

Digital Blackface

In early 19th century America, white actors began to darken their faces in order to portray black caricatures in plays, comedies, and later film. In cases of blackface, white actors assumed an improvised black identity, while at the same time mocking it—reducing and distorting the black image and persona for the sake of humor. Popular black characters of this period were most often represented through a series of harmful stereotypes: the deferential servant, the lazy drunk, the promiscuous beast, or the village idiot. These roles were designed to portray black people as second class, sub-human, and the proverbial butt of the joke. No example is more paradigmatic than the now-infamous improvised character, Jim Crow. Popularized by actor Thomas Rice, the character was the etymological basis for a generally pejorative term for black Americans, and later became the stand-in moniker for the oppressive segregation laws of the 20th century. In his portrayals of Jim Crow, Rice “darkened his face, acted like a buffoon, and spoke with an exaggerated and distorted imitation of African American Vernacular English.”¹

In the 21st century, some now argue that there is an analogous phenomenon occurring on social media platforms—digital blackface. Digital blackface refers to a white person’s use of a GIF, video, or other media that portrays a black persona (i.e., a face, voice, attitude, or expression) to add humorous emphasis to their own online reaction. According to its critics, digital blackface is similar to traditional blackface in that white users are “putting on” the black face and reducing black people to one-dimensional characters, which express stereotypical versions of attitudes like sass, anger, disgust, or dismissal. When a white person uses a GIF of a black person (sometimes accompanied by stereotypically black language, e.g., “bye Felicia,”) they use such memes to alter their personal voice, expressing their own thoughts through the lens of a black culture, black language, and black bodies. Critics suggest that the harms of digital blackface are two-fold. First, that the act itself embodies a pointed disrespect in using a black person as a mere means to the end of comedic affect. Second, that consequences of posting these GIFs include tacit acceptance and perpetuation of racist stereotypes, such as, for example, the sassy or angry black woman.

Others, however, are skeptical of these criticisms. Some have cited a concern about policing digital creative expression, when it is unclear which GIFs, if any, cause real harm. They also point out that not all GIFs that include black faces promote racial stereotypes. For instance, some well-known GIFs evoke emotions of surprise, or happiness. Other frequently used GIFs are videos of famous athletes or actors, who are aware their image will be used in the public sphere. These GIFs, they argue, are neutral with respect to the harms suggested by critics. Furthermore, some also worry about the downstream implications of recognizing and problematizing digital blackface—Are critics suggesting that a permissible digital presence requires that we segregate our digital expressions? The New York Times’ Amanda Hess cautions: “None of this means that white people should only use white people GIFs and black people should only use black people GIFs, but it does mean that even something as seemingly simple as trying to express happiness on the internet is complicated by structural racism.”²

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Is digital blackface morally analogous to traditional blackface?
2. Does an ethical digital presence require that non-black people, in particular, think twice before sending or posting GIFs of black faces? Why or why not?

¹ <https://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/origins.htm>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/video/arts/10000005615988/the-white-internets-love-affair-with-digital-blackface.html>

