

## Reasoned Rage over Blackface?

By Gary P. Posner

Both sides of my family are of Jewish lineage. I was fortunately spared any discernible discrimination, unlike my mother, who absorbed “dirty Jew” taunts throughout her school years. Jews constitute only about 2% of the U.S. population, vs. 18% for African-Americans, and though as a people we have never been enslaved in this country, we know what happened in 1940s’ Europe and what will happen should Iran ever decide to trigger its “Death to Israel” policy. But if a button-nosed actor or actress were tasked to play the role of a Jewish historical figure whose stereotypical nose was unmistakable, not only would I be fine with an appropriate “schnoz” as part of the makeup, I would likely otherwise find the portrayal laughably absurd.

Enter, stage right, Billy Crystal, and his numerous spot-on impersonations, on *Saturday Night Live* and elsewhere, of Sammy Davis, Jr., who used to quip about himself, “I’m a member of five minority groups. I’m a short, ugly, one-eyed, black Jew.” Crystal, the antithesis of a racist, is not particularly tall, and would adopt Davis’ voice, mannerisms, and facial characteristics to a T, along with makeup to “uglify” and deeply darken his complexion. This all took place repeatedly during the 1980s (not the ’50s), but he was not hounded out of show business for this unpardonable offense.

Aileen Wuornos was a “Monster” — the name of the 2003 biopic starring Charlize Theron, one of the most beautiful women on the planet. Often a serial killer will target prostitutes, but Wuornos was a prostitute who serially murdered her johns. In the months preparing for the part, Theron doffed her swanlike grace in favor of Wuornos’ swagger, and packed on 30 pounds by bingeing on donuts. Prior to each day’s shooting, makeup artists marred her face and defiled her teeth. Her physical transformation into “monster” Wuornos was uncanny, but not terribly dissimilar to millions of girls across the country not blessed with beauty. I am unaware of youths committing suicide in significant numbers as a result of cyberbullying for being black, but there has been much national attention devoted to such problems due to ugly- and fat-shaming. So it was only natural that Theron was rightly ostracized from society for such egregious insensitivity. No, wait. Sorry about that. I just looked it up, and it seems she was awarded that year’s best-actress Oscar!

But the times they are a-changin’ and early February of this year was particularly troublesome for

Virginia Governor Ralph Northam. Many who took no issue with his endorsement of extremely late-term and even postpartum abortions, and who accepted (at least pending further evidence) his shaky denials about the KKK and blackface yearbook photos, just had to draw the line at his admission to having at least once before, in the 1980s, adorned a bit of blackface. That this was part of a Michael Jackson impersonation for a dance competition — for which Northam had also learned the “moonwalk” — seems to matter not a whit. His efforts won him that contest, but many of his own Democratic Party allies are now demanding his exit from public office.

And just a few days after Northam’s admission, his state’s Attorney General, Mark Herring, apologetically acknowledged that, in 1980 as a 19-year-old, he had dressed as a rapper for a costume party. Had blackface not been part of the apparel, his impersonation might have seemed as authentic as lily-white Pat Boone’s cringeworthy cover of Little Richard’s “Tutti Frutti.” No matter. Throw the bastard to the wolves.

Nazi Germany’s depictions of Jews as hooked-nosed vermin, and segregated America’s grotesquely exaggerated black caricatures, were concocted in crucibles of cruelty and hatred, and weaponized in order to dehumanize. Reason reveals, however, the fundamental differences between those abominations and Crystal’s Davis, Northam’s Jackson, and Herring’s rapper. Ditto Theron’s “monster.” Double-ditto the hysteria over children’s Halloween costumes!

In my experience, even walking on eggshells isn’t a sufficient path toward avoiding “offending” some person, gender, race, or even an entire subspecies (in this sentence, chickens). Anyone can proclaim offense to almost anything in a world in which common sense becomes a criminal offense. As I write this, I am hearing — I kid you not — of a lesbian (Julia Beck) recently being booted off of a Baltimore LGBTQ mayoral commission for having committed an act of “violence.” The nature of her “violence”? She persisted in using the pronoun “he” during the group’s discussion about a convicted rapist who, by claiming to self-identify (without actually transitioning) as female, got himself incarcerated in a prison where, surprise surprise, he proceeded to rape two female inmates.

The year 1984 may have come and gone with nary a whiff of Orwell’s fictional thought police, but 30-something years later, Heather Mac Donald’s *The Diversity Delusion* reads far more frighteningly. Employing black-and-white thinking about blackface (and the rest) blinds one to the gray zones wherein reason resides.

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