



BLACKFACE AND APPROPRIATION

THE BYGONE TERROR AND ITS CONTEMPORARY
MANIPULATION.

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Second Year / 2017-20
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“BLACKFACE AND APPROPRIATION”- The Bygone Terror and Its Contemporary Manipulation

This essay aims to define and explore the theme of appropriation, focusing on the instances concerning race and minority cultures; Chiefly on the historical stereotype- blackface. It will briefly comprehend the timeline of black cultural misuse from when it was socially acceptable and celebrated to the present day.

The Oxford Living Dictionary connotes cultural appropriation as the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices and ideas of people or society by the members of another and typically more dominant people. (Oxford living dictionary, n.d.) As a term, cultural appropriation holds its roots back to the latter half of the 20th century with its highest usage coming after 1980. (Bainbridge, D., 2019). Cultural appropriation is a ubiquitous phenomenon, encompassing a profoundly broad area to research upon. Despite the rise in focus, it remains conceptually unstable. (Ashley and Plesch, 2002).

When looked back into the past, for example in 1897, the kingdom of Benin, now southern Nigeria was invaded by the British, killing many of the natives they looted artefacts including bronzes (the Benin bronzes), ivory and chests. These stolen artefacts were sold and traded in European markets despite their original belonging. (BBC Bitesize, 2019) (Fairygodboss.com, 2019) .



Figure 1: Benin bronzes in the British Museum (2019)

Appropriation in history was not only limited to physical looting, in the 17th century western travellers adopted articles of clothing like the necktie and silk waistcoats from parts like Croatia and middle east and later declared as their own. (Bills, 2019)

Now the term has become one of the most discussed and controversial topics.

Cultural Appropriation has been catalysed upon conventional ideas of a particular culture. Generally, it involves members who have faced repression and tyranny by a dominant culture or suggest the exploitation of elements of a minority culture.

(Johnson, 2015) The coercion created by the domineering cultures on the oppressed emanates on such issues.

‘The Italian fashion house Gucci atones and withdraws an \$890 black balaclava jumper designed with a polo neck large red lip cut-outs.’ (Ferrier, 2019); The news

update came as a colossal backlash to the global fashion label as their luxurious jumpers and face warmers prompted people and reminded them of the historical racial discrimination-

THE BLACK FACE - a long, troubling history in America. Like slavery and racist segregation, blackface has been permanently entrenched in the history of America.

(Merelli, 2019) A prominent and established theatrical practice dated back to the 19th century after the civil war, principally of the urban north (Lott,1993),

encompassing comedic performances of blackness by the white minstrels. White men would darken their skin with shoe polish, greasy soot or burnt cork;

(Clark,2019) They painted large lips, wore exaggerated costumes and negatively stereotyping through comically distorting the enslaved culture which included disdaining their looks, language and dance impersonating them to be lazy, ignorant, hypersexual, prone to thievery and cowardice. The blackface actors mispronounced words imposing a 'blaccent', acted like bumpkins and sang impertinent songs.

(Millner,2019)



Figure 2: 1951: Doris Day frowns while a makeup man touches up the blackface makeup (Photo by Hulton Archive/Getty Images, 195



Figure 3: Photo of Al Jolson Photo performing in the minstrel show "The jazz singer" (Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images,1970)

Such adverse exemplification of Black people left a destructive relic in popular culture particularly in art and entertainment (Harmeet Kaur, n.d.). These facetious interpretations of the dominated desensitised white men by assuring their notions of superiority and promoted authority and right on the coloured. Blackface has remained among the most precarious topics allied to racial prejudice. It has therefore been summed up by Saxton (cited in Lott, 1993, pg.3) as "half a century of inurement to the uses of white supremacy." (1975) Moreover, it was structured around the fairly perspicuous 'borrowing' of black cultural materials for white broadcasting, a purloin that eventually depended on the material relations of slavery.



Figure 4: William H. West minstrel show poster (1831)

The minstrel show masked these relations by feigning slavery was amusing, right and natural (Lott, 1993, pg.3) and was “the first consented open acknowledgement by the whites of black culture which were established on petite but significant crimes on pre-fixed ideas of racial demarcation.” (Lott, 1993, pg.4) These shows had been so omnipresent and predominant in the lives of people in North America that there is scarcely any awareness regarding an extraordinary influence. These minstrel troops entertained presidents (including Lincoln), disdainful high minded quarterlies and rakish sporting journals. (W. Weik, 1922 cited in Lott, 1993, pg.4). The ‘amusing’ minstrel show operated for over a hundred years constantly suggesting and providing a channel for the black cultural ‘contamination’ of the dominant. (Lott, 1993, pg.3-5) It tactfully delineated that any cultural interaction would lead to dishonour and ignominy.

The character Jim crow augmented significant popularity in its time; 'The title Jim crow' initiated around 1830, when a white minstrel show performer, Thomas Dartmouth Rice first performed it with a blackened face and danced an outlandish jig while he sang the song jump Jim crow.



Figure 5: Sheet music cover image of the song 'Jim Crow', United States, 1900.

(Photo by Sheridan Libraries/Getty Images)

Several historians presume that a Mr Crow owned a slave who stimulated Dartmouth's bit, thus the 'Jim Crow' term in the lyrics. The Jim Crow image propagated to be one of the numerous stereotypical descriptions of black mediocrity in the popular culture—alongside Sambos, Coons, and Zip Dandies. (F. Davis, n.d.) The title 'Jim Crow' developed into a racial stigma synonymous with

black, coloured, or negro in the jargon of many whites; enactments of racial disjunction towards the coloured were frequently regarded to as 'Jim Crow laws and practices'. (F. Davis, n.d.)

Blackface offered the idyllic entertainment towards a slave nation. Subsequently, after the Civil War, a society that was built on racial segregation and prejudice.

(Millner,2019). Ralph Ellison (1958) addressed vividly about blackface; He discerned America as a cauldron of contradictions - It taught equality but practised slavery and bigotry. It valued liberty and identification of people's humanity while negotiating several citizens like things and animals. (cited in Millner,2019)



Figure 6: The Gucci balaclava jumper, which was withdrawn from sale. (Gucci, 2019)

Alongside the palatial brand Gucci, other prodigious brands like Prada and Katy Perry occurred to have involved in cases of inciting blackface descriptions. (BBC News, 2019) Broadcasts reported that Prada's Pradamalia line and had window

displays and launched bag charms showcasing monkey like figures with exaggerated lips instigating the blackface imagery. (CNN Style, 2019).



Figure 7: Prada store with "Pradamalia" figures on display. (Chinyere Ezie, 2018)

Furthermore, Luxury brand Moncler was also indicted for selling an outerwear comprising racist figure resembling the golliwog doll. (Voice-online.co.uk, 2016) (Howdy, 2016) Golliwogs were anti-black dolls, brightly dressed with large eyes and exaggerated lips (Pilgrim, 2000). A caricature of blackface created by Florence Kate Upton in her book 'The adventures of two Dutch dolls'. (Pilgrim, 2000).



Figure 8: Little girl with a teddy bear. (Photo by SSPL/Getty Images, 1949)



Figure 9: A black-faced doll, with frizzy hair, named "Golly" (Chaloner Woods/Getty Images, 1962)

These incidental depictions substantiate to be an aide memoir of the preluded power imbalance between the whites and the blacks. The brands when held accountable for racial bigotry immediately withdrew the merchandises from stores. Designers and people revolted against by boycotting products (Griffith, 2019) and

were alleged for their insensitivity and unawareness of diversity when designing a product. Marco Bizzarri, chief executive officer of Gucci, retorted declaring the act was purely unintentional which indicated a general cultural exchange. (Zargani, 2019) Designer Spike Lee was one amidst those to respond to Gucci's expression of regret on social media by entreating the brands to hire and engage more black people to shun similar episodes. (Griffith, 2019) Soulja Boy, Rapper T.I., Russell Simmons Waka and Flocka also weighed in with similar criticism of Gucci and Prada. (Griffith, 2019).

On the contrary; Are these genuine mistakes as claimed by the brands or are they very well-planned marketing strategies? London based Fashion designer Suril Patel asserts that fashion companies and houses are creating products "on purpose just to spark the controversy". "the More sensitive the subject is, it is likely to be shared wider," "Off the back of that they are going to get more traffic to their website and make more sales." (cited in BBC News, 2019). Simple procedures of research may have prevented such instances. The fashion industry has presented more similar occurrences, models painted black and made to wear brown makeup, Photoshoots being carried out with white models appropriating black accessories and style is are few prominent ones. The May 2013 edition of Vogue Netherlands involves a spread termed "Heritage Heroes," starring Dutch model Querelle Janson. Her face is made to look black and also she is seen styled in a textured, afro-like wig. (Moore, 2013)



Figure 10: Querelle Janson featuring in Vogue Netherlands May 2013

Author of *How To Be A Pop Star*, Madison Moore states- High fashion editorials' mission is to trade a lifestyle and a dream. (Moore, 2013) Can the creative expression in the name of inspiration be used as a means to prolifically racist the image of blackface? (Moore, 2013) Creators state that a model in blackface implies a way of paying homage to the beauty of brown bodies. (Moore, 2013) Why not use "Models of colour"? "The fashion industry continues to be hesitant to include more

models of colour, despite everybody notifying about the lack of diversity in catwalks". (Moore, 2013) Blackness, although inappositely defined by its performers, is used as a decoration and lessened to a costume, rather something that is painted on and then taken off after the celebration is over. (Lockhart, 2019)

Black culture has been burlesqued and taunted from very early times. (Anderson, 2018) "Slavery effectively accustomed black people at the bottom of the American racial order a position that allowed any white person to feel superior to a black person." (Anderson, 2018). Majority of the appropriated codes retain very significant and robust historical meanings. (Ali, 2015) They are often symbols of struggle, self-affirmation and means of expression from a group of incarcerated individuals. (Ali, 2015) "Taking inspiration is encouraged and permissible to everyone- adopting the black culture, its codes; but being involved solely in the positive aspect without supporting the claims from those who developed them and denouncing racism is intolerable". (Ali, 2015) The moment gestures are comprehended, not put into practice because it is funny or exotic and participate in perpetuating negative stereotypes; it is respectable. (Ali, 2015)

"When blackface photos cause political storms" (Margaret and Hard 2019).

Controversies do not cease with fashion brands. A recent incident occurred when "the former governor of Virginia Ralph Northam resigned as he was affirmed of featuring in his medical school yearbook page; a photograph of a man in blackface and a man in Kul Klux Klan hood" (Chotiner, 2019)

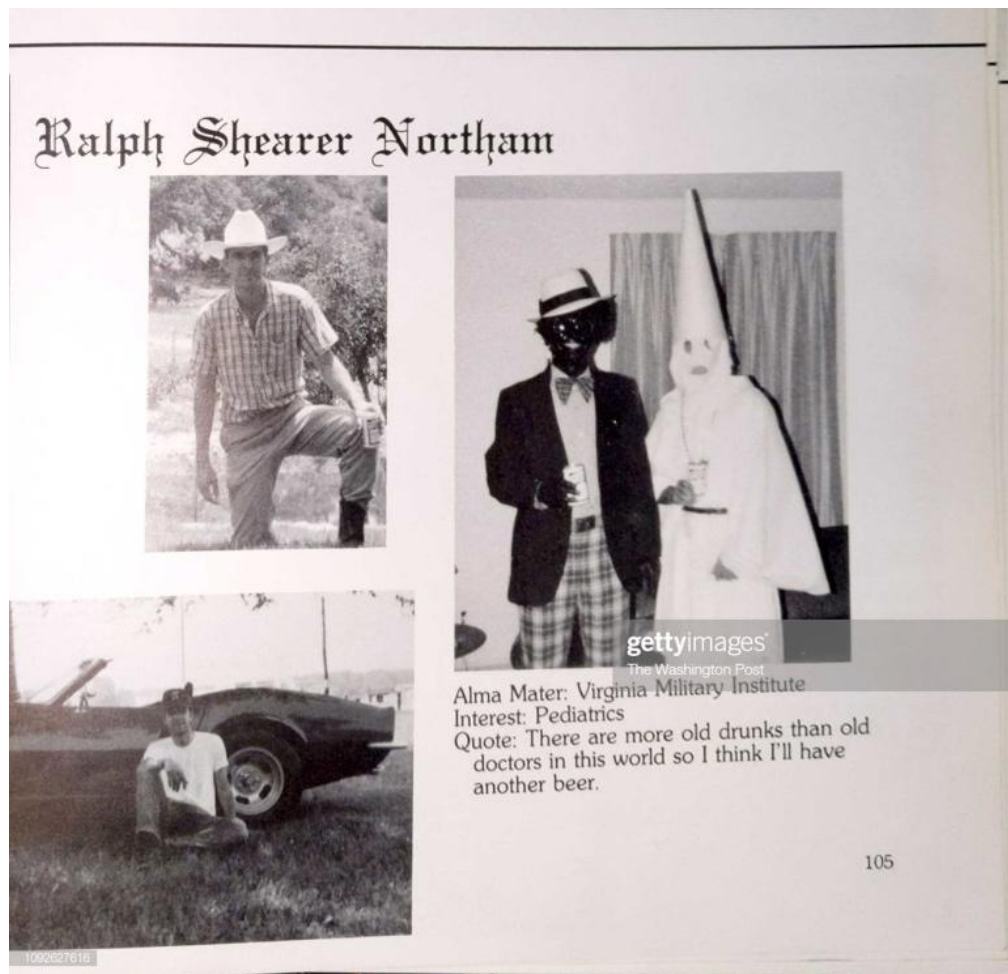


Figure 11: Ralph Northam's page in the yearbook of Eastern Virginia Medical School, he is seen in blackface with a friend dressed in a KKK costume. (The Washington Post via Getty Images, 1984)

"the photo was offensive and adapting such a thing being the representer of the African American was difficult to accept"; Eric Lott, Author of "Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy & the American Working Class," stated.

"Northam was, at the absolute minimum, comfortable with pictures that simulates the torture and degradation of African-Americans that haunts Virginia's past".

(Nelson, 2019) Due to mere ignorance and despite its cruel history he chose to portray it and abjure the humanity of an entire class of coloured people. (Nelson, 2019)

[...] Frederick Douglass, an African- American social reformer and writer, saw the famous minstrel shows of his day for what they were: the mockery and denial of black dignity and humanity. He condemned those who wore blackface as "the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, a way in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens." (cited in Nelson, 2019)

Northam concentrated on advancing his image and did not take accountability for his role in the history of defilement of the perception. (Nelson, 2019)

Other political leaders who have been accused and caught up in similar scandals have usually resigned or rejected by voters. The news has attracted a vast amount of criticism and reproach from the people. (Hard and Kramer, 2019)

In the past few years, blackface incidents are largely observed in college campuses, ill-advised Halloween costumes and eccentric television sketches; Harris (2014) states. "Put down the black and brown face paint. Step away from the bronzer 12 shades darker than your skin." These were not commendatory representations. Blackface is further more profound than black paint applied to intensify a costume. (Harris,2014) One that should not be practised for the delight of college students, partygoers, or television audiences. (Lockhart, 2019).

David Leonard (2012) in his post asserts, "Just Say No To blackface: Neo Minstrelsy and the Power to Dehumanize" (cited in Harris,2014) With all that has changed over the years, ignorance pertains.

Blackface was one of the oldest and visible parts of appropriating and regulating the black culture; It evolved to being a socially accepted atrocity. Today, small acts of ignorance can portray signs of backing and approval of painful past stereotype. The distinction between appropriation and appreciation befalls when we, rather than celebrating, acknowledging and upholding the culture; actually ridicule, ignore the history and the meaning behind, or even mistreat the intellectual property of another culture. (Ali, 2015) Borrowing ideas without paying decent homage or reverence to their originators, perpetuating stereotypes and being patently offensive is inadequate. (Ali,2015) Through social media, procuring information has become remarkably effortless, and nevertheless, unawareness to several emotional values comes more often as a choice. When the misrepresented culture is a disadvantaged indigenous or minority culture, the harm caused could be severe. (Hosie,2018) Dr. Royce Mahawatte, refers that "Racism is reflected in the way that dress is understood." (cited in Hosie, 2018) "Our mainstream culture does not know how to conduct this and in an age of digital media - we have a perfect storm." The senior lecturer in cultural studies states. (cited in Hosie, 2018)

Blackface plays a significant part in the chronicle of dehumanisation, of withheldright of abode, and of attempts to rationalise and support brutality. It is time to stop with the disputes that describe impudent acts as playfulness, ignorance and youthful indiscretions. (Harris, 2014) "Blackface reinforces the notion that black people are appropriate victims of ridicule and mockery and reminds us of stereotypes about black criminality, and danger. "(Leonard, 2012., cited in Harris,2014)

"The ability to be ignorant, and to be unaware of the history and consequences of racial bigotry. When ignorance is claimed, Leonard said, "Why do you not know, and what have you done to make sure that you continue not to know?"

(Leonard,2012., cited in Harris, 2014) Simple gestures and the ability of straightforward comprehension can change appropriation to a beneficial cultural exchange; There is no justification for ignorance in today's world. If the intention is 'exchange' then the condition should be 'a mutual phenomenon'.

Furthermore, when it involves culture, It becomes hard to enumerate the symbolic value of what is borrowed. (Galchen, 2017) Preservation of the emotional value of culture and pertaining a certain amount of generosity is mandatory in any exchange.

Conclusively; The intent can be difficult to discern, and it is not quantifiable in any precise way. (Holmes, 2017) Appropriation is indefensible, (Bradford, 2015)

It has numerous ways to contemplate right and wrong. It leaves behind a wide area to research further.

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Figure 10: Ralph Northam's page in the yearbook of Eastern Virginia Medical School in which he appears in blackface with a friend in a KKK costume. (1984). [image] Available at:
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