Corks and Works

- Post Reprint: “Blackface is white supremacy as fashion — and it’s always been in season”
- Post Reprint: ‘The Birth of a Nation’: The most racist movie ever made
- Teachers Notes: In the Classroom: Blackface, Minstrel Shows and Stereotypes
- Post Reprint: “Northam struggles to escape Va.’s troubled past — and his own.”
- Student Activity: Legacy: Indenture, Separation, Trains
As events were finalized to commemorate the 400th year since the first enslaved people from Africa were brought to and sold in Virginia in August 1619, news sources reported that a photograph of a man in blackface and another in a Ku Klux Klan robe appeared on Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam’s page in the Eastern Virginia Medical School yearbook.

Uncertainty of whether Northam was pictured was paired with his acknowledgement that he had used blackface in a talent show. Response ranged from calls for his resignation, pleas not to judge others by their past but their present actions, and Northam’s pledge to stay in office and focus on racial equality. The use of blackface by other political figures, its presence in yearbook photographs and design adaptations by fashion houses emerged.

This resource guide provides articles to stimulate dialogue about blackface use and vestiges of racial supremacy and expression in art and culture. As more research and attention was paid to the attitudes underlying blackface use, it becomes clearer that it is very much part of the American past and current culture.
Blackface is white supremacy as fashion — and it’s always been in season

BY ROBIN GIVHAN

Blackface is in the news. But then, blackface always seems to be in the news.

As long as there are costume party revelers, thickheaded college students, button-pushing artists, free-associating designers and plain old unrepentant racists, there will be blackface. The blackface currently in question is, most notably, that of Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam (D) and the state’s attorney general, Mark R. Herring (D). They have admitted to dressing up like African American performers they admired — the former as Michael Jackson and the latter as Kurtis Blow — and darkening their face for effect. They didn’t do this as elementary schoolchildren with a tenuous grasp on American history but as young adults at least moderately informed of it.

In the bright light of political reprisal, both men now say that what they did was reprehensible. Perhaps they genuinely understand that to be so. Or perhaps they are just feeling engulfed by the flames of political correctness and an apology is the only way to ostensibly parachute out.

Blackface is, in essence, a kind of fashion — one rooted in the dark, arrogant insecurity of white supremacy, one inspired by this country’s original sin — that keeps evolving year after year until each iteration is just a little bit different from the previous one. But they are all of a piece. Blackface isn’t a fad or a one-off. It’s a classic that’s embedded in the cultural vocabulary. Reimagined, modernized, stylized. Whether some sleek photograph in a fashion magazine or a grainy one in an Eastern Virginia Medical School yearbook, it’s all the same. Blackface gets to the discomforting core of how black people are seen by the broader culture and how some white people see themselves.

So often, the people who are reprimanded for wearing blackface are emotionally disconnected from its history. After all, if it’s not your past, then it’s not personally painful or hurtful, it’s all just weird-looking tchotchkes, intellectual fodder, creative inspiration. And for a lot of nonblack Americans, African American history is separate from theirs. It isn’t shared history.

Apologies tend to focus on offering a balm to the “black community.” But shouldn’t apologies be made to
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the American community writ large? After all, anti-Semitism, homophobia and misogyny shouldn’t just offend the Jewish or the gay community, or only women. They should horrify us all because those dark forces chip away at our collective humanity.

Blackface lives because so often the people who indulge in it simply don’t see themselves as racist — particularly those in the arts community or who came of age in a post-civil rights society. They enjoy black popular culture. They know the lyrics to countless rap songs and they think Beyoncé is cool and “Black Panther” was great and that the Kehinde Wiley portrait of Obama is magnificent.

The fashion industry is not racist because Prada dressed Lupita Nyong’o on the red carpet and Gucci loaned Donald Glover clothes. But after Prada’s Golliwog-like charm and Gucci’s black balaclava sweater, with the lips outlined in bright red, had to be recalled after social media outrage, both brands could benefit from a more nuanced understanding of the cultures in which they do business.

Culturally sensitive parents find the n-word offensive and teach their children not to see color. Color doesn’t matter, which is a bit like saying that who a person is doesn’t matter and how humans have interacted in this country for centuries is irrelevant. Somewhere between not seeing color and color being the only thing one can see, there’s a glimpse of a person.

People are not racist, they think, because they have that one really good black friend or terrific colleague. But they rarely consider what it means to be the “only one” in the room, at the party, at the table, in the neighborhood. Perhaps they have been invited to a black church on Sunday morning and have marveled at how they were the only white person in the sanctuary and joked about standing out and having the rare experience of feeling “so white,” which in the world of 2019 can sound like a humblebrag. But have they ever considered what it means to feel “so black” virtually all the time?

Racism is not measured by how you treat the person-of-color you know, but by how you treat the ones you don’t. It’s not measured by your affection for the singular black person, but your respect for black people in general.

People are rarely racist in the D.W. Griffith, Bull Connor, sweat-drenched “Mississippi Burning” sense. Good God, of course not. But that’s the image stuck in our head. And so, smearing brown makeup on your face for a Halloween get-up couldn’t be racist because if it was, they — the non-racist — wouldn’t do it, nor would their non-racist friends.

Blackface — or, more gently, black makeup — is just a costume. It’s just fashion. Maybe. But why choose that one? People are wearing it for the same historical reason they always have: It amuses them. It’s an opportunity to dabble in otherness and then wipe off the black and go back to being “so white” with all the benefits that entails.

For a long time, the fashion industry treated race like a paint chip. Sometimes, dark skin was right for the season’s color palette or mood, sometimes not. Blackness — or brownness — was an extra element on the runway. White was the unspoken neutral; it was the presumed default. White was the starting point.
Blackface refuses to let darker skin be its own, unalterable baseline. It negates the idea that blackness is a part of a person’s humanity, that it’s a non-transferable essence of who they are. It reduces identity to a pot of grease paint, to a joke.

For some people, the idea of dressing up in blackface is just another form of drag. It’s a performance delivered with a knowing wink and a nudge. Folks chuckled at the sight of Tyler Perry dressed up as Madea; they applauded countless glittery drag queens strutting around in an exaggerated display of traditional femininity. Generations of students indulged in the drag traditions of Harvard’s Hasty Pudding theatricals and Princeton’s Triangle Club kick line. Drag has been a way of exploring the definition and confines of gender. It has meaning within the gay community that is empowering, liberating and joyful. But sometimes drag is just a guy caricaturing the worst stereotypes about women for laughs.

Blackface, though, is more than drag. It’s a lot more than a thoughtless costume selection or fashion gone wrong. It’s painful, shared history, of course. But it’s also the horrible present. And it’s likely part of a crummy future. Blackface is denial and ignorance. It’s narcissism, willfulness and disdain.

This country sorts its citizens by race. We have decided that race is important. Blackface is not a statement about which race matters more; it’s a reminder of who set up the whole ugly system.

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‘The Birth of a Nation’: The most racist movie

by Ed Rampell

Originally Published March 3, 2015

A century ago, on March 3, 1915, the most reprehensibly racist film in Hollywood history opened in New York. *The Birth of a Nation* had premiered in Los Angeles on Feb. 8, and on Feb. 18 it became the first feature film to be screened at the White House. But the première at New York’s Liberty Theater was much more of a scene, as a massive publicity effort orchestrated by director D.W. Griffith converged with a massive protest led by the NAACP.

The approximately three-hour-long drama follows two white families — one Northern, one Southern — through the antebellum period, the Civil War and Reconstruction. Griffith, the son of a Kentucky colonel in the Confederate cavalry, perpetuated the demeaning caricatures of blacks typical of minstrel shows and “coon” songs. White actors wearing blackface play buffoons.

But Griffith amped up the racism. As Leon Litwack wrote in *Past Imperfect, History According to the Movies*, the film depicts African American men as “subhuman,” possessing “vicious bestiality” and “primitive sexuality.” Walter Long (another white actor playing a black man) portrays the former plantation hand Gus, who lusts after the virginal Flora Cameron (Mae Marsh), causing her to leap to her death to avoid being raped. The Klan rides to the rescue of Southern whites in general and, in particular, silent screen superstar Lillian Gish’s character, another blonde beauty who is menaced by the “mulatto” Lt. Gov. Silas Lynch (played by George Sigmann).

The film also notably hyped the threat of black power. Beyond the lieutenant governor, African Americans are depicted as state legislators, judges, juries, voters and — most dramatically — armed soldiers enforcing equality. Black South Carolina lawmakers appear shoeless, drinking whiskey and eating chicken in the state legislature when they pass a law allowing blacks and whites to intermarry. During his Oscar acceptance speech for Selma’s...
song “Glory,” John Legend warned last month “that the voting rights act that [Civil Rights activists] fought for 50 years is being compromised,” but in The Birth of a Nation it is blacks who are shown disenfranchising white would-be voters. Uppity free slaves push white southerners off sidewalks.

The Birth of a Nation was hardly the last racist accomplishment to come out of Hollywood. But it far surpasses in viciousness the cartoonish servile servant roles epitomized by Stepin Fetchit in movies such as John Ford’s 1934 Judge Priest. And while there are allusions to the Klan in 1939’s Gone with the Wind, those are mild compared to the graphic and laudatory portrayal in Griffith’s film.

Rather, The Birth of a Nation takes its place alongside the Nazis’ Triumph of the Will and Jew Suss as among the most despicable propaganda pictures of all time. Its racist imagery has reverberated for a century. Griffith’s agitprop epic is believed to have been a Ku Klux Klan recruiting tool. And his stereotype of black men as brutal savages may be in the unconscious or conscious minds of those police officers and vigilantes who use excessive force against blacks now, in Ferguson, Mo., Staten Island, N.Y., Sanford, Fla. and beyond.

It took Hollywood 97 years to rehabilitate Griffith’s misrepresentation of the great radical Republican abolitionist Thaddeus Stevens, who served as the model for the villainous character Austin Stoneman (played by Ralph Lewis). Tommy Lee Jones was Oscar-nominated for his portrayal of the courageous congressman who fought for the emancipation and enfranchisement of African Americans and cohabitated with a Black woman in 2012’s Lincoln.

Now it’s time for Tinseltown to more thoroughly reconstruct Griffith’s profoundly flawed, dishonest view of Reconstruction. Certainly, a screen saga about brave, noble Freedom Riders could be as dramatic and visually compelling as The Birth of a Nation’s night riders.

Ed Rampell is a film historian and critic and co-author of The Hawaii Movie and Television Book.
In the Classroom: Blackface, Minstrel Shows, Stereotypes

Photographic revelations of public officials using blackface, some activities in classrooms during Black History Month, and movies nominated for Oscars presented issues and questions not fully understood. Teachers searched for the best approach to teaching about slavery, blackface use, minstrel shows and Jim Crow, racism and racial relationships.

Questions to be answered include:
• What happens when the public’s trust in their elected officials is broken or put into question because they wore blackface years earlier?
• When do reenactments become insensitive activities?
• When and how should teachers seize the opportunity to teach about stereotypes?
• What is the best manner to introduce and discuss the use of blackface in minstrel shows?
• How to bring parents into the planning of activities and to prepare students for examples they will see and hear?

We have provided reprints of Washington Post features, news articles, and commentary for your classroom use. We have added discussion questions and suggested some activities. We also encourage teachers to become very familiar with their school systems’ policies and programs of study for guidelines. Perhaps, an in-service led by a cultural historian, civil rights expert or master teacher would be helpful. These are important topics that need to be taught — historic origins, social and political ramifications, and means to respectful relations.

Teachers may find these online resources helpful in your planning of accurate and meaningful lessons that are sensitive to today’s student population.

Morning Center for Teaching Social Responsibility
“What is Blackface” lesson
https://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/what-blackface

Teaching Tolerance | Southern Poverty Law Center
• Article: “Teach About Blackface and Other Racist Halloween Choices”
https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/teach-about-blackface-and-other-racist-halloween-choices
• Article: “Putting Governor Ralph Northam’s Blackface Controversy in Perspective”
• Podcasts: Teaching Hard History
https://www.tolerance.org/podcasts/teaching-hard-history/american-slavery
Blackface Minstrelsy — and Mark Twain’s Huck Finn
http://twain.lib.virginia.edu/huckfinn/minstrl.html

Cultural Appropriation
In addition to Robin Givhan’s “Blackface is white supremacy as fashion — and it’s always been in season” that is reprinted in this month’s guide, teachers may use the following articles to discuss different angles on clothing design choices.

- “The One Lesson Every Leader Should Learn From Prada’s Blackface Trinket Debacle”
  https://www.forbes.com/sites/soniathompson/2018/12/21/the-1-lesson-every-leader-should-learn-from-pradas-blackface-trinket-debacle/#52cc62e2c4d

- “Seriously, Prada, what were you thinking?: Why the fashion industry keeps bumbling into racist imagery”

- “Katy Perry made shoes that evoke blackface. She’s been accused of racially insensitive fashion before.”
  https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2019/02/12/katy-perry-made-shoes-that-evoke-blackface-shes-been-accused-racially-insensitive-fashion-before/?utm_term=.0e348fde13c8

- “Haute Couture Blackface’: Gucci apologizes and pulls ‘racist sweater’”
Northam struggles to escape Va.’s troubled past — and his own.

BY PETER JAMISON, MICHAEL LARIS AND FENIT NIRPIL

• Originally Published February 3, 2019

At pivotal moments, Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam (D) has built his political career on denunciations of his state’s racist past, attacking Confederate monuments and energetically courting African American voters.

But Northam — whose early successes, including a long-sought Medicaid expansion, have been a bright spot for Democrats — on Saturday found himself in a place no politician wants to be in 2019: explaining on national television how hard it was to remove shoe polish from his face after a dance routine. He said he darkened his face in the 1984 routine to imitate Michael Jackson and the moonwalk.

His extraordinary public appearance Saturday laid bare the tensions that have gripped the commonwealth and the country since Friday afternoon, when a photograph from the governor’s 1984 medical school yearbook page emerged showing people in blackface and Ku Klux Klan robes.

After initially apologizing for his presence in the image, Northam reversed course on Saturday, saying he was not one of the costumed figures. Those denials were in line with statements from several of Northam’s classmates, who said

Northam said Friday was the first time he’d seen the photo, which he called “shocking and horrific.”
they had never seen him in the kind of offensive garb pictured on his yearbook page.

But Northam’s defense was offset by several admissions he made during his first extended remarks since the photo became public. Among them: He had applied shoe polish to his face to impersonate Jackson while he was in the Army and did not fully realize until his 2017 campaign, during conversations with a black aide, that what he had done could have been seen as offensive.

“I had the shoes, I had a glove and I used just a little bit of shoe polish to put under my, or on my cheeks, and the reason I used a very little bit is because — I don’t know if anybody’s ever tried that, but you cannot get shoe polish off,” Northam told a crowd of reporters who listened in stunned silence at the governor’s mansion.

“I actually won the contest because I had learned how to do the moonwalk,” he added.

Such statements, coming from an elected official committed to advancing racial equity, were in a sense characteristic of a state that has long been defined by unresolved tensions: Between its economically booming north and agrarian south, a Republican legislature and a Democratic governor and, perhaps most importantly, between black and white.

Built upon centuries of slavery and segregation, Virginia was home to the capital of the Confederacy and to a demonstration by white supremacists in Charlottesville that led to a deadly riot in 2017.

It was also the first state to elect an African American governor — L. Douglas Wilder, who held the seat now occupied by Northam from 1990 to 1994. Justin Fairfax, the state’s black lieutenant governor, would replace Northam if he is forced to step down.

Such contradictions are embodied in the strange circumstances surrounding Northam’s racist yearbook page. Several of his classmates from medical school — some of them black — said they were astonished by the offensive photograph and could not bring themselves to see the amiable young physician they had known as a racist.

“The Ralph that I know wouldn’t do something like that. He never showed any of those kinds of attitudes, never, during the entire time we were there,” said Walter G. Broadnax Jr. “I’m just dumbfounded by it all.”

Broadnax, a retired neurologist who is African American and now lives in Chesapeake, Va., after years practicing in Cincinnati, described Eastern Virginia Medical School in 1984 as a tolerant campus where he never detected overt racial bias from other students.

That description was echoed by Tobin Naidorf, who also graduated in 1984 as a gastroenterologist in Alexandria. Naidorf, who is Jewish and originally from Northern Virginia, said his medical school lacked many of the outdated Southern attitudes he had never seen at the University of Virginia.

Naidorf said the offensive outfits on Northam’s yearbook page would have been unacceptable at medical students’ social gatherings. Far from being an outpost of bigotry, Naidorf said, the school was populated by idealistic young medical students eager to practice in low-income communities.

“If anything, EVMS was founded on humanistic principles to provide care to the underserved population in Tidewater,” Naidorf said. “I never saw anything like that at parties.”

Naidorf said that he did not know Northam well during their time at the school, but that his impression was of a “nice guy, soft-spoken.”

E. Franklin Roberts, an African American obstetrician in Virginia Beach, was a year ahead of Northam at EVMS. He said students of the same race sometimes stuck together, but not always. He said a sense of camaraderie in the face of the medical school’s demands brought students together, and they would frequently drink together on Friday nights.

Attention also has turned to Northam’s college years at Virginia Military Institute, in particular a yearbook that listed one of his nicknames as “Coonman.” Northam said Saturday that the name was bestowed upon him by upperclassmen and that he could not explain it.

Benjamin B. McClellan, Northam’s first-year college roommate, said he had never witnessed racist behavior by Northam or others at VMI.

“Obviously we were in Southern Virginia. I would imagine it was in the region, but I never heard or saw anything,” McClellan said. “I never saw that side of him at all and I don’t know if that picture was an anomaly. I don’t have any idea.”
An anomaly is exactly how Northam described the picture Saturday, saying he did not submit it to the yearbook staff and believed it had been placed on his page by mistake.

Pamela Kopelove, who is identified in the yearbook as its editor, did not respond to repeated calls for comment. Other yearbook staff members could not be reached. Both Naidorf and Broadnax said there were no mistakes on their yearbook pages and that the photos on their pages were ones only they could have submitted.

EVMS President Richard V. Homan said in a statement that the photograph on Northam’s page was “shockingly abhorrent and absolutely antithetical to the principles, morals and values we hold” and that he would be convening a meeting of school leaders to address the issue. “It has been said that those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it,” he added.

Some experts said that the spectacle of students in blackface was not as surprising in 1980s Virginia as some might like to believe.

“Virginia and the South in the 1980s had barely moved beyond Jim Crow,” said Julian Hayter, a historian who focuses on 20th-century American history at the University of Richmond. “Many people who were in college in the 1980s were raised by people who knew nothing but segregation and had intolerably archaic views even then.”


The transition from white supremacy to a more integrated and multicultural population in formerly all-white institutions created anxiety for people unprepared for change, Hayter said.

Before the rise of social media, people in primarily segregated institutions “felt safe — they did these things in ‘polite’ company that they didn’t expect to become public, to be held accountable for,” Hayter said. “They’re a product of their time and culture.”

Northam, who grew up outside a town of fewer than 2,000 people on Virginia’s rural Eastern Shore, alluded to the commonwealth’s unsavory past in his remarks on Saturday. “In the place and time when I grew up, many actions we rightfully recognize as abhorrent today were common place,” he said, without providing further details.

Northam also said that he had worked in recent years to better understand the perspective of African Americans. His 2017 campaign was marked by frequent visits to black churches. On Saturday, he spoke of a road trip during the gubernatorial race with his assistant Seth Opoku-Yeboah.

The governor said the topic of blackface performances — which originated with 19th-century “minstrel shows” in which white performers would portray African Americans in demeaning ways — came up, and he told Opoku-Yeboah about the Michael Jackson performance.

“I assume you probably would think that’s offensive,” Northam recalled saying.

“I would,” Opoku-Yeboah replied. Northam recounted his response: “I apologize for what I’ve done in the past and I can promise you I’ll never do that again in the future.”

On Saturday, Northam again found himself apologizing, with little effect. As the evening wore on, state Democratic lawmakers called on him to resign. The state’s two Democratic U.S. senators, Mark R. Warner and Tim Kaine — who had stopped short of calling for him to go after the photo emerged on Friday — issued a joint statement urging him to step down.

For those who had admired Northam and expected much out of his next three years in office, it was a harrowing spectacle. A politician who acknowledged his state’s troubled past, and his own, was trying to move forward. But he could not move fast enough.

Patricia Sullivan and Antonio Olivo in Washington and Jim Morrison in Norfolk contributed to this report.
Legacy: Indenture, Separation, Trains

Indentured Servitude or Slavery?

1. In their book *Myne Owne Ground: Race and Freedom on Virginia’s Eastern Shore* T.H. Breen and Stephen Innes tell the story of early Virginia settlers. In it we learn that the first 20 African people who arrived in 1619 were bound by a four- to seven-year indentured servant contract, just as poor whites. At the end of their servitude they were “freed and regarded as equal members of the colony. To learn more about Anthony (“Antonio, a Negro”) Johnson, Francis Payne and their community begin here:
   https://www.amazon.com/Myne-Owne-Ground-Virginias-1640-1676/dp/0195175379
   https://www.gavinpsmith.com/analysis-myne-owne-ground/

2. This relationship began to change in the 1640s when colonial courts issued racially disparate criminal sentences. Any indentured servant who ran away, broke a tool, or struck his or her master would be sentenced to additional years of service. Black indentured servants started receiving sentences of a life of indentured servitude for committing the same offenses as white indentured servants. To learn more watch “The Terrible Transformation,” the first episode of the PBS documentary Africans in America.
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aklSlHjFBbU

3. In 1662, the children of black indentured servants in Virginia were born as indentured servants. In other words, indentured servitude became hereditary for black indentured servants only. In the 1690s, colonial legislatures passed laws preventing masters from freeing black indentured servants unless the newly freed servants left the colony. By this point, indentured servitude for black people had become slavery.
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aklSlHjFBbU

Separate Communities

4. Throughout the Americas blacks created all-black communities. In Brazil, they are the quilombo or mocambo founded by fugitive slaves. The most well-known of these was Palmares which by 1690 had 20,000 inhabitants. In Cuba, they were called palenques. In Jamaica and other English-speaking colonies, they were called maroon communities. To learn more, begin reading Maroon Communities in the Americas and National Park Service material.
   http://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/article/?id=A0060
   https://www.nps.gov/subjects/ugrr/discover_history/maroon-slave-societies.htm

Passenger Railroads

5. The National Park Service provides examples of passenger train car rules. Read the three examples below. What do you understand about the relation between white and black passengers and society’s attitudes?

**Alabama** | The conductor of each passenger train is authorized and required to assign each passenger to the car or the division of the car, when it is divided by a partition, designated for the race to which such passenger belongs.

**Maryland** | All railroad companies and corporations, and all persons running or operating cars or coaches by steam on any railroad line or track in the State of Maryland, for the transportation of passengers, are hereby required to provide separate cars or coaches for the travel and transportation of the white and colored passengers.
Virginia | The conductors or managers on all such railroads shall have power, and are hereby required, to assign to each white or colored passenger his or her respective car, coach or compartment. If the passenger fails to disclose his race, the conductor and managers, acting in good faith, shall be the sole judges of his race.


The Bonus Army
6. In 1932 military veterans who had been promised a bonus for their service in WWI, converged on Washington, D.C., no longer willing to wait for payment. They came in freight trains, trucks and on foot. In the February 2003 Smithsonian magazine, “Marching on History,” Paul Dickson and Thomas B. Allen wrote about the encampments:

While newspaper reporters produced almost daily dispatches on camp life, they largely missed the biggest story of all: in this Southern city, where schools, buses and movies remained segregated, Bonus Army blacks and whites were living, working, eating and playing together. Jim Banks, the grandson of a slave, looks back on the camp as “the first massive integrated effort that I could remember.” Roy Wilkins, the civil rights activist who in 1932 wrote about the camps for The Crisis, the NAACP monthly, noted that “there was one absentee [in the Bonus Army]: James Crow.”

To learn more about the Bonus Army begin reading “The ‘Bonus Army’ in Washington”:
https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/895979.The_Bonus_Army