

# The New York Times

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**Opinion**

## **How Blackface Feeds White Supremacy**

*A racist caricature from 19th-century minstrel theater still haunts America.*

**By Brent Staples**

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*An image from "Blackface," the photographer David Levinthal's series depicting racist memorabilia. CreditCreditDavid Levinthal*

Nineteenth-century minstrel entertainers spawned a racist caricature that endures to this day when they darkened their faces to portray black people as grinning, dancing simpletons.

The white men who donned tattered clothing and blackened themselves with burned cork introduced working-class patrons who had never so much as met an African-American to the dimwitted stereotype whose bulging eyes, rubbery lips and mangled speech would become ubiquitous in newspapers, radio, television, movies and advertising.

This debased depiction of blackness underwrote a white supremacist impulse that metastasized into every aspect of American life. The image tightened its grip on the country at a time when the South was lynching Negroes with impunity, writing them out of state Constitutions and stocking its parks with monuments to slavery.

The most egregious versions of the stereotype were banished from the public square by the end of the 1960s. By then, of course, the dehumanized caricature with the scarlet, clownish mouth was imprinted in the popular imagination and firmly established as the fixation of choice for Ku Klux Klansmen.

The former Fox and NBC News host Megyn Kelly personified a broad national ignorance of this history last fall when she insisted that blackface Halloween costumes were all in good fun and derided dissenters as “the costume police.” And in the past several months, Gucci, Prada and the singer Katy Perry were forced to withdraw from the market some reviled fashion designs, revealing how the caricature manifests itself through people who are blind to what it connotes.



*Gucci apologized for the blackface clothing that was a feature of its Fall/Winter 2018-2019 collection. Credit Antonio Calanni/Associated Press*

The blackface photographs that in January led the newly installed Florida secretary of state, Michael Ertel, to resign — and a similar picture discovered on the medical school yearbook page of Gov. Ralph Northam of Virginia — represent a more troubling aspect of this history. They illustrate how young white men who were destined for careers that gave them profound influence on the lives of African-Americans continued to privately embrace racist caricature long after it became unacceptable to do so in the open.

## White Supremacy's Minstrel Face

The grinning stereotype that shuffled across the minstrel stage owes much to the itinerant actor and New Yorker Thomas Dartmouth Rice, the “father of American minstrelsy,” who put on black makeup around 1830 to sing and dance as a character known as Jim Crow. The name quickly became an insult to hurl at black people, and the expression was later appropriated to describe the Southern laws passed during the late 19th and early 20th centuries that were intended to erase the civil rights that black Southerners had gained after the Civil War.



*The character Jim Crow. Credit Library of Congress*

The minstrel show spread rapidly from the Northeast to the rest of the country and came to encompass a range of ready-made stereotypes that new performers could step into. The characters included the “coon,” a denigrating synonym for anyone black; the “zip coon,” the free black person depicted as a buffoon for affecting independence, literacy and fine dress; the rotund “mammy,” who was made to stand in for all black women as she patrolled the kitchen wearing flowing clothes and an apron; and the pickaninny, the bestial child whose pigtails stood straight up in the air and who was often maligned as a watermelon thief.



*Vaudeville performers dancing in a minstrel show. Credit John Springer Collection/Corbis, via Getty Images*

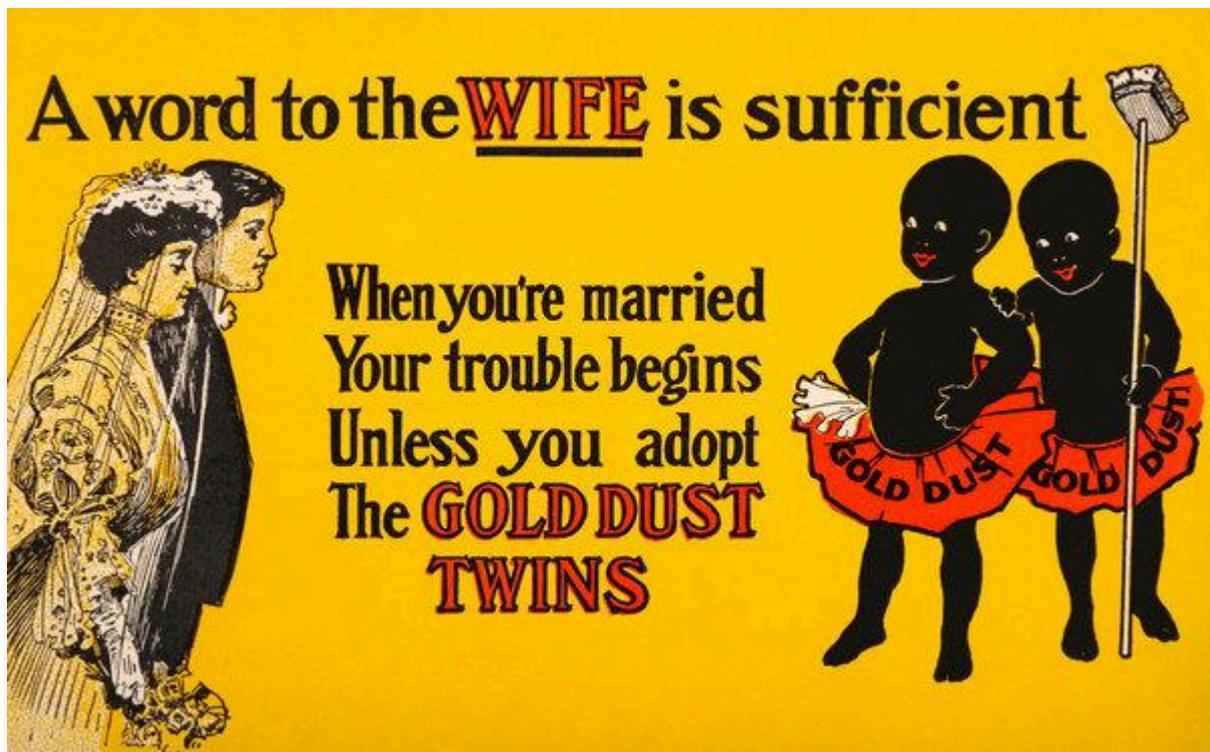
The tortured minstrel face embodied the assertion that blackness was grotesque in itself because it could never achieve the mythical ideal of whiteness. As the filmmaker and art historian Manthia Diawara observed so cogently two decades ago, the caricature silenced the black body by deforming it, leaving “room only for white supremacy to speak through it.”

The parody jumped from the minstrel stage to radio — where white actors portraying black characters drew tens of millions of listeners for the infamous “Amos ’n’ Andy” show — and became one of the founding personas of Hollywood. White actors in blackface were featured in D.W. Griffith’s rabidly racist silent film “The Birth of a Nation” — Hollywood’s first blockbuster, released in 1915. The movie valorized the Klan and depicted African-Americans as buffoons and incipient rapists. When the silent movies gave way to the talkies, household names like Judy Garland, Mickey Rooney and Shirley Temple took to the screen with darkened faces, transforming the racist caricature into family entertainment.



From left, Shirley Temple, Bing Crosby, Marjorie Reynolds and Mickey Rooney were among the film stars who appeared in blackface. Credit Photofest

Commercial advertisers denigrated blackness to sell everything from tobacco to molasses to breakfast cereal. The most widely known of the jet-black commercial icons were the Gold Dust Twins, who appeared naked — except for their trademark tutus — and represented a popular brand of washing powder whose motto was “Let the Twins Do Your Work.” The twins, Goldie and Dustie, embodied the country’s determination to confine the African-American likeness to white-owned kitchens, where Aunt Jemima, the pancake matron, and Rastus, the chef on the Cream of Wheat box, stood vigil. Marilyn Kern-Foxworth writes in her study of racist advertising that it was difficult in the mid-20th century to “prepare a meal without using food products featuring a stereotypical pickaninny, black mammy or black Sambo.”



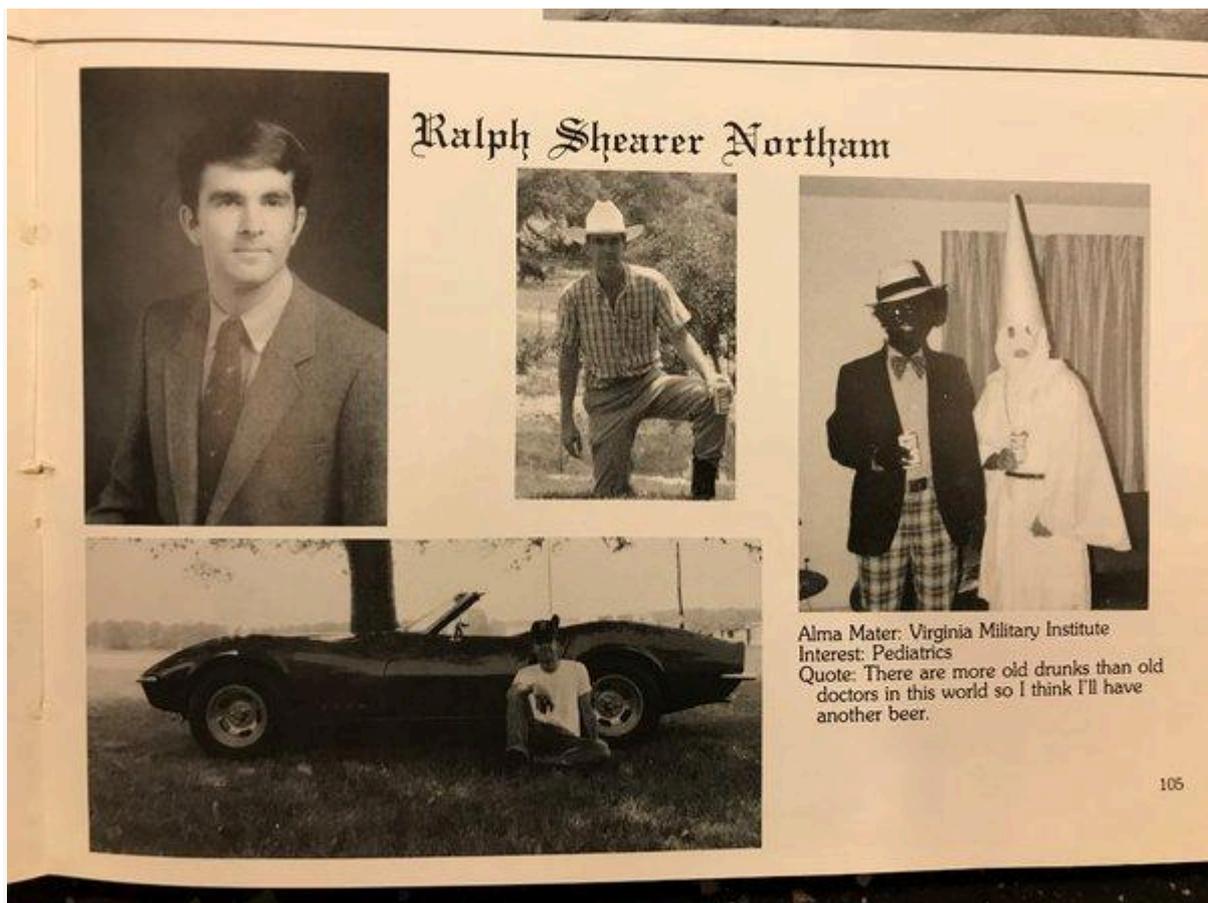
An ad for a popular brand of washing powder, circa 1920. Credit Popperfoto/Getty Images

## Blackface at the Frat House

The minstrel caricature went hand-in-hand with white supremacy at colleges. The historian Anthony James showed in his study of Southern fraternities two decades ago that blackface acts at fund-raisers, parades and other campus events were a “public performance by Greeks for the whole white community” until the onset of integration, after which these activities were mainly confined to fraternity and sorority houses.

USA Today deepened our understanding of this issue in February in a review of 900 yearbooks at 120 schools across the country. The analysis found that a number of schools had published racist yearbook images into the 1970s and 1980s — including “pictures of students dressed in Ku Klux Klan robes and blackface, nooses and mock lynchings.” Those poses could have been lifted straight out of “The Birth of a Nation.”

The 1984 medical school yearbook photograph that generated calls for Mr. Northam to resign his governorship — a white man in blackface standing next to a person in Klan garb — comes from the same strain of images. Nevertheless, the Northam incident stands apart for two important reasons.



*Gov. Ralph Northam's page in his 1984 Eastern Virginia Medical School yearbook.*

First, Mr. Northam was not a young undergraduate. He was embarking on a career as a physician with a responsibility to treat all patients equally. Second, he was educated in Virginia, the veritable cradle of eugenics and scientific racism. In the 20th century, the state harnessed both its formidable education system and the apparatus of

government to advance eugenics, the belief that “feeble-mindedness” and racial contamination from exposure to “mongrel” races posed a risk to white “racial purity.”

Virginia’s answer to this fictional problem was a system of forced sterilization that victimized people for half a century, continuing into the 1970s. (The state finally apologized for this shameful practice in 2002.)

As the historian Gregory Michael Dorr explains in his revelatory book “Segregation’s Science: Eugenics and Society in Virginia,” the elites used a rhetoric of “eugenically informed white supremacy to champion public policy curtailing the individual liberties of blacks, poor whites, women, mental patients, and the disabled, preserving social stability and elite power.”



*Demonstrators observed the one-year anniversary of a deadly clash in 2017 between white supremacists and counterprotesters at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Credit Win McNamee/Getty Images*

As a result, generations of Virginians embraced segregation as “the natural ordering of the world” and believed it was delineated by biological law. The fact that this racist ideology emanated from the University of Virginia — the most respected university in the former Confederacy — gave it credence elsewhere, lending support to racist medical policies that killed more African-Americans than all the lynch mobs that ever were. This is the historical backdrop against which these photographs deserve to be seen.

Instead of focusing on the blackface images alone, Americans should be asking themselves how the devaluation of blackness embodied in them affects the way white professionals like lawyers, teachers, police officers and — especially — doctors do their jobs.