

Digital Blackface and Historical Obliviousness in Human-Approximating Primate Non-Fungible Tokens

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Abstract

We observe the distinct medium of a non-fungible token (NFT) in which a digital representation is affixed to a transaction on a given blockchain and allows for verification, ownership, and transfer. Given this medium, we then observe the initial creation of an on-chain caricature set with a fixed quantity and algorithmically generated variations initiated by Larva Labs titled CryptoPunks. In CryptoPunks, we observe the use of what may be called human-abstract features such as varying skin color in a manner that allows for race inference without an overly direct association with any racial stereotypes.¹ In contrast, with the launch of the Bored Ape Yacht Club (BAYC) collection, we observe the translation of a common cryptocurrency terminology—to ape—into a human-approximating primate NFT collection.² We observe that by being oblivious to the historical representation of Africans as monkeys, apes, and other primates within a racist context, the BAYC collection creates a form of digital blackface.

1 Introduction

Simianization, the disparaging comparison or likening of a member of a racial or ethnic minority group to an ape or monkey, is undeniable.³ The publishing of *Types of mankind* in 1854 by Josiah Nott and George Gliddon as an extension of the research of Samuel Morton was fundamental in establishing the theory of Africans as a race with features akin to that of primates and therefore deserving of life-long enslavement and servitude. In the illustrations⁴ provided by the authors, the depiction of Africans overly emphasizes their mouth, exaggerates the extension of their jaws, and generally seeks to conform the diversity of the African visage to the singularity of the primate form. During the 20th century,

¹<https://www.larvalabs.com/cryptopunks>

²<https://boredapeyachtclub.com/>

³Smith, David Livingstone. (2015). Aping the Human Essence Simianization as Dehumanization

⁴<https://archive.org/details/typesmankindore00pattgoog/mode/2up>

this simianization would evolve into the image of the coon and the picaninny. Through these, primate-like features such as the exaggerated and protruding jaw line and outwardly extended teeth with large lips were translated into a racist caricature of the watermelon-craving⁵ plantation slave.⁶ The teeth-showing apes shown in BAYC NFTs, as a form of visual representation, closely approximate the teeth-showing characterization of the negro established as early as 1866 in public works such as *The two platforms*.⁷

2 Collection Origins

In consumer investing and cryptocurrency trading, the term “to ape” or “ape into it” is used to indicate what may be considered an irrational trading strategy driven by buying large amounts of a security or cryptocurrency investment to a degree that may seem irrational. An individual who engages in such a strategy can be referred to as an ape, indicating that they are somewhat “smooth brained” in their decision making. This slang or idiomatic language does not extend to a human-approximating visual representation: ape and banana emojis are used in communication but not in a way that associates their use with the physical appearance of an investor.

BAYC NFTs sought to take that often used term and create a series of NFTs that would represent successful cryptocurrency investors who have retired to a swamp after reaping their aped profits. The creators, who describe themselves as the “Beastie Boys of N.F.T.s.”, initially sought to create a set of NFT girlfriends called CryptoCuties but considered it “too pandering—not to mention creepy.”⁸ In creating the BAYC collection, there is no indication that they engaged in any similar considerations regarding public viability or in any historical review of human-approximating primate caricatures and their historical context. While the use of “ape” and “to ape” in the investment context relates to an action, the creators of the BAYC NFTs translate apeing into a visual representation of a human being. This is the significant crossover that was not researched beyond the deep inspiration of “eighties hardcore, punk rock, nineties hip-hop” that they state.⁹

While stating in the same article that professional illustrators were hired for a total of around forty thousand dollars, it is not clear who originated the caricatures of the BAYC NFTs. While the collection uses the general term ape, the caricatures more specifically resemble chimpanzees. Regardless of the

⁵<https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/12/how-watermelons-became-a-racist-trope/383529/>

⁶<https://storage.googleapis.com/f67d86691061/3b92fe61ccb3.jpeg>

⁷<https://www.loc.gov/item/2008661700/>

⁸<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/why-bored-ape-avatars-are-taking-over-twitter>

⁹<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/why-bored-ape-avatars-are-taking-over-twitter>

resemblance, the artistic choice of a broad horizontal expansion of the nasal elements—beyond what is seen in a chimpanzee—aligns it with a stereotypical Black feature.¹⁰ A historical review of prominent racist imagery in cartoons shows that Africans are depicted as having a similar chimpanzee structure with the large mouth, extended teeth, and elongated smile.

In Disney’s *Mickey’s Man Friday* (1935), a character still referred to as a “monkey-faced native”¹¹ presents a similar facial structure as the BAYC NFTs.¹² A profile of the speaking of this character indicates the purposeful extension of teeth while speaking.¹³ This matches the archetype of the African skull first created by *Types of mankind*, illustrating the continuity between 19th century ideologies and enslavement, 20th century racist stereotypes, and 21st century historical obliviousness in digital art. To not consider this history in either the creation or the public rise to popularity of the BAYC NFTs results in a form of digital blackface NFTs that are actively being utilized. Significantly, they are being utilized as digital avatars representative of people.

3 Real-World Transposition

Real-world transposition of BAYC NFTs includes the dressing in fashion and attire to match an owned NFT¹⁴ or matching a modification imposed upon the NFT for a particular occasion.¹⁵ The statement “I am my jpeg. My jpeg is me.” is also used¹⁶ and has been endorsed by the BAYC Twitter account on multiple¹⁷ occasions.¹⁸ In order to understand why this type of real-world transposition of the BAYC NFTs is racially insensitive based on historical context relating the appearance of primates to the appearance of Africans, a simple thought experiment will suffice.

Assume that you had the individuals whose race is that generally depicted in the BAYC Twitter account—Caucasian and Asian—as well as an individual of African descent standing before you. Each individual is dressed to match the clothing and accessory characteristics of a BAYC NFT. You then, beginning with the Caucasian and Asian individuals, state to them out loud the following statement: “You look like your ape.” Once you reach the African individual, please consider whether in the real-world you would proceed to make that same statement. Given a reasonable frame of reference and historical awareness, you would not complete the statement as it would associate that individual with

¹⁰<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0963721416667916>

¹¹<https://storage.googleapis.com/f67d86691061/1fdf29babb0a.png>

¹²<https://storage.googleapis.com/f67d86691061/ec57caba5e17.jpeg>

¹³<https://storage.googleapis.com/f67d86691061/db51b6c5d812.png>

¹⁴<https://storage.googleapis.com/f67d86691061/aace9482671e.png>

¹⁵<https://storage.googleapis.com/f67d86691061/e7dcc82afa45.png>

¹⁶<https://storage.googleapis.com/f67d86691061/824bb4075c86.png>

¹⁷<https://storage.googleapis.com/f67d86691061/7c1f6c7362c8.png>

¹⁸<https://storage.googleapis.com/f67d86691061/ce63c9df6f8a.png>

a history of racism affixing primate visualizations and terms such as “porch monkey” to people of African descent.

This real-world validation test is not only achievable but also a consistently implemented standard in modern avatar or human-approximating digital representations. With Bitmoji¹⁹ and Apple’s Memoji²⁰, an individual is able to create something that will clearly pass this real-world validation test. It may be argued that cyptocurrency based creations are purposely divested of the corporate and politically correct considerations public companies and social-communication products are bound to or regulated by. However, BAYC in its use of the primate caricature presents itself as being absolved of any contextual association between its present choice of imagery and historical racism.

4 The Bert Williams Fallacy

While it may be argued that having prominent African-American athletes and entertainers use the BAYC NFTs as their digital avatar invalidates their categorization as digital blackface, this can be countered with what may be called The Bert Williams Fallacy. Bert Williams was a prominent blackface actor who rose to fame in the early 20th century.²¹ While Williams was able to achieve milestones such as being the first Black man to play a leading role in a film for the movie *Darktown Jubilee* (1914), his roles and his requirement to undertake personas—such as those while he was a part of the “Two Real Coons” burnt-cork blackface duo—are not to be seen as a willful choice.

Williams was bound to those roles and to blackface by a tradition that began with the Jump Jim Crow blackface persona originated by Thomas Dartmouth Rice in Louisville in 1828.²² Blackface minstrelsy would rise in popularity as a form of American entertainment between 1850 and 1870.²³ Its portrayal of racist stereotypes such as Jim Crow, Zip Coon, and Uncle Tom would continue as part of America’s stereotype driven portrayal of Blacks well into the 20th century. Williams’ use of blackface should not be seen as an endorsement of blackface but rather as an enslavement to it: it was the only way Southern audience would allow a Black man to be included in performances. While present day athletes and entertainers may not face such restrictions, their endorsement of the BAYC NFTs does not invalidate the argument. While Williams’ use of blackface extended his enslavement, the BAYC NFT use by present-day Black athletes and entertainers may equally result from their historical obliviousness.

¹⁹<https://www.bitmoji.com/>

²⁰<https://support.apple.com/en-us/HT208986>

²¹<https://vaudeville.sites.arizona.edu/node/15>

²²<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-Dartmouth-Rice>

²³<https://www.britannica.com/art/minstrel-show>

Significantly, the popularity of an accepted representation of blackface has recent modern precedent in the BBC show *The Black and White Minstrel Show* which ran from 1958 to 1978.²⁴ The show would reach an audience as large as sixteen million. Its creators and producers believed it was simply entertainment. Opponents would suggest that to fully understand the historical obliviousness of the show, one only had to present it to audiences of African origin or to play it on broadcast networks that primarily play content for African-American audiences in the United States. The show only seemed valid to its creators in a de-contextualized state. Playing it to an audience aware of the history of segregation, racism and violence represented by the Jim Crow legacy would immediately show it to be what it truly was.

In the case of *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, the Bert Williams Fallacy was also in full effect. In a push to show “black faces” with more “dignity”, Black British actors were offered and accepted roles on the show. This in no way invalidated what is now looked upon as a significant error of judgement by the BBC. Like Bert Williams, supporting blackface was a matter of survival for the Black actors rather than an endorsement of blackface itself. They had few other employment opportunities available at the time.

5 Conclusion

Digital forms of art do not exist in complete or even partial disassociation from real-world historical contexts, especially as they proceed to exert a significant cultural and societal influence. Responsibility rests on the creators, buyers and auctioneers of art to consider its implications. Ignoring the correlation between historical images of primates and racism against Africans simply because the medium has shifted towards a digital platform indicates a historical obliviousness. The term digital blackface is used to represent a human-approximating caricature which ignores the historical context of Africans being depicted as primates.

²⁴<https://www.bbc.com/historyofthebbc/100-voices/people-nation-empire/make-yourself-at-home/the-black-and-white-minstrel-show>