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Bobble Head Dolls: On Performing The Lawn Jockey

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Bobble Head Dolls: On Performing The Lawn Jockey

Clara Younge

Damn.

oh, daamn.

scyu me, cu I talk to u fo a minit?

escyu me, cu I talk to u fo a minit?

Uh, yeah, ah jus wanna letchu know, da back a yo head is ridiculus.

I was a minstrel today. Today, and yesterday, and every day since I got here. I've pop-lock-and-dropped it, cornrowed my hair, blamed my tardiness on CP Time, and opened my eyes till they're as big as saucers. I've even pulled out my best ebonics for special occasions, – oh and I *only* listen to the newest hip hop and R&B.

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It's not hard to be a minstrel; you just kind of do what you do – although *you* pro'lly best not try that shit because thats when it becomes cultural appropriation, or just straight *problematic*. The only reason nobody calls me out on it is because I'm black. And I have the right to misrepresent and further stereotype my own race. The one line I can't seem to find is between reconnecting with my culture, just being myself, and straight ign'ance.

Blackface: n. a type of stage makeup made from burnt cork, greasepaint or shoe polish used to blacken actors' faces and exaggerate their eyes and lips for roles in traditional minstrel shows.

My best friend Marshall is white and for some reason he defaults to spanglish and ebonics in certain situations. It's something about going to a public high school in an urban area that exposes you to those things. He's actually very aware of his privilege and in some cases more socially conscious than I am though, so I don't ever have a problem when he says things like *light-skinn'ted* or *hijo de la chingada*. Our other friends, however, always make fun of him for appearing "Mexican" or sounding "like an uneducated black kid from brooklyn." Their reasoning being simply that he is white, and so shouldn't talk like that. Of course, when I use similar phrases like *what had happened was* or the Caribbean swearword *coño*, there is no objection. "It just sounds more natural coming from Clara." And I have to wonder, to what extent can we attribute this "naturalness" to my greater fluency in these dialects, and to what extent has the media naturalized the image of someone like me speaking in a certain way?

Yo you a bitch ass nigga, snitch ass nigga,

I'm the type to get cash quick fast nigga,

In high school I was never Black. Sure, I was Mixed, sometimes I was Latina; but I was never Black. Michael Burwell in my 10th grade Algebra II class was always judging and reducing and marginalizing my blackness and that of other people with terms like Oreo, and telling people they acting white. Now I do see some valor in his statements about Mariah Carey – statements about skin whitening in pop stars and pride in black identity – statements previously masked in prejudiced vocabulary and my own hurt feelings of inadequacy. The fact is, I was never black enough for any of the kids in my high school. I lived on the wrong side of town, my skin was the wrong color, I talked the wrong way, and I just didn't have the right attitude. It's a long story of push and pull and mostly put-down that still affects the way I desperately search for acceptance in every circle of black people I come across. But now that I'm in a space where I finally *can* be black, I feel more like I *have to* be. Because if I don't, who will?

Of course it had to be some deep fucked-up racist shit. How else could we call it the original American Theatrical form?

Macalester College is a small, *private*, liberal-arts institution that promotes multiculturalism in the form of international students from the high ends of society all over the world – often at the expense of the simple domestic diversity that I took so for granted my whole life.

Back in the day, when people didn't have to hide their racism behind comedians and institutional structures like they do now, the way that your average small-

town-Iowan-who-had-never-seen-a-black-person-before, or your sheltered-ingenuous-well-to-do-white-girl learned about Race and Culture other than their own was through theatre.

My first reaction, when I had been on campus long enough for the fog of anxious conception to clear, was shock and bewilderment: *there are no ghetto people here.*

More specifically, minstrel theatre.

Macalester was the first time in my life that I was not only tolerated or accepted, but *befriended* by a group of black people. It was also the first time I regularly found myself the *blackest* person in a space.

At a safe distance from any real black people, America became familiar with the fat, happy matronly Mammy, the ever-loyal, sentimental but stupid Old Darky, the seductively light-skinned Mulatto Wench, the uppity, high-talking Dandy, and the ignorant, primitive Coon's big, buggy eyes, huge lips, stupid grins, black as black skin, woolly hair, exaggerated ebomics, ridiculous costumes, and constant musical, dancing habits.

Here there are small-town Iowans who have never seen a black person before. Actually. There are rich kids whose parents own a piece of land the size of the college and think maybe because they're grown or maybe because they have money or maybe because they have a black friend or consider themselves "post-race" that they can do and say whatever they want. And there are lots and lots of sheltered ingenuous well-to-do 'liberals' who still don't understand that oppression in America is not over and that racism can manifest itself in more ways than KKK appearances in remote southern middle-of-nowheres or words like nigger and spic.

What happened to these minstrel shows? Did people realize that they were mechanisms of mass-racism and stop showing them? Well, not exactly. They, like the ideologies they represent, went into hiding for a while to change their appearance, and proceeded to integrate themselves into the institution and became streamlined through mass-media like MTV, BET, SNL and MadTV.

And when I'm busy "being black" on this campus, do I stop to think about where my ideas of what is black come from? How much of my act comes from my dad or the kids in school or UPN9 or artists like Nicki Minaj and Petey Pablo?

(freak-a-leek) Shameka, Keisha, Tara, Shonda, Sabrina, Crista, Daronda,

Quite honestly, not until now, really.

(freak-a-leek) Teresa, Felisha, Tanisha, Shavon, Monique, Christina, Yolanda

But like I said...

Tha back a yo head is ridiculus.

This television sketch was first aired sometime around 2007, and has been gaining popularity ever since. The stereotypically gangsta, yet foolishly and pathetically sentimental Darrell (“its spellt like **Dar**-rel but its pronounced Duh-**rell**”) plays the sexual predator that every white woman expects as he widens his eyes (“oh damn”) and licks his lips at the girl in the movie theater (“Yvonne? oh damn, thats a french-ass name, Yvonne. yeah, my little bree. my little butter and croissant. mm, yeah..”).

This video is hilarious.

And the best part is that this shit would actually happen. And it has. Granted, niggaz is usually a little more smooth about it than this fool, but it seems like everyone has their own Darrell – everyone has met someone who just won’t stop asking *so, uh...can I hav yo number? can I? can I hav it?*

triflin: adj. when you play someone, or is shady, deceitful, manipulative, good-for-nothing, lazy, reckless, overly self-important, when you have too much attitude, or is talkin about something that you dont kno nothing about, or just overall actin like a asshole.

So can I be surprised when, coming home from the club over fall break, I see two white college-age girls standing outside the bus shelter, while two mixed-race young men with hooded sweatshirts and baggy jeans stand inside? And can I be surprised that five minutes after the two young men leave, the girls realize they’re gone and come in to ask me and my friends when the bus will get there? And can I be surprised when once we get on the bus, the aisle is full all the way to the front with college kids coming back from a night on the town while not one of them bothers to take one of the *two empty seats* because that would mean they would have to sit next to a black man? The first thing I said to the guy when I sat down was I don’t know why nobody was sitting here before, and his reply was Hey, I’m not complaining.

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Darrell starts to exit the movie theatre extolling between sniffles his love for this pretty little white girl, when someone new walks in conveniently alone and he follows her to her seat to spit some more game. I'm walking to the bus stop with my friends and two different groups of guys stop to holler at us in the space of four blocks. Ironically enough, the second group wandered over to the same bus stop and proceeded to vigorously hit on the same two white girls. These are the stereotypes that we reinforce every day. And can I be surprised that I *expect* every black man I see on the street to try to talk to me and every Mexican that drives by in a truck to whistle out the window when I walk by?

Lawn Jockey: n. a type of lawn ornament in a jockey's clothing, esp. a statue representing Black stereotypes – big eyes and lips, black skin, and depicted eating watermelon, fishing, or dutifully holding a lantern for his white owners.

Really I would like to be surprised, because I used to be one of those sheltered people who were not aware of all the racist shit that goes down. I would like to be surprised, because I never thought people would be so open with their racism within my world. I would like to be surprised, because I thought I would never be complicit in this. But we are all implicated in the dealings of mass media and popular culture, no matter how hard we can try to escape them.

Many other Black Americana collectible antiques feature Mammy, Dandy, and Sambo tropes in the form of mechanical banks, salt shakers, puppet dolls and post cards.

I have found websites selling Americanas remade with Obama's face on them.

And should I be surprised or offended when my friends expect me to know all the words to every song by 50 cent, Ludacris, T Pain, and Lil Wayne? And *can* I be surprised or offended when they ask me to bobble my head from side to side or teach them my latest dance moves? And when they're surprised that I'd rather listen to Linkin Park or Taylor Swift, or that I don't have any new dance moves, is that their fault or mine?

It's not hard to be a minstrel; you just kind of do what you do – although you pro'lly best not try that shit because thats when it becomes cultural appropriation, or just straight problematic. The only reason nobody calls me out on it is because I'm black. And I have the right to misrepresent and further stereotype my own race. The one line I can't seem to find is between reconnecting with my culture, just being myself, and straight ign'ance.

So where do my ideas of blackness come from? Where does anyone's idea of blackness come from?

One thing is for sure – some people's idea of blackness comes (at least in part) from me. And regardless of my answer – my intentions or my sources or my ideologies – the way that I talk and the clothes that I wear and the music I listen to are all just ways of reaffirming the stereotypes that are thrown at us from popular media every day.

Ign'ant: adj. when you know damn well you wrong and you chose to act stupid anyway.

I was a minstrel today.