmful these stereotypes were. In this instance, the actor who played Cotton was not trying to introduce Black culture into white society. He continued to promote racist stereotypes that helped further divide the races, as this performance reinforced the idea that Black people were nothing more than dumb and lazy.

Another concerning aspect of Cotton and Chick’s performance is the way that Chick constantly talks down to Cotton because Chick believes that she is superior to Cotton. Whenever Cotton pronounces something wrong or does not understand something, Chick is always quick to insult his intelligence and correct him. Eventually, Chick offers to hire Cotton for what he is worth; however, Cotton turns the offer down because he does not believe he is worth much. Cotton tells Chick, “No Ma’am, I gotta have some money” (“Yes Sir”). Although this is supposed to be for comedic effect, these jokes are reminiscent of the power dynamic that occurred during slavery. Chick’s constant corrections serve as a reminder that she believes she is superior to Cotton. This performance also suggests that Black men should not have the same worth as white men which was another strategy that slave owners used in order to continue to repress African Americans. Altogether, this performance is disturbing. If Rice began performing blackface to combine cultures with one another, it did not remain that way because minstrel shows in the 1950s reinforced outdated power dynamics.

By the time minstrelsy had come to an end, its impact had already done enough damage to how Black Americans viewed themselves. It was as if blackface was a window in which Black people were able to get an honest glimpse into how white people viewed them. Therefore, Black people began to manufacture an identity that purposefully avoided these stereotypes in order to be accepted by white society. W.E.B. Du Bois referred to this phenomenon as a double-consciousness: “This sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, -- An American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts” (Du Bois 5). Although Du Bois was not directly addressing minstrelsy as the issue within this piece, I believe that double-consciousness was a direct result of blackface. The Black community was afraid of being perceived as the stereotypical figures represented in minstrel shows, so every word and action done in white company was carefully calculated. Therefore, Womack’s argument that Rice may have had good intentions whenever he created his character Jim Crow should not matter. His character and all that followed in the history of minstrelsy was calculated to cause Black people to be insecure in their skin, as they always had to concern themselves with how white people perceived them.

Minstrelsy shamed Blackness. Therefore, it attempted to teach Black people to be embarrassed of their own skin tone, which led to a subgenre of African American literature that revolved around rejecting one’s own identity. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* written by James Weldon Johnson is just one novel that explores the internal monologue of a man who rejects his identity. I am choosing to examine this novel because it gives two different but brilliant and realistic responses to how the Black community responded to these stereotypes. These responses and changes in identity challenge Womack’s notion that minstrel shows were

not inherently offensive, as it impacted the way Black Americans viewed themselves. Specifically, “Shiny” is a character who relies on his intelligence in order to be respected while the Ex-Colored Man forgoes race in hopes of becoming happy. Because “Shiny” is the darkest student at his school, he is the target for most teasing, so he overcompensates by proving that he is smart. By doing so, “Shiny” hopes to symbolize his entire race: “I think that solitary little black figure standing there felt that for the particular time and place he bore the weight and responsibility of his race; that for him to fail meant general defeat” (Johnson 20). For too long, minstrel shows portrayed all Black people as intellectually inferior to white people, so “Shiny’s” intelligence could not only be his own. He had to prove to all his white peers that these stereotypes were wrong. This is his double-consciousness, as if his entire existence is just a rebuttal against century old stereotypes. If he was unable to succeed in school, it would prove that white people were right which would embarrass not only him but other classmates as well. In this novel, Johnson is able to show the pressure that the Black community faces from a young age, which should elicit guilt for those who reinforce these stereotypes.

However, the Ex-Colored Man does not feel the need to represent his race, as he wishes to blend into white culture without realizing that by doing so he is also proving that Black people are inferior to white people. Whenever the Ex-Colored Man matures and reflects on his life, he regrets that he went the easier route instead of living a life similar to “Shiny’s.” He believes that he could have helped progress the image of his race, “I, too, might have taken part in a work so glorious... I cannot repress the thought, that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage” (Johnson 99-100). By rejecting his race, the Ex-Colored Man does not feel as if he has lived a proper and meaningful life; however, rejecting race is the Ex-Colored Man’s survival tactic, as it allowed him to escape racism and violence. This is his

own form of double-consciousness. The Ex-Colored Man acknowledges that he can pass as a white man, so he acts in a way that will allow him to continue being perceived as white.

Although both characters are works of fiction, it is interesting to see how Black Americans responded to the stereotypes that minstrelsy helped create. Whenever examining both of these characters, they lived in accordance with white society. “Shiny’s” skin tone was not light enough to effortlessly blend in, so he developed this double-consciousness that would allow him to survive amongst a white audience. While the Ex-Colored Man was light enough that his intellect and talent was never questioned which proves how race is a made up construct. Never once did anyone think to blame the white performers who profited off these stereotypes, instead Black people felt that it was their responsibility to rid the world of harmful representations.

Another novel that fits within this subgenre of African American literature is Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, but this main character introduces yet another different response that the Black community took whenever faced with these stereotypes. The Invisible Man accepts that white society will always view him as a criminal, so this invisibility acts as a way to relieve himself of any responsibility for his actions, “But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me?” (Ellison 14). The Invisible Man’s mentality is that he will never be seen as an individual because these stereotypes about race are so deeply ingrained into society. In contrast to “Shiny’s” character, The Invisible Man does not try to prove the white man wrong, as he believes that they have created the mold in which he is expected to act; therefore, it is the white man’s responsibility for any of the crimes or immoral things that he does. Even though it might seem that the Invisible Man does not live in accordance with double-consciousness, he still views himself in accordance to white society. He acknowledges how he should act, but he chooses to reject how he should behave in order to symbolize that no one

should be forced to act any certain way. Although not directly related to blackface, the Invisible Man's acceptance of identity proves that these stereotypes are harmful. If the Invisible Man had decided to become invisible in response to minstrelsy, he may have taken the persona of a lazy dunce. I chose this excerpt from Ellison's novel because it differs tremendously from the characters' responses to race in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. It is bold but truthful in blaming white people for the way the Black community saw themselves. Blackface furthered the stereotypes that it was critiquing.

Whenever minstrel shows decreased in popularity, their existence faded into a taboo part of American history that was meant to be forgotten; however, forgetting blackface was not enough to rid it from a part of American culture. For the youth who were raised to believe blackface was a cultural norm, the end of minstrel shows did not suddenly dissipate all racist prejudice that they held. For instance, 900 yearbooks that were published anywhere from the 1970s to 1980s were examined to see what was deemed school appropriate at this time. In a large majority of these yearbooks, students were pictured wearing Ku Klux Klan attire, reenacting lynchings, and being in blackface (Staples 20). It may be difficult to fathom that this would have been deemed appropriate for a school setting this far after minstrelsy had ended unless the attitudes of these students is closely examined. If scholars such as Womack suggest that blackface did not have a negative intention and these students grew up experiencing minstrel shows in their childhoods, their actions were actually considered normal. White people up until this point had not been held accountable for the way that minstrel shows had made Black people feel; therefore, it made posing for these pictures quite easy. Minstrelsy has been so ingrained in American society that it has often been reduced to a cultural norm without being questioned.

Although it could be argued that these yearbooks are not significant enough to claim that blackface still exists in America on a much larger scale, Hollywood films were guilty of continuing the legacy of blackface as well. Instead of continuing to allow white people paint their faces black, the 1970s introduced movies that included an all-Black cast that *still* heavily relied on stereotypes. This era of film was known as blaxploitation. It is characterized by its “overreliance on violence, sexual content, and drug culture” (Lawrence and Butters 745). Much like blackface, blaxploitation films reduced Black Americans into one-dimensional characters written solely using stereotypes, which impacted the way that white people viewed Black Americans. The issue with blaxploitation does not arise from the fact that these portrayals exist because “The problem is neither black people in comedies nor black people depicted as criminals, since there are black people who are comical and there are black people who are criminals” (Crouch 7). However, films following Black people have become predictable because they rely so heavily on these tropes, and these tropes do not occur as commonly in movies with a predominantly white cast. Therefore, film and television have associated Blackness with violence, drug use, and sex much like blackface associated Blackness with stupidity and laziness. It further separates races from one another, as it villainizes the Black community.

However, some scholars believe that blaxploitation cannot be dismissed as a subgenre rooted in stereotypes because Black people directed the majority of these films. Cult classics such as *Shaft*, *Superfly*, and *Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asssss Song* are all guilty of leaning into violence and sex for major plot points, yet it was written and directed from a Black person's perspective (Strausbaugh 255). With this information, it could be argued that these films are harmless and cannot possibly have racist intent; however, Black directors do not inherently mean that the entire film was written and edited by a Black person. In fact, almost 100% of people who

finance films are white (Sexton 47). Therefore, I speculate that these movies were not solely led by Black creators even if that is what the film pushes its viewers to believe. The director has the illusion of control in these instances, but it is the financial side of films that dictate the final product: “A black director behind the camera makes no substantive difference... film studios and financial underwriters with... potential consumer markets in mind always have the first and final word” (Sexton 48). If this is true for these films who use Black directors as an excuse for blatant racism, then not only have these films become a modern day version of minstrel shows, they have also reversed Sekora’s concept of “Black Message/White Envelope.” In these blaxploitation films, a predominantly white film studio accepted films about the Black experience that revolved around violence and sex because it fits these stereotypes, so the message of the film stems from what the white film studio wants. However, the envelope is now Black. These directors were given a sense of control in order to make the film feel more authentic and real, yet the plot and meaning of the film were still dictated by the studio.

Although the concept of blaxploitation is still fairly new, it has already impacted the way in which white audiences respond to Black characters. These characters do not even necessarily fit into the stereotypes that the blaxploitation craze popularized for the white audience to reject any positive trait that the character may have. After an endless amount of films came out depicting Black Americans as criminals, white audiences now automatically assume that newer Black characters will be similar. When the trailer for *The Hunger Games* was released, fans took to Twitter to voice their concerns that one of the characters were Black, “Awkward moment when Rue is some black girl and not the innocent blonde girl you pictured” and “When I found out Rue was black, her death wasn’t as sad” (Paraham-Payne 468). It is most likely these fans have experienced watching other movies in which Black characters were stereotyped as violent

or aggressive; therefore, their image of Rue was shattered based on preconceived notions that she would resemble these other characters. Even if Rue's race is not something that impacts the plot, the audience projected the stereotypes ingrained in blaxploitation and even blackface onto a character who represents innocence and youth. This example proves how damaging stereotypes can be especially whenever they are shown repeatedly because people will start to believe them. I speculate the attitudes that have developed from these blaxploitation films do not end with fictional Black characters, either. If someone assumes that a Black character in a film is not innocent without any further context than skin tone, these same people must be assuming that all Black people share the traits depicted in blaxploitation films.

When applying Womack's logic that Rice's actions were justifiable because he did not have a negative intent to a more modern approach like films guilty of exploiting Black stereotypes, it is quite simple to see the fallacy in his logic. In this comparison, I am substituting Rice's intent with the intent of the film studios and finance department during the peak of blaxploitation. They could excuse their actions by stating that these films were nothing more than entertainment or a glimpse into Black culture; however, does it negate what they did? When people genuinely believe that Black characters like Rue cannot be sympathized with because of the standards blaxploitation films have repeatedly used to villainize the Black community, intent no longer matters. The abundance of blaxploitation films still harmed Black Americans by reinforcing the same stereotypes that minstrelsy conveyed. A crucial part of evolving from America's racist past is taking accountability regardless of intent. Without acknowledging racism, white people will continue to commit these offensive acts and thus harm minority groups.

Quite recently, there has been yet another resurgence in blackface in pop culture which has in return impacted modern beauty standards and has inspired normal, everyday people to also participate in blackface. Although no one may be intentionally darkening their skin tones or portraying stereotypes, blackface has become a custom of sorts in America; therefore, the remnants of blackface are rarely recognized as offensive. In recent years, the act of blackface has transformed itself into two different terms. The first term is cultural appropriation which has been defined as “The act of taking or using things from a culture that is not your own, especially without showing that you understand or respect this culture” (Cambridge Dictionary qtd. in Cherid 359). However, the issue with using the term cultural appropriation in context to blackface is that it is not specific to the Black community, as it can be applied to the cultural theft that other races experience. Therefore, I will be more specifically referencing the second, more modern term “blackfishing” which is described as when white women:

Steal looks and styles from Black women... these women have the luxury of selecting which aspects they want to emulate without fully dealing with the consequences of Blackness... extensive lip fillers, dark tans and attempts to manipulate their hair texture, white women wear Black women’s features like a costume... with Black women’s contributions being erased all the while. (Thompson qtd. in Cherid 362)

This definition of blackfishing is interesting, as it notes that features such as enlarged lips, darker tans, and hair texture are the most appropriated Black features. These are the same traits that were used to mock Black women only a century earlier in minstrel shows. However, blackfishing becomes harmful when acknowledging that Black features are only deemed beautiful when white women appropriate them, as Black women still experience racism and are mocked for their

features. Therefore, blackfishing is the modern day blackface, and regardless of intent, it still harms Black women.

Kim Kardashian is guilty of being one of the most prevalent instigators of blackfishing in recent years. Although Kim's mother Kris and father Robert have always been viewed as white by the public, Kim's own ethnicity has been widely debated. This is due to the way that Kim Kardashian has portrayed herself on social media. The images of her that go viral most often "Monetizes her assets by presenting herself as bold and 'exotic' vision of beauty... she plays 'ethnic'" (Tehrani 167-168). Whenever Tehrani mentions Kardashian's assets as "exotic," he is most likely referring to her tanned skin tone, overdrawn lips, and buttocks that she had surgery on in order to enhance its size. All of these traits can also be traced back to the stereotypical "mammy" figure portrayed in most minstrel shows (Crouch 7). However, the way that Kardashian is viewed differs from the way that these "mammy" figures were viewed. While the appearance of a "mammy" was meant to make the audience laugh, Kardashian's appearance is seen as the pinnacle of modern beauty standards. In my research, I could not find anything to suggest what in American beauty standards has changed for women like Kim Kardashian to be viewed as beautiful; however, I suspect that Black beauty is not what is being idolized here. Kim Kardashian is a white woman who appropriates "exotic" features in order to be seen as beautiful. She does not truly appreciate the culture, like the definition of cultural appropriation suggests. As a white woman, Kim Kardashian is able to pick the elements of Black culture she finds attractive in order to redefine what Black features are beautiful without actually being Black.

Kim Kardashian is not the only celebrity who is guilty of blackfishing, as Ariana Grande has also experienced scrutiny for her appearance. In the early 2010s, Grande was featured in the Nickelodeon show *VICTORiOUS* where it was evident that Grande was a white woman;

however, her appearance has since changed since Grande has entered the world of hip hop music. Most noticeably, Grande's music video to "7 Rings" features the musician in a tan that is much darker than her usual skin tone, a slicked back ponytail, and outfits that are similar to the ones made popular by Black designers. In the song itself, Grande references buying hair extensions as well having large buttocks (Cherid 363). Although it could be argued that Grande's actions are harmless because she is showing an appreciation of Black culture, it should be remembered that Grande is yet another white woman who is profiting off Black culture without actually having to experience any racism. Whenever she was young, Grande did not alter her skin tone in order to fit in with beauty standards, yet when Grande entered a music genre that is predominately Black, she participated in blackfishing in order to sell her music. If someone could excuse Grande's actions, he or she is essentially agreeing with Womack who believes the intent that blackface had is more important than the impact it has caused.

Some may argue that Kim Kardashian and Ariana Grande are not harming anyone with blackfishing, yet women all over the world are seeing them change their appearance which demonstrates that other women can do the same. A woman named Rachel Dolezal decided that she would drastically change her appearance by darkening her skin, perming and dying her hair, and identify as African American. Dolezal was then elected as president for a local chapter of the NAACP until 2015 when Dolezal's mother provided pictures of a younger Dolezal who was very clearly white (Tehrani 168). Although Dolezal did not state that Kardashian had influenced her decision to transform her own race and then represent the Black community while being a white woman, Kardashian's appearance had already made racial ambiguity normalized within the culture, so it is likely that Dolezal did not believe her actions were that outlandish. Dolezal's actions demonstrate the true harm that blackfishing can have on the Black community. It was

unacceptable for Dolezal to hold such a highly regarded position in which she would speak on Black issues, yet her case raises questions about the future of blackfishing. Have some white women entertained themselves with the idea of being Black for so long that they have forgotten their own ethnicity? Will the white community fool themselves into believing they know what is best for the Black community based on the stereotypes that are depicted? The future of blackfishing is still unknown, yet it is bound to further ostracize the Black community from their own identity while white people are unscathed from their own actions.

A common misconception is that blackface and minstrel shows are no longer occurring in America; however, traces of blackface have never disappeared from pop culture. Modern minstrel shows have just evolved to be deemed less offensive even though its impact has not changed. When Du Bois wrote about double-consciousness in 1902, he detailed the impact that the white gaze has had on Black identity. Over a century later, some Black Americans still connect with Du Bois' words, and feel ashamed of their identity because they are navigating this concept of double-consciousness in which they are trying to either reject stereotypes entirely or embrace the stereotypes because they are frustrated that these ideas will never change. African American literature reflects this struggle, as *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *The Invisible Man* both center around Black men who are met with the choice to conform to stereotypes or distance themselves from their identity. Therefore, blackface has always been a way to continue the power dynamics that slavery began, as it serves as a reminder that the Black community lives their life in accordance to how white people view them. It is scholars such as Womack who suggest that blackface began with good intent and an appreciation of culture that has allowed for minstrelsy to go on for so long. By not faulting white people for their actions, the cycle of blackface is bound to repeat itself without any change. Cultural appropriation and

blackfishing must be addressed before Black Americans can truly feel comfortable embracing Blackness in a country that has for the past two centuries has berated Black identity. Although minstrel shows are thought to no longer exist, the failure to explore its legacy has continued to perpetuate the racism that keeps blackface alive.

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