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## A Stolen Culture: The Harmful Effects of Cultural Appropriation

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**A Stolen Culture: The Harmful Effects of Cultural Appropriation in the  
Black Entertainment Industry**

By Amirah Lockhart

**A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.**

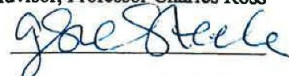
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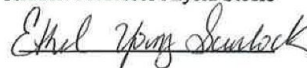
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## ABSTRACT

Amirah Lockhart: A Stolen Culture: The Harmful Effects of Cultural Appropriation in the Black Entertainment Industry

Entertainment has always been an outlet from reality, no matter the culture. Whether in the form of music or television, entertainment has something for everyone. Different factors influence the content of the entertainment being consumed, but culture is one of the most important and decisive elements. The appropriation of entertainers in their work is not always immediately obvious to all consumers of entertainment, but members of the affected culture are quick to notice and usually shut out. I argue that the cultural appropriation of Black culture in most cases facilitates results that are harmful and damaging to the Black community. My research methods will use firsthand recollection of recent examples of cultural appropriation in the entertainment industry by members of the African American community who range from intellectuals to creators to consumers and juxtapose their accounts with historical examples of appropriation as recorded in primary and secondary sources.

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## **Introduction: What is Cultural Appropriation?**

Cultural appropriation as defined by Aboriginal activist Fourmille (1996) in one of the first critical analysis of the matter is the “adoption of a culture’s element or elements into the identity of members of another culture.” There are several contexts in which cultural appropriation can be used. This paper will examine the affects cultural appropriation has on the Black entertainment industry by white artists. Entertainment is anything that provides leisure or relaxation, but in this paper it will be used to narrowly reference music and its role in the newly developed world of social media.<sup>1</sup>

Arguably, cultural appropriation is more than just taking from an already developed idea, but more accurately it is the profiteering from the hard work, talent and ideas of Black creators by white artists who are viewed more positively by the media and thus classified as the mainstream. Music has been a source of freedom and self-expression for African-Americans throughout their history in America. After the Civil War, the blues was an African American form of music that emerged from an amalgamation of different musical styles that included instruments to create a brand new sound. Jazz followed at the end of the 19th century, and laid the foundation for rhythm and blues. R&B was followed by Rap and then hip-hop. All of these genres have something in common-- they were initially rejected by white culture and then later rebranded and replicated by white artists in order to become more feasible and digestible to larger white audiences.

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<sup>1</sup> Fourmille, Henrietta (1996). "Making things work: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Involvement in Bioregional Planning" in Approaches to bioregional planning. Part 2. Background Papers to the conference; 30 October – 1 November 1995, Melbourne; Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories. Canberra. pp. 268–269

Blues singers like Muddy Waters and BB King are cited as influences for bands like the Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton, Led Zeppelin, The Doors, and AC/DC. Waters and King were products of the new wave of blues called rhythm and blues, or R&B. They incorporated the electric guitar into their music, which laid the foundations for many white rock and roll players. Waters' influence can be seen widely across several genres and subgenres of music that include R&B, psychedelic blues, rock and roll, and soul. Even the Rolling Stones band name came directly from the song "Rollin' Stone" by Muddy Waters.<sup>2</sup>

The Rolling Stones and other white musicians influenced by Waters went on to become some of the most well-known musicians in the world. Many white rock fans believe that their favorite bands are not guilty of cultural appropriation but instead cultural appreciation because they acknowledge the influence that Black blues singers had on them. While the vocal appreciation is admirable, the distinction in success, wealth, and recognition that those bands received in comparison to Black blues singers is too overwhelmingly obvious to ignore. Black blues musicians fathered the rock and roll that white people love so deeply, yet shun Black fans out of their communities. Many Black fans feel as though the genre has been whitewashed.<sup>3</sup>

Rap is among one of the newer genres of music in Black culture and the most recent victim of whitewashing. Rap became popularized in 1980 when "Rappers' Delight" by the

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<sup>2</sup> Moore, Allan. 2002. "The Cambridge Companion to Blues and Gospel Music." New York: Cambridge University.

Tooze, Sandra B. Muddy Waters: The Mojo Man. Toronto: ECW Press, 1997. Print.

<sup>3</sup><https://blog.sonicbids.com/appropriation-vs-appreciation-in-music-where-should-we-draw-the-line>

<https://thekollection.com/the-true-story-of-rock-and-roll-how-whitewashing-let-down-the-black-voice/>

Whitewashed is a metaphor for cleaning something of vices or scandals in order to make it more appealing; it is also a pejorative term meaning to take the cultural or ethnic roots out of something and present it as something of white culture, especially in media.

<https://www.stereogum.com/1901679/could-rap-music-be-whitewashed-the-way-rock-n-roll-was/columns/status-aint-hood/>

Sugarhill Gang became the first rap song to enter the top 40 in Billboard's Hot 100. The song signified the beginning of a fast-spreading genre amongst the African American community. The emergence of popular West Coast rappers like NWA, Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, and Tupac helped popularize rap across the country. Most if not all of rappers' music centered around the hardships they faced in the streets during their life. It was not until the 2010s when Eminem became the most successful white rapper, selling over 200 million records. Discovered and produced by Dr. Dre for his talents, Eminem opened the door for other white rappers into rap. Since the 2010's, rap has seen a steady increase in white faces. Many are climbing the ladder to popularity and financial success much more easily than black artists.<sup>4</sup>

Among one of the most disappointing moments in rap, white rapper Macklemore won Best Rap song of 2014 for "Thrift Shop," his gimmick debut single about a trip to the thrift shop to buy vintage clothing. In his video, he is wearing a fur coat, often recognized as a 'pimp coat.' This song romanticized thrifting and opened the doors for white kids to go into thrift shops, intended to sell slightly used clothing to poor people, usually Black.<sup>5</sup> Macklemore was nominated alongside Kanye West's "New Slaves," A\$AP Rocky, Drake, and 2 Chainz's "Fuckin' Problems," Jay-Z and Justin Timberlake's "Holy Grail," and Drake's "Started from the Bottom" for the award. His album *The Heist* was also nominated for Album of the Year. In Grammy history, only 2 rap albums have won Album of the Year, OutKast's *Speakboxxx/The*

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<sup>4</sup> Golus, Carrie (2012). *From Def Jam to Super Rich*. Twenty First Century Books. p. 22.

Lynette Keyes, Cheryl (2004). *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*. University of Illinois Press. p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> <https://miscellanynews.org/2019/04/18/opinions/fetishized-thrifting-culture-contributes-to-gentrification/>  
<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1999-jan-06-ca-60928-story.html>  
<https://www.billboard.com/articles/events/year-in-music-2014/6386055/the-10-best-rap-albums-of-2014>

Replay value measures the quality of, in this case, a musical record and how suitable it is to be played more than once.

A blaccent is a hybrid word of black and accent used to describe the fake accent that nonblack people put on to mimic black people.

<https://www.csmonitor.com/The-Culture/Culture-Cafe/2014/0703/Iggy-Azalea-Fancy-sets-new-Billboard-record-for-a-song-by-a-female-rapper>



*Love Below* and Lauryn Hill's *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. The Grammy's have been known to snub Black artists for nominations yet Macklemore managed to get four with one win. In this same year, several albums were released that have been considered to be staples in rap history such as *Honest* by Future, *No Label II* by Migos, *2014 Forest Hills Drive* by J. Cole, and *The Pinkprint* by Nicki Minaj: all albums with heavy replay value even today. Macklemore has not put out a song since 2019. Another white rapper who rose to stardom off of mediocrity is Iggy Azalea. The Australian female rapper's single *Fancy* broke the Billboard record in 2014 for longest charting song for a female rapper. Azalea was one of the first white female rappers in the rap game, and heavily embraced Black aesthetics and vernacular with her mastered blaccent, a hybrid word of black and accent used to describe the fake accent that nonblack people put on to mimic black people. . Several celebrities including Jill Scott and Eve called Azalea out for cultural appropriation. "She's representing a group of girls right now as well. And yeah, I think people right now are too quick to give too many accolades to new people," Eve said. "That's the one thing I just can't stand. Let her do her thing. It's not my cup of tea. It would be dope to hear her with her swag. What are you? Who are you? What is that? You know what I'm saying? That's the only reason why I say that."

"It's a little challenging for me, because I come from the era that she pulled from," Scott added. "To me, it's a mixture of Da Brat and Eve, the way that it sounds. That's what it sounds like to me...it [the tone of her voice] also sounds like a big bite to me," Jill Scott said in the same interview with Billboard Magazine.

In an interview with Azalea addressed the allegations in an interview with Cosmo where she said that she wanted to "talk so much about my experiences of things I didn't have, and I think it felt like I wasn't acknowledging that there is white privilege and there is institutionalized

racism. It seemed to a lot of people like I was living in this bubble or unaware of all these things that people have to experience.” She went on to apologize for the misunderstanding, but went on to say “Then again, can you really say sorry and then keep doing the same sh\*t? I’m still going to make the same type of music and still be ridiculous and larger than life. So I can’t be that f\*cking sorry about it.” The apology, or lack thereof, signifies the lack of self-awareness that a lot of white people who enter Black spaces possess on their privilege and the effect they have on an entire culture they don’t understand. I will more heavily dissect white artists who appropriated black artists and their culture.<sup>6</sup>

Another facet in the practice of cultural appropriation as defined by Rogers is that it “is involved in the assimilation and exploitation of marginalized and colonized cultures and in the survival of subordinated cultures and their resistance to dominant cultures.” In modern Western media, the assimilation of such cultures is done by inserting White artists into these Black spaces unannounced and unaccounted for. Azalea and other white artists mimic the soul and pain that these Black artists go through in such a way that you would never even know they were white.<sup>7</sup>

Though this phenomena is not new, the Internet provides a cultural mecca where this type of behavior is easier to imitate and quicker to spread. Social media gives young creators of entertainment a space to freely express their ideas, and cultural background to the world. While this platform provides a place to express, it is also a place to observe. It has not gone unnoticed how many white users of the platforms will adopt the slang of Black people, copy different hairstyles that are unique to textured hair, and sometimes completely plagiarize the work and

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/01/04/how-a-white-australian-rapper-mastered-her-blaccent/>  
<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/halsey-accuses-iggy-azalea-of-cultural-appropriation>  
<https://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/music/a28485080/iggy-azalea-cover-story-in-my-defense-not-sorry/>

<sup>7</sup> Rogers, Richard. "From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation." *Communication Theory*, vol. 16, 2006, pp. 474-503.

take credit for it as their own. On the other hand, the Internet is also a great place for others to hold people accountable for their theft of a culture that doesn't belong to them. Many times, users will try to 'expose' a cultural appropriator by showing side by sides of the work they stole from and encourage others to stop patronizing them. This technique seems to work pretty well in some cases, but in others it tends to be more extreme. The immense accessibility that the Internet provides prompts a new era of accountability, a more dangerous era called "cancel culture." The idea of cancel culture is to basically ban someone from the Internet completely, or make it extremely hard for them to reinvent themselves in peace. Once you have made a mistake that the rest of the Internet feels is irredeemable, they 'cancel' you as an artist, influencer, figure, person, etc. Sometimes, hackers can doxx a person and reveal their address, phone number, and all personal information making them vulnerable to attacks and identity theft. This is extremely damaging and traumatizing, no matter who the person is. This is why I believe examining the impact that social media has on cultural appropriation is important because it brings a new wave of accountability and perspective that many cultural appropriators have never had to face-- possible victimization.

In this thesis, I will reference aspects of social media in relation to the effect it has on cultural appropriation: the roles that Black content creators take on through these platforms, the permanence of the Internet and what that means for appropriators and the victims of appropriation, and the large forum it gives Black entertainers and consumers that they have never had. An important aspect of social media that needs to be recognized when discussing this paper is the significance that Black users have on social media platforms-- most importantly, Twitter. Twitter is an app that allows you to say whatever may be on your mind in blurbs of 180 characters or less called tweets. Many people have found community on Twitter through

common interests or identities. Black users fall under a community commonly known as Black twitter. In *Salon* viral Twitter sensation and activist Feminista Jones describes Black twitter as “a collective of active, primarily African-American Twitter users who have created a virtual community ... [and are] proving adept at bringing about a wide range of sociopolitical changes.” Black twitter has weaponized social media as an organizing platform that makes reaching to other Black people thousands of miles easier.<sup>8</sup>

Historically, African Americans have often found distinct ways to communicate with each other as a means of survival. When African people were separated from those who spoke the same language as them, they used spirituals to communicate and bond with one another. In the Civil Rights era, grassroots activism was necessary in organizing massive movements of protest during heightened tensions between black and white people. In the 21st century, Black twitter is serving as a platform for millions of African Americans to communicate with each other. People share their opinions, make jokes, spread news, and organize on massive scales all through a free social media app. It also encourages users to be themselves with no threats from fearful white people. Other users can use the app to share their opinions and can make negative remarks to a Black person, but unlike in real life, users cannot be silenced or reprimanded for being authentically Black to comfort white people. Users type in a common form of African American vernacular language called ebonics, share family stories, and find like-minded people that look like them. In a Pew study, Black people were among the top groups to utilize Twitter for a plethora of reasons including political activism and entertainment. It is safe to say that of the social media platforms, Twitter is where most Black people who have Internet access and utilize social media generally convene to share their opinions. While this is not representative of

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<sup>8</sup> [https://www.salon.com/2013/07/17/how\\_twitter\\_fuels\\_black\\_activism/](https://www.salon.com/2013/07/17/how_twitter_fuels_black_activism/)

every African-American person, it is the largest, most diverse sample. For this reason, I will be quoting several users from the Black Twitter community and their tweets that have gone viral or gained a heavy amount of traffic and support.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/mercy-street/blogs/mercy-street-revealed/songs-of-survival-and-songs-of-freedom-during-slavery/> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/12/11/social-media-continue-to-be-important-political-outlets-for-black-americans/>

## Chapter 1: Black Pioneers and their White Beneficiaries

“The Lord messed up on me in two ways – he didn’t make me black and didn’t make me a bass singer” is what singer Elvis Presley said to his biographer Trina Young during her time uncovering the secrets and internal thoughts of the crowned King of Rock and Roll. This same quote is used heavily on the website [elvisbiography.net](http://elvisbiography.net) in a blog entry detailing the connection between Presley and the Black community.<sup>10</sup> In recent years, many have called Presley a racist and cultural appropriator, but the website works to unpack these rumors and repeal the notion. Presley was exposed to the blues by Black children in his Mississippi hometown of Tupelo and went on to become one of, if not the most, recognized Rock and Roll singer of all time. Coming up in an age where faceless radio was the main form of media, many people were surprised to find out that such a soulful voice did not belong to a Black man. During that time, Black artists didn’t feel like Presley ripped them off or took something away from the Black community by becoming popularized and adored, while Black musicians continued to struggle for the respect of integrated audiences. B.B. King spoke about Presley saying, “I don’t think he [Elvis] ripped ’em off,” B.B. King said. “I think once something has been exposed, anyone can add or take from it if they like. He was just so great, so popular, and so hot – and so anything that he played became a hit. To me, they didn’t make a mistake when they called him The King.”<sup>11</sup> Presley did not get as much praise or recognition from the Black community. Juan Thompson, author of “Fade to White: Black Music, White Artists= Big Money,” discusses the controversy behind Presley and

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<sup>10</sup> This quote was cited in “ELVIS: Behind The Legend.” *Elvis Presley Biography*, 27 Feb. 2020, by Trina Young and under the blog entry “Elvis Presley and the Black Community: Dispelling the Myths.”

<sup>11</sup> This quote was taken from the short documentary “Elvis Presley & the Black Community - That Echo Will Never Die” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xd1pXw1DmsA>

his success as a cultural appropriator when he says “other music artists, such as Elvis Presley, who hijacked rock 'n' roll... [and] Miley Cyrus, who exploited the use of black signifiers.” Prior to his discovery of Presley, his agent Sam Phillips said, “If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars” (Farley, n.p.) While it is understandable to see the viewpoint of twenty-first century critics, actual Black musicians of the 1950s more than likely disagreed. Presley was known to credit his teachers from his hometown several times, most notably in a 1957 *Jet* magazine article where he praised Black choirs and different rock and roll artists like Fats Domino. Even soul singer Jackie Wilson gave credit to Presley for his stage mannerisms that changed the game for solo artists, “A lot of people have accused Elvis of stealing the black man’s music, when in fact, almost every black solo entertainer copied the stage mannerisms of Elvis.”

Some of the most iconic singers of today have been accused of “blackfishing,” the practice of making yourself look, sound, or act in a way that can be perceived as Black. Christina Aguilera, critically acclaimed as the voice of her generation, gained much of her notoriety during the raunchy or x-rated era of her career. During this time, Christina, or X-Tina, changed her entire crew to consist of mostly Black people, took on a darker tan, and dressed much more risque. Her music was more explicit in her album *Stripped* as she sported box braids and weaves. Some people on tabloid online discussion boards and “Black Twitter” cite her Latinx roots as the explanation for this and having nothing at all to do with Black culture, which raises another question of when did Black and Latinx culture become interchangeable? Even so, Christina grew up in Pennsylvania with no connection to her Latinx roots being shown beforehand.

Twitter user fufuisonme, a notable curator and activist from the United Kingdom, sparked a debate that first exposed the blackfishing era of Aguilera for what it is back in 2018:

“Christina Aguilera was one of the original black fishers nine years ago #blackfishing let us not forget.” alongside two screenshots of the music video “Can’t Hold Us Down” featuring Lil Kim where Aguilera is sporting a bronzed skin with dark, curly hair, juxtaposed with a picture of Aguilera in her ‘natural’ state, pale and icy blonde. In the replies, another user justifies this transformation with a simple “she is Latina.”

Another artist who has been getting by due to her Latina roots is Jennifer Lopez, sometimes referred to as “JLo” or “Jenny from the Block.” Lopez was constantly seen alongside plenty of Black artists in the early 2000s, most notably her boyfriend at the time P. Diddy. After an arrest involving the two, Lopez and Diddy split and Lopez ceased making music in the hip-hop/R&B genre. She was notorious for saying the n-word in her song “I’m Real,” which was later discovered to be mostly written and sung by Ashanti, an R&B artist who rose to fame due to her collaborations with Ja Rule. Ashanti’s voice was kept for the final vocals and she was credited for her background singing, but not her writing. Many of Lopez’s songs that reached the charts were not completely sung or written by her. Other Black songwriters that have gone into legal disputes over Lopez’s thievery include Usher, Christina Milian, Debra Laws, Shannyette Harrell, Natasha Ramos, and Brandy Norwood.<sup>12</sup> Although Lopez is known for more than the music attached to her name, it would be inappropriate to not attribute her success to the music and vocals of unrecognized Black talents.

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<sup>12</sup><sub>3</sub> <https://mefeater.com/ten-songs-jennifer-lopez-shamelessly-vocally-stole/>



Not all celebrities who are accused of blackfishing are let off as easily as Lopez or Aguilera. Awareness to the dangerous phenomena of cultural appropriation is at an all-time high, public forums like Lipstick Alley discuss the similarities between white artists' "culture vulture era."<sup>13</sup> Disney channel star Miley Cyrus went through her wild phase which firmly separated her from the innocent white girl role that brought her to fame. During this era, Cyrus released *Bangerz*, described as a "primarily pop and R&B record, which also integrates elements of hip hop, synthpop and country music" by her official website. Included on the tracklist is "We Can't Stop," a single that went #1 and remained on the charts for six months. In the music video, Cyrus is wearing a white two-piece set, a short mohawk, and glittery makeup. Her appearance was not too off putting, but the choreography was nothing but her twerking with a group of black women in a room full of drugs and alcohol. Cyrus' run in 2013 introduced the new "ratchet" Miley as she says, someone who is free to do whatever she wants and be as risqué as she pleases. White women everywhere began to feel as if they could express their 'ratchet' side and began sporting what they call space buns, when in actuality they are a rip off of bantu knots, a distinctive black hairstyle, commodified to fit white hair. Cyrus began referring to herself as "The White Nicki Minaj."

Her appropriation of Black hairstyles adds insult to injury when juxtaposing celebrities' comments about her 'space buns' and dreadlocks. Zendaya Coleman, a Black woman featured on Disney alongside Cyrus, sported long dreadlocks at the Oscars where talk show host Giuliana

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<sup>13</sup> On Lipstick Alley's public forum, users ask questions and invite other users to share their opinions. One forum is titled "Was Christina Aguilera culture vulture in the Stripped era? Like Mikey Cyrus was in Bangerz?" <https://www.lipstickalley.com/threads/was-christina-aguilera-culture-vulture-in-the-stripped-era-like-mikey-cyrus-was-in-bangerz.2237505/page-2>

Rancic later said she looked like she smelled of “patchouli oil and weed.”<sup>14</sup> A few months later, Cyrus wore the same dreadlocks and Rancic’s only comment was that she “looked amazing.”

After a back and forth on social media between Minaj and Taylor Swift over Minaj’s loss for Video of the Year, *New York Times* interviewers asked Cyrus what her impression of the feud was. Cyrus stated “If you want to make it about race, there’s a way you could do that. But don’t make it just about yourself.... What I read sounded very Nicki Minaj, which, if you know Nicki Minaj is not too kind. It’s not very polite. I think there’s a way you speak to people with openness and love. You don’t have to start this pop star against pop star war. It became Nicki Minaj and Taylor in a fight, so now the story isn’t even on what you wanted it to be about. Now you’ve just given E! News “Catfight! Taylor and Nicki Go at It.”<sup>15</sup>

Despite being ranked among the top rappers and a pioneer for female rap, Minaj has continuously been blackballed by the music industry for her outspokenness on Black women’s lack of recognition in music. Her video “Anaconda” failed to receive a nomination and Minaj stated that it was because she included thicker Black women to promote body positivity. Taylor Swift’s *Shake it Off* video, however, received a nomination and included skinnier white models twerking in a Cyrus-like fashion. People praised white artists like Swift and Cyrus while Minaj was criticized for being a bad example for kids watching at home. Cyrus stated Minaj was only upset because she didn’t win and continued to say she was known for being an angry person. Minaj wasn’t happy with her comments and called her out as she sat in her seat with her

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<sup>14</sup><sub>5</sub>

<https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2021/03/Zendaya-giuliana-rancic-dreadlocks-comment-oscar-2015-w-ma-gazine>

<sup>15</sup><sub>6</sub> [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/28/arts/music/miley-cyrus-2015-mtv-vmaw.html?\\_r=2](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/28/arts/music/miley-cyrus-2015-mtv-vmaw.html?_r=2)

dreadlocks asking ‘what’s good?’<sup>16</sup> Of course the ratchet Miley act paused for a moment as she looked around in confusion and disbelief. Two years earlier at the same award show, Cyrus got on the stage with Robin Thicke, twerking, gyrating and exposing every part of her for everyone to see. However, Cyrus changed her behavior when she began to be held accountable for her actions. She continued this phase all the way into 2017 until she decided hip-hop was no longer for her. In a *Billboard Magazine* interview, when asked about the influence hip hop had on her music she said, “‘I also love that Kendrick [Lamar] song [‘Humble’]: ‘Show me somethin’ natural like ass with some stretch marks,’ . . . I love that because it’s not, ‘Come sit on my \*\*\*\*, suck on my \*\*\*\*.’ I can’t listen to that anymore. That’s what pushed me out of the hip-hop scene a little. It was too much ‘Lamborghini, got my Rolex, got a girl on my \*\*\*\*’ — I am so not that.’”<sup>17</sup> And just like that, she was done with hip-hop. She dropped her fifth studio album *Malibu* where she appeared barefaced with her natural hair. The grills, dreadlocks, and makeup were gone. She had seemingly gone back to what everyone remembered her as, the squeaky clean innocent pop star. After this album, Cyrus continued to make disparaging remarks about hip-hop and how it all stemmed from her being in a negative place. Years later, social media revisited the article where a number of tweets criticizing her remarks went viral. In one of the viral tweets quoted in a multitude of articles, Twitter user @iamdevinsummers said:

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<sup>16</sup> The heated encounter became the most memorable moment of the night as viewers everywhere tried to understand where the hostility started. <http://www.mtv.com/news/2342088/nicki-minaj-explains-miley-cyurs-feud-vmas/>

<sup>17</sup> In a *Billboard* cover interview publicizing her new ‘rootsy’ album, Cyrus bashes her previous hip hop phase. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/magazine-feature/7783997/miley-cyrus-cover-story-new-music-malibu>

“Miley Cyrus exploited hip hop culture then bashed it and hopped back into her white girl innocence phase[.] [H]aving white privilege must be nice”<sup>18</sup>

Amazing enough, Cyrus is not the first and won't be the last white person to use Black culture as their outlet and disguise to behave recklessly and barbaric then apologize a few years later when they want to return to the comfort of white privilege. For four years, Cyrus benefitted from Black culture while simultaneously putting down Black women and perpetuating the narrative that the most influential female rapper is an angry Black woman. Now of course, she's back to making her country music and is catering to her white fanbase as if the years 2013 to 2017 didn't happen.

Blackfishing does not stop at music; the Kardashian family is known for their overexaggerated features commonly associated with Black women, such as lip fillers, butt implants, and long weaves. The family has built a multibillion dollar empire off of their image copying the looks of Black women. The most recognized and the pioneer of the Kardashian clan, Kim Kardashian-West rose to fame after her relationship with Ray J and their leaked sextape. According to their home network E! News and other reality television sources, Kim's mother and manager, Kris Jenner, capitalized off of the bad publicity Kim was getting and pitched the idea of a reality show based on the family's life to television host Ryan Seacrest. The family was already a popular name as their father, the late Rob Kardashian represented OJ Simpson in his murder trial. Over the years, the Kardashians have been called out for cultural appropriation and the excessive amount of wealth they have accumulated based off of Black culture. In other

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<sup>18</sup> This tweet was used in several articles including Seventeen magazine, Atlanta Black Star, and Amherst Wire to show the opinions many Black people shared on Cyrus' reborn image.

instances, they have also appropriated Asian cultures and other Eastern countries. Kim Kardashian seems to shamelessly appropriate culture on the daily even after the birth of her biracial children with rapper Kanye West. Perhaps one of her most controversial shoots with Paper Magazine, and possibly of all time, Kardashian held a glass of champagne with her posterior recreating Saartjie Baartman's in an attempt to bring the South African music sensations' famous comics to life. Both women are known for their large bottoms and similar to Kardashian, famous advertisements that can be found in the Library of Congress show her profile from the side almost exactly like Kardashian posed for the magazine. Baartman was a woman who suffered from steatopygia, resulting in extremely protuberant buttocks due to a build-up of fat. She was a scholar, quadrilingual in Dutch, English, French, and in her maternal tongue. She also was a talented musician who performed for a living. In 1810, Baartman was taken to Europe from South Africa to perform. Her body turned into a spectacle and the men she worked for kept her barely dressed in order to draw attention. She was constantly gazed at in awe and shock by the locals in London. She was socially overcome by illness and alcohol abuse that didn't allow her to perform anymore. She died in poverty and her body was made property of scientist Georges Cuvier. Until 1974, her body was on display in a Paris Museum when it was then returned back to her homeland in South Africa. Baartman never received credit and was treated like a circus act due to her natural body size and now white women like Kim Kardashian have made a fortune and empire off of plastic surgery enhancements in order to have the natural curvy shape and facial features of a Black woman.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: a Ghost Story and a Biography, by Clifton C. Crais and Pamela Scully, Princeton University Press, 2011, pp. 8–15.

The Kardashian family has been called out multiple times for wearing African hairstyles including Fulani braids, cornrows, plaits, and bantu knots. Whenever they post their new hairstyle, they attribute them to another white cultural appropriator or rename them. In 2018, Kim posted a set of Fulani braids on Instagram calling them “Bo Derek braids” referencing the actress who solidified her position as a sex symbol in the movie *10*.<sup>20</sup> Many felt like the family’s appropriation of the braids was inappropriate and disrespectful to Black people who face discrimination in the workplace, school, and society in general for wearing the same types of braids. Multiple cases have gone to court to fight for anti-discrimination laws against Black hair. In 2010, Chastity Jones was asked to cut off her locs in order to qualify for a job at Catastrophe Management Solutions. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission sued the company on Jones’ behalf, but the district court’s ruling that the employer was not discriminatory because hair was not a racial characteristic but instead “were not a mutable characteristic of Black people”<sup>21</sup> was upheld in the Supreme Court. This was the only federal case in regards to Black hair in the workplace.

The fight against hair discrimination is a direct result of racial discrimination that goes back to slavery. Enslaved women who worked in the fields covered their hair in headrags due to the harsh weather conditions, but those who worked in the house often wore wigs and fashioned other hairstyles to mimic their enslavers’ hairstyles.<sup>22</sup> Freed women in cities like Louisiana who

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<sup>20</sup><sup>11</sup> <https://graziadaily.co.uk/celebrity/news/kim-kardashian-braids/>

<sup>21</sup> A case brief of EEOC v Catastrophe Mgmt. provides the conclusion and reasoning of the court with direct quotes at <https://www.lexisnexis.com/community/casebrief/p/casebrief-eeoc-v-catastrophe-mgmt-sols>

<sup>22</sup> I Am Not My Hair: African American Women and Their Struggles with Embracing Natural Hair! by Brenda A. Randle, *Race, Gender & Class*, Vol. 22, No. 1-2, *Race, Gender & Class 2014 Conference* (2015), pp. 114-121 Jean Ait Belkhir, *Race, Gender & Class Journal*

wore their curls out were forced by Tignon laws to cover their hair with a head rag to signify they were still of the slave class.<sup>23</sup> Madame CJ Walker built an empire off of hair straightening tools and creams in a popularized movement to ‘tame’ kinky hair that is still seen in Black hair care today. Oftentimes, people look at Black women’s efforts to change their hair from anything other than their natural curl pattern as a desperate attempt to achieve whiteness and erase their Blackness; however, before Madame CJ Walker’s business took off, Black women were being ridiculed and mocked for their natural hair. Minstrel shows depicted them as unkempt and animal-like for wearing their hair in their natural state.<sup>24</sup> For centuries, Black women have been forced into sporting alternative hairstyles for societal acceptance; however, for white women like Kim Kardashian and her sisters who think the style makes them look ethnic, or even ‘hood,’ society embraces it as a new trend or fad that will come and go.

The entertainment industry unironically showcases the way that cultural appropriation constantly benefits white celebrities and causes irreparable damage to their Black counterparts and the Black community as a whole. Black culture allows for white people to enter into a world of unique customs that they can pick and choose from at their own discretion to benefit them however they want. Black culture is more than just hairstyles and hip-hop for Black people. It comes with your very existence being challenged daily and constantly places you in danger. The harm that white people like Elvis Presley, Christina Aguilera, Miley Cyrus, and the Kardashians

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<sup>23</sup> Free Persons of Color in Colonial Louisiana, by Donald E. Everett, *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Winter, 1966), pp. 21-50 Louisiana Historical Association

<sup>24</sup> Wilkerson, Kamina. “The Natural Hair Movement.” *Continuum: The Spelman Undergraduate Research Journal*, 1 Jan. 1970, [radar.auctr.edu/islandora/object/continuum:0001.008](http://radar.auctr.edu/islandora/object/continuum:0001.008).

place on the Black community through their appropriation may not seem harmful on the surface, but reinforces generations of abusive cycles designed to keep Black people oppressed.



## Chapter 2: The Internet

The Internet has become a cultural mecca for learning, creation, communication, and a plethora of other content. Although the Internet has been around for decades, it did not become a part of everyday life until the 21st century. Now, we use it for everything: music, utilities, photography, research, classwork, television, and much more. Music and entertainment has been greatly influenced by these growing institutions that seem to have everybody on the edge of their seats. As the rise of social media grew in the early 2000s, musicians followed the crowd. It was Black artists who began the push towards streaming music online and developing these platforms into what they are today.

Deandre Cortez Way, also known as Soulja Boy, is cited as one of the most influential Internet content creators of all time. Born in Chicago in 1990, Way became interested in rap music when he moved to Atlanta at age 6. He began to start making music after he moved to Batesville, Mississippi in 2004. In high school, he received positive feedback to his music from his peers and published his songs onto underground streaming services like Limewire and Soundclick. Once his music started doing well on the streaming sites, he established official pages on YouTube and MySpace, two emerging social media platforms. When Soulja Boy released his hit single "Crank Dat" with an accompanying music video on YouTube with instructions on how to do the dance. The combination of dance and rap were not unheard of at this time as "Lean wit it, Rock wit It," "Walk It Out," and many others were released before Soulja Boy's time, but the difference between those and Soulja Boy's music video was that it was easily accessible any time of the day. Other artists only had their music videos accessible through cable TV music video channels like MTV and BET, but there were hundreds of other music videos these channels had to play. Artists would have to sit and wait for their video to

come and go as the stations saw fit. With YouTube, artists' videos were always available and could rack up as many streams as possible. "Crank Dat" amassed over three million purchases and downloads. Soulja Boy was nominated for a Grammy for the Best Rap Song of 2008 along with other established artists that included, Kanye West, T.I., 50 Cent, and T. Pain. This was all accomplished by a maintained social media presence and a groundbreaking discovery for music through the Internet. More importantly Soulja Boy achieved this success without having to sign a contract with a major record company. Today, this formula is the blueprint for many rappers. Instead of having to give out CDs of their music or hope to track down a famous rapper at a club so they can get a shot and potentially being taken advantage of by a record label. Rappers and artists found autonomy in building their own brand. Many people try to discredit Soulja Boy for his contributions to the music industry and elevating not only rap but music in general.<sup>25</sup>

Without question Soulja Boy is responsible for the way we listen to music now, but many people think that it was inevitable that someone was going to use the internet to stream music and Soulja Boy just happened to be the first to do it. Critics claim that he was just a one hit wonder and that he got lucky; however, the influences of Soulja Boy's early music are still prevalent today. Beyonce used a sample from "Turn My Swag On" for the opening song on *Lemonade*, crediting Soulja Boy as a writer, and won several awards for the song. His sampling credits on whosampled.com is nine pages long and include the likes of Pitbull, Lil Wayne, T-Pain, Wiz Khalifa, Nicki Minaj, Jay-Z, Drake, and many more. Whenever Soulja Boy voices that he feels as if he doesn't get enough credit for his contributions to music, the Internet, and the rap game, his peers and listeners laugh at his comments. The Migos hit song "Versace" that got them the attention of Drake and the rest of the rap community, essentially setting them apart from the

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.michigandaily.com/arts/soulja-boy-invented-internet/>

overpopulated rap scene was produced by Soulja Boy, a fact that very few people know. Instead, many people give credit to the white developers of websites like SoundCloud and YouTube for the success of music streaming although it was Soulja Boy who put it in practice.<sup>26</sup>

Compared to the music industry in the past, Black artists' music is much more easily accessible to anyone. While the upside of this is that they could gain the recognition and be exposed to more opportunities than ever before, the very real dilemma of cultural appropriation is still increasingly present now than ever before. Their social media presence is a big part of any growing artists' image nowadays, but the followers play an equally big part. While many underground Black artists tend to have a largely Black following, anyone of any race in any part of the world could run across their content. Consequently, anyone could take their ideas and sounds and play it off as their own, amass a bigger following, and no one would be the wiser.

The most prevalent and damaging example of this form of cultural appropriation has appeared through a new social media platform called TikTok. The app was intended to recreate the nuances of a now deactivated application called Vine, where content creators had seven seconds to create a video that would captivate its audience. TikTok allows for 60 seconds of content in the form of dance, music, comedy, educational facts, or whatever else the creator decides. An interesting feature of this app is that a user could upload a 'sound' that could be their voice, an original song, or a remix of a copyrighted song and now that sound is available for any other user to use and make their own video with. The three most popular users on this app are all young white women that were not famous prior to their social media presence: Charli D'Amelio with 109 million followers, Addison Rae with 77 million followers, and Bella Poarch with 58 million followers. On social media apps geared towards video content, the more followers and

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.rap-up.com/2020/10/06/soulja-boy-says-he-changed-the-music-industry/>

interactions an individual's posts get, the more opportunities they get for brand deals, meaning they get paid to post content promoting products. This can range from small, local businesses to large corporations like Amazon or Target. As of February 2021, the highest paid Tik Tok user was Addison Rae, making \$5 million off of dancing videos per year. Charli D'Amelio was second, making \$4 million per year, not including her outside brand deals like Sabra Hummus' Super Bowl commercial. <sup>27</sup>

D'Amelio's rise to fame is accredited to her dancing videos, although none of them were created by her. The dance that put her, and TikTok, on the map was created by 14 year old Jalaiah Harmon from Fayetteville, Georgia to Lottery by K Camp, but more widely known as the Renegade. As of today, D'Amelio's video of her doing the Renegade from October 2020 has 4 million likes. The choreography started the entire dance craze of making complicated sequences to any one section of a song. D'Amelio's dance was a lot more diluted in that many of Harmon's moves were fast paced and apparently too difficult to do. After several months, many Black users of TikTok found out that Harmon was the originator of the dance and took an issue with no one giving her credit. People on Twitter antagonized D'Amelio about her claim to fame and her failure to recognize the original creator.

@fandxms wrote:

“So you mean to tell me I was doing the gentrified version of the renegade dance and this whole time the original had this much flavour? I hate it here...” <sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.gobankingrates.com/money/entrepreneur/how-much-do-tiktokers-make/>

<sup>28</sup> *Hundids Mag* explains how the Internet, mainly the Black Twitter users, forced TikTok influencer Charli D'Amelio and the app itself into giving Jalaiah Harmon credit for the revolutionary dance. <https://hundidsmag.com/the-internet-bullied-charli-damelio-into-crediting-the-original-renegade-dance-creator-jalaiah-harmon/>

Eventually, Harmon was recognized for her dance, and did a video in collaboration with D'Amelio. She was invited to the NBA All-Star game where she did the Renegade Dance with the dancers there in March of 2020. It took nearly three months and a mob on the Internet for one Black teenager to get a fraction of the credit that a white teenager continues to receive on a daily basis.

On March 26, 2021, a similar issue arose as the second most followed person on TikTok Addison Rae was invited to The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon where she taught him eight famous TikTok dances, none of which she created. Almost immediately after the show's clips were posted on social media, Twitter users began responding to the clip noting how unenergetic and 'gentrified' the dances were. They then started questioning host Jimmy Fallon as to why he could not get the original creators of the dance to appear and teach their own dances. One user wrote: "Stealing from black entertainers and having white 'creators' regurgitate it to the masses is american history 101." Another said: "I think Black creators should just stop creating content for like a good 6 months and just observe what these people come up with."

Another person stitched a video of the original creators of one dance next to Addison Rae and noted how comical it was to see the life and movement of the original next to the simple and stiff version that Rae performed. After a while, the replies began to amass hundreds of thousands more likes and retweets than the original tweets, pressuring Fallon to respond.<sup>29</sup> On April 6th, 2021, Fallon invited the original choreographers -- via Zoom -- to the show to perform from their homes. He also issued an apology for not including them in the original airing of the segment. Twitter users began to ask why they too could not be invited to the studio as Rae was.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2021-03-29/addison-rae-jimmy-fallon-tonight-show-tiktok-dances>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/06/entertainment/jimmy-fallon-addison-raes-tiktok/index.html>

According to software developers, these events are not exclusive or coincidental. Many have said that the algorithm that generates what videos are shown on Tik Tok's discovery page is racist and intentional in bringing white users more exposure and popularity. Black creators say that their videos rarely ever appear on the discovery page and that they rarely ever see other Black creators on theirs. They also have shared their experiences with their videos being taken down and flagged for hate speech whenever they talk about the discrepancies and racism they face as Black people on the app and in real life. Even videos that do not talk about racial prejudice or injustice have been taken down for inappropriate use. These same videos were being repackaged by white users and receiving millions of likes. Outside of likes, these white users were receiving brand deals, endorsements, advertisement opportunities, and much more while the originators of their content were being banned and flagged by the app. In the wake of protests against racial injustice and police brutality, more users of the app began to call out the app censoring videos with the hashtags "Black Lives Matter" and "Justice for George Floyd" as well as the racist algorithm. TikTok's directors responded with an apology and said that the problem was due to a glitch in the system. They also announced that they would be taking steps to ensure a more equitable environment and invited Black creators to have discussion about their experience on the app.<sup>31</sup>

Kaychelle Dabney, a 24-year-old TikToker with 1 million followers, felt the apology was not enough and failed to address the real issues. Dabney said in a tweet:

"I feel like it should never have come to a point where they had to apologize for it. ...

After the apology, some things were kind of cleared up, but not a lot of it, because a lot of times

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<sup>31</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/pop-culture-news/months-after-tiktok-apologized-black-creators-many-say-little-has-n1256726>

we would post and our videos would be taken down for things we didn't even know [why, but] white creators doing the exact same thing, their videos were still up.”<sup>32</sup>

Again, TikTok is a recreation of the formerly popular Vine app that also played its part in cultural appropriation. Not only that, the degradation of the Black community seemed to be the driving force behind the most famous Black content creators' work. Unlike TikTok, the most followed users on Vine were Black. Of the top ten most followed leading up to the app's deletion, two were Black and four were nonwhite. It is important to note that nearly all of their content was based on stereotypes of their race and consisted of pranks, unconventional situations, and public embarrassment. Andrew Bachelor, more commonly known as King Bach, was the most followed Viner with 16 million followers. Jerry Purpdrank was the ninth most followed Viner with 9 million followers. When searched online, nothing can be found about Jerry other than his association with Vine, not even his real name. “Purpdrank” is short for purple drink, a drink that is stereotyped to be loved by Black people. Jerry's most famous video trope involved him at a grocery store eyeing a watermelon then shouting that it was the “most beautiful thing he had ever seen, watermelon!” He pronounced watermelon with an accented o for comedic effect. His other videos depicted stereotypes surrounding watermelons, like sitting in his bathroom with a set up as if he was about to inject himself with heroin but with watermelon instead. Another video showed him feeling physical pain whenever people would cut watermelons or dispose of them without eating. Not all of his videos included watermelons; some were done in collaboration with white Viners. One video showed a group of white friends talking when one slips the N-word into the conversation. Three Black men including Jerry

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<sup>32</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/pop-culture-news/months-after-tiktok-apologized-black-creators-many-say-little-has-n1256726>

emerged from the background to chastise him when the white guy says “It’s all good. I got my N\*\*\*\* pass!” Another video begins with Jerry being forced to the ground by a pretend police officer who yells at him to put his feet on the ground to which Jerry responds “But officer, they’re brand new J’s [Jordan’s].” The officer stomps on his feet to force them onto the ground while Jerry cries over his new shoes. Almost all of Jerry’s videos involve some type of trope surrounding stereotypes against minorities, even when you think that it won’t. In a seemingly normal video about burning his arm on his seatbelt during a hot summer day, Jerry runs into a pool to cool off. While he’s floating in the pool in the last second, he says, “Wait, I can’t swim” and drowns.<sup>33</sup>

King Bach’s vines played less into the stereotypes of Black people being obsessed with foods, shoes, and depictions of police brutality and more into him just being unintelligent. Oftentimes, he was the lone Black person in his vines and provided some type of comedic relief that all of the nonBlacks loved. In a confusing repeated skit, Bach would be somewhere like work or a party and someone would bump into him, making him spill spaghetti out of his pocket. He also incorporated a lot of dancing into his videos, randomly doing backflips off of walls in public places. Whenever he had a love interest in the skit, she was more than likely white. If she was not white, it would be noted that she was “foreign” in the caption. There were no Black women in any of their videos and barely other Black people besides their personal friends.<sup>34</sup>

For a while, these were the two Black faces of the up and coming social media content creation platforms. In an anecdotal moment, Twitter users reminisce on how they felt upon the realization that the most notable social media figures at the time had to rely on anti-hegemonic

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I53ekxF2W6E>

<sup>34</sup> Vine Racial Comedy as Anti-Hegemonic Humor: Linguistic Performance and Generic Innovation by Kendra Calhoun, *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, Vol. 29, Issue 1, pp. 27–49, ISSN 1055-1360, EISSN 1548-1395. © 2019 American Anthropological Association.



racial humor to gain popularity while simultaneously normalizing Black degradation as entertainment.

@PanAfricanJedi said “Jerry Purpdrank, King Bach, Destorm Power, and Page Kennedy walk into a bar...who setting the Black community back the furthest?”<sup>35</sup> @ratamiibo said “ I remember seeing ppl like Jerry Purpdrank & thinking "wow, a Haitian content creator who is getting SUPER popular!" & wanting him to be successful. But as soon as he popped off, the anti-Black jokes became his WHOLE bag. Like everybody in LA was on the same wave.”<sup>36</sup>

Racial humor is not a new concept; it has been around just as long as television and entertainment itself. One of the earliest black film and television stars was Lincoln Perry who played Stepin Fetchit, an illiterate, mumbling, bumbling fool who played into every negative trait that white America saw in Black people. He was featured in movies and shows like *Judge Priest*, *The Sun Shines Bright*, *Hearts in Dixie*, and several others. Perry was the biggest Black star that Hollywood had produced at the time in the 1930s and 1940s, but was not popular amongst the Black community. Several activists pushed for his character to be taken out of films as it was not progressive in integrating Black actors onto the big screen as more than stereotypical characters that lacked intelligence. Perry’s character was a stepping stone for others to get into the door, but the content was doing more harm than good. The likes of Bach and Purpdrank were doing nothing but harm. Their characters were not used to open doors for Black creators, but instead focused the spotlight on a handful of these coonlike characters.

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<sup>35</sup> <https://twitter.com/panafricanjedi/status/1374430564824928258?lang=en>

<sup>36</sup> <https://twitter.com/ratamiibo/status/1374403352000307209>

### **Chapter 3: Performative Activism**

Outside of entertainment, the Internet and social media has opened up a new can of worms for the Black community called performative social activism.

Social movements of the past have relied heavily on a singular identity: whether that be race, gender, or sexuality. The Civil Rights Movement could not have been accomplished without the communal banding of African Americans and nonblack people of color. The Women's Suffrage movement was led by white women who piggybacked off of the abolitionist movement to end slavery and the Second Great Awakening. The American Revolution was led by white men in search of freedom for 'all' mankind, who they defined at the time as other white Protestant men. In the 300 years of protesting and revolutionary acts that have taken place in America, arguably it wasn't until 2016 that ally solidarity was viewed as an essential part of activism.

After the election of Donald Trump, people of all backgrounds began to feel a sort of violence they had never felt before. Coming down from eight years of President Barack Obama, the first Black president in 2016, peace, progression, and political correctness was all that had been voiced from the White House and all that a whole generation of children had known to expect from a president. The day after Trump's inauguration, the 2017 Women's March took place in Washington, D.C. breaking the record for the largest single day protest in US history with an estimated 3.3 to 4.6 million people participating. Its purpose was to send out a cry for the "protection of our rights, our safety, our health, and our families – recognizing that our vibrant and diverse communities are the strength of our country." The march had no casualties and no reports of police brutality or excessive force, citing that their aim was to adhere to the nonviolent

ideology of the civil rights movement. It seemed to be a progressive day and a milestone in women's rights and activism.<sup>37</sup>

Just four short years before, many of the same white women's rights activists were criticized for not including black women in their movement. During her self-titled era, Beyonce Knowles took a whack at feminism and her place in it. Bringing the talents of Nigerian feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie onto one of her most popular singles, "Flawless\*\*\*," was just the tip of the iceberg. As artists do, she explored her womanhood and independence through her music. Many white feminists called the act performative due to her last era being 'anti-feminist' as she celebrated her new roles as a wife to Sean Carter, or Jay-Z, in The Mrs. Carter Show World Tour. Barbara Read dissects Beyonce's very being as a hypersexualized public figure who promotes unrealistic body standards and devalues feminism by claiming to be a part of the movement. The same unsavory comments on the body have been said for Nicki Minaj and even Michelle Obama.<sup>38</sup>

In a gripping article posted in 2013, political writer Michelle Cottle slams Michelle Obama for embodying housework and domesticism during her time as first lady, calling her a feminist nightmare. Disgusted by her work in "gardening, tending wounded soldiers, [and]

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<sup>37</sup>"The March: Jan 21 2017". Women's March.

<sup>38</sup> In "The State Hip Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay," Aisha Durham discusses how Nicki Minaj disrupted gender roles and the way that feminism is supposed to look by being confident and embracing her body. In the essay, Durham gives examples of how Minaj is stereotyped as the angry, savage Black woman, especially during the MTV VMA's, by white feminists and the entertainment world throughout her career.

Michelle Obama opened up to Oprah Winfrey on her "2020 Vision Tour" about body shaming that she suffered during her time campaigning and her time as First Lady, recalling times that conservative men made comments about her butt, her arms, and her health overall.

McGraw, Meredith; Kelsey, Adam (January 20, 2017). "Everything You Need to Know About the Women's March".

reading to children,” Cottle goes on to say that Obama had reduced the role of first lady to “English lady of the manor”. In so many words, Cottle was calling the First Lady of the United States a Mammy. Cottle received major criticism for her posts from correspondents of other news outlets, but never publicly apologized for her statements. Still an active member of the political journalism community, Cottle has not written an article about Melania Trump’s time as first lady despite several nude photos of her surfacing prior to Trump’s inauguration.<sup>39</sup>

These types of comments are not new to Black women, no matter the profession. In almost every movement, Black women have been excluded from gaining the necessary traction for their individual needs and wants. Intersectionality was the solution that Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw devised in order to explain how no movement was equal for all until this praxis was implemented. Intersectionality is defined as the analytical framework for understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. Oftentimes, society confuses intersectionality with solidarity. Allyship and intersectionality are two different concepts. A white woman can be an ally to a Black feminist movement, but they will never fall under the social identity of being a Black woman to know firsthand the experiences and tribulations that Black women go through. A wealthy Black woman will not have to go through the same problems that a poor Black woman will have to go through. Identities are composed of several socioeconomic factors that

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<sup>39</sup> “Leaning Out: How Michelle Obama Became a Feminist Nightmare” by Michelle Cottle, November 21, 2013. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2013/11/leaning-out-michelle-obama-100244/>

make each experience unique, which is why subjecting the Black community's voice to only celebrities who live lavish lifestyles and highly educated scholars silences the 99 percent.<sup>40</sup>

The theory exploring the lack of intersectionality in American politics is a strategy designed to keep marginalized communities silenced and hinder them from progress has been discussed by Dr. Na'im Akbar in his book *Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery*. The deconstruction and disrespect of African-American leadership is one of the most destructive influences that grew out of slavery. The white community will detach the emerging leaders who have real potential to change the Black community from the activist environment and fixate their idea of who should be seen as the leader, often a person with no political or leadership background. They will then start to degrade the assigned leader and make their wrongdoings the responsibility of the entire community.

Black Lives Matter is an ongoing social and political movement protesting against police brutality and racially motivated violence against Black people. The movement began in 2013 following the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman. Street demonstrations and protests followed nationwide and popularized the movement in 2013. A year later, the death of Michael Brown resulted in another wave of civil unrest and protests in Ferguson, Missouri followed by the rest of the country. In 2020, the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd sparked the most recent series of protests and calls for change. From 2013 to 2018, the Black Lives Matter movement was met with an overwhelming amount of opposition

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<sup>40</sup> Crenshaw, Kimberle, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," University of Chicago Legal Forum: Vol. 1989: Iss. 1, Article 8. <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>

from mostly white people and law enforcement. It wasn't until 2019 that a Pew Research poll showed that 67% of Americans expressed support for the Black Lives Matter Movement in some way.<sup>41</sup>

In today's environment, the practice of a person using activism to increase one's social capital rather than because of one's devotion to a cause is called performative activism. White scholars have used this to describe many Black celebrities' actions, especially recently with the Black Lives Matter movement.<sup>42</sup>

While some of these actions can be reduced to being purely performative, it detracts from the groundwork being done by regular, everyday working class Black people. The disparaging term is more heavily used for Black celebrities when it could be used to reflect on the demeaning ways white people everywhere reduce Black struggle to social media posts. Following the death of George Floyd, a surge of protests flowed through the nation. There were protests in every state calling for a stop to police brutality, defunding of the police, and the abolition of private prisons. Black people were being shot at, tased, maced, and fought in the streets of their own homes. Tensions were high and allyship was needed more than ever. People started defining their relationship with nonblack people based on people being willing to be vocal on the subject. In response, a nationwide "Blackout Day" was called where people posted black squares on social media, mainly Instagram, under the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag to show their solidarity -- and to

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<sup>41</sup> Parker, Kim; Horowitz, Juliana Menasce; Anderson, Monica (June 12, 2020). "Majorities Across Racial, Ethnic Groups Express Support for the Black Lives Matter Movement". Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project. Retrieved July 16, 2020

<sup>42</sup> Spring-Serenity Duvall & Nicole Heckemeyer (2018) #BlackLivesMatter: black celebrity hashtag activism and the discursive formation of a social movement, *Celebrity Studies*, 9:3, 391-408, DOI: 10.1080/19392397.2018.1440247

get their Black friends off of their backs. This black square did not stimulate the Black community financially, socially, or politically in any way shape or form. In fact, it began to block out important resources and information that many protestors were using to communicate and stay safe. This was peak performative activism and it was embraced by the entire nation, clearing the white guilty conscious.

Performative activism goes beyond social media posts from white people. Some people take it a step farther and attempt to support black-owned businesses, but still allow their privilege to show. For example, a black-owned bookstore called Black Garnet in Minnesota gained major attention after the murder of George Floyd. Because of its close proximity to Floyd and the case, many people wanted to order books and other items to put money back into a community that was hurting. Store owner Dionne Sims had not been in business for more than three months when she began to receive an influx of orders that overwhelmed her over the holidays. She began to receive angry messages asking why she was taking so long to send their books and that Amazon would have gotten them the book much faster. Among the emails were racist and threatening messages. This is an example of reactionary activism. People felt angry and shocked in the heat of the moment, in this case after watching the gruesome death of George Floyd in broad daylight, and wanted to be able to contribute in a way that gave them instant gratification and cleared their guilt. This is another symptom of white supremacy. Growing up, white people have not had to feel uncomfortable due to racism and discrimination. It was something they could easily ignore or not have to acknowledge. With the recent surge of activism and the wide reach of the Black Lives Matter movement because of social media, it is impossible for anyone,

no matter what race, to ignore the injustice that Black people go through. It requires them to have an opinion and to process the reality that Black people live.<sup>43</sup>

White people realized this as the movement intensified. Some white people who were against the Black Lives Matter movement began to vocalize their dissent. Black users on Twitter would single out as many of these posts as possible and signal boost for other users to call these people's places of work and inform them of their racist attitudes. Quickly, people began to actually be held accountable for their prejudices. Other white people grew fearful that they would be singled out for not doing enough, triggering reactionary and performative activism. Because of this, a lot of white 'allies' are not genuine in their efforts.<sup>44</sup>

In her journal article "Unpacking the False Allyship of White Racial Justice Leaders," Anastasia Reesa Tomkin explores the many issues involved with white allyship. Tomkin explains that there are three P's that white allies are driven by: power, profit, and prestige. These P's are the ways in which white allies justify their appropriation of Black organizing spaces and find comfort in not being one of the 'bad guys.' Power is the basis of white supremacy. Extending white privilege to get in a place of power in order to lead a movement in which a white person does not experience personally is not beneficial for the cause that they are supposed to be fighting for. Tomkin invites these leaders to step down to show that they are really in it for the cause and for the good of the Black community. Even if they are not in a titled position of power, this can be expressed by talking over Black people in any sense and not working to

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<sup>43</sup> THE SEESAW EFFECT OF PERFORMATIVE ACTIVISM by Gretchen Brown.  
<https://www.tptoriginals.org/seesaw-effect-performative-activism/>

<sup>44</sup><sub>8</sub> <https://www.thewrap.com/black-lives-matter-comments-11-people-fired-suspended/>



amplify their voices. A local example of this is the resignation of the former NAACP executive at the University of Mississippi's chapter, Allen Coon. Coon was a former University of Mississippi white male student and Mississippi native who worked as a member and executive of the NAACP to remove the Confederate flag from campus. Many Black students, primarily women, were behind this movement, but Coon was the face. The *New York Times* wrote an article about him and he went on to receive the prestigious Truman award.<sup>45</sup><sup>1011</sup>

Profit is the driving force behind the pillars that uphold white supremacy. This profit can be currency, recognition, engagements, amongst other things. Famous white Tik Tokers have some type of “Black Lives Matter” associated element in their profiles. Charli D’Amelio has not changed her profile picture from a black circle with simple “Black Lives Matter” text in a white font in months. Others have “#BLM” with the different shaded fists in their bios, signifying that they support the movement, and therefore cannot be racist.<sup>12</sup> Some of these users participated in blackouts as requested by Black Tik Tokers to stand in solidarity with the lack of recognition they received and the racist algorithm, as mentioned in the previous chapter. The irony in this is that these are the same people stealing and appropriating their content and profiting off of it. These quick fixes soothe the white ego and buy into the white savior complex that so many of them embody. Perhaps an appropriate response would be for white TikTok creators to stop using Black creators’ content to further propel their careers.

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<sup>45</sup> <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/unpacking-the-false-allyship-of-white-racial-justice-leaders/>

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<https://www.wdam.com/story/37671299/petal-natives-named-finalists-for-prestigious-truman-scholarship/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/13/us/ole-miss-liberal-agitators-education-university-mississippi.html>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/19/us/tiktok-black-lives-matter-trnd/index.html>

Prestige is the last P. This somewhat ties into the profiting aspect in that the prestige is the distinction they will receive for being such an inspiring and different white person. They seek to gain recognition from prominent individuals as a stamp of approval to be ‘accepted’ into the Black community, as well as nationwide recognition. Endorsements by the liberal Democrat party in 2020 were one of the quickest markers in ensuring that they could be seen as an approved white ally.

The three P’s don’t just apply to the white performative activism of today, it can be traced back to abolition. White abolitionists of the North were mostly white women who were in search of extra support for the women’s rights movements. Coupling abolition and women’s rights was an instance of performative activism. Black women were used as symbols to paint the Black man as violent and needing to be rescued from. Woman suffragist Cady Stanton said in dissent to the 15th Amendment that “as an abolitionist we protested against the enfranchisement of the black man alone, seeing that the bondage of the women of that race, by the laws of the south, would be more helpless than before... What to her the loosing of the white man’s chains, if the ignorant laborer by her side, who has learned no law but violence... is henceforth to become her master?”<sup>46</sup> In their newspaper, *Revolution* Stanton and Susan B. Anthony picked through which stories told by African American women they would share in order to better support their movement.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. "Sharp Points." *Revolution*. 9 Apr. 1868, pp. 212-213.

<sup>47</sup> MacDanel, Jan. "White Suffragist Dis/Entitlement: The Revolution and the Rhetoric of Racism." *Legacy*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 244.

Many white people have begun to identify as “liberal,” a step up from Democrat.

Liberalism has almost become a derogatory term because of the lack of awareness that people who use this label possess. Since the Civil Rights movement, White Liberalism has become the adjunct, whitewashed version of Black Power. Dr. Martin Luther King addressed the problem with white liberalism and how it missed the mark on the real purpose of the movement when he said “Negroes want the social scientist to address the white community and ‘tell it like it is.’ White America has an appalling lack of knowledge concerning the reality of Negro life. One reason some advances were made in the South during the past decade was the discovery by Northern whites of the brutal facts of Southern segregated life. It was the Negro who educated the nation by dramatizing the evils through nonviolent protest. The social scientist played little or no role in disclosing truth. The Negro action movement with raw courage did it virtually alone... These partial advances were, however, limited principally to the South and progress did not automatically spread throughout the nation. There was also little depth to the changes.”<sup>48</sup>

White liberalism does little to address the underlying issues and acknowledge the way that white supremacy molds the country, but serves as a pacifier for the guilty white conscious while allowing them to still sit in on Black conversations.

Performative activism comes in many different forms, but can easily be exposed when digging under the surface of the facade that allyship puts on. Black people are becoming more wary of these stunts and are beginning to identify this as another form of cultural appropriation.

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<sup>48</sup> Martin Luther King to the American Psychology Association in 1967.

Activism is a big part in Black culture; just like everything else in Black culture. white people want a piece of it.

## **Conclusion**

Over centuries, African-Americans have been pioneers in the different forms of entertainment that we consume today while receiving a fraction of the credit. This is a result of a combination of racism, capitalism, and theft that is called cultural appropriation. From music to television to politics to social movements, cultural appropriation can be identified in any form of media that we see.

This thesis comes to the conclusion that as long as Black artists are actively overshadowed and overlooked for white people who recreate and popularize their identities and original ideas, cultural appropriation will prevail. Rejection of eurocentric beauty standards and ideals as a whole will diminish the demand for cultural appropriation and rightfully position the original artists in control of their art. This thesis also comes to the conclusion that cultural appropriation is more than just theft. It is degenerative and harmful to the African American community. It robs them of their originality and manipulates future generations into believing that the art they identify with belongs to white people, or is somehow made better because a white person took control of the idea. Not only does it harm future generations, but it also takes away the essence and expression of art as it should be presented. Financially, it significantly disadvantages Black artists from seeing the capital their art is worth and puts more money back into white supremacist institutions. Black artists should have years of generational wealth because of the influence and impact they have had on the entertainment industry, yet there are rarely Black artists who are properly compensated.

While the Black community is not the only marginalized community to suffer from cultural appropriation, it is important to note that as it pertains to music and entertainment Black people have contributed the most and gained the least. My objective opinion is that Black artists should be more protective of their art and their accomplishments, but to deprive an artist of an expression by silencing them is just as cruel as denying them of creativity, profit, and recognition. White supremacy and capitalism are to blame for the continuous thievery and reselling of content, but the Black community will continue to make strides in breaking the vicious cycle and reclaiming their art once and for all.