

Article

Why Shouldn't Race Be a Costume? —A (Qualified) Defense of Wearing Cross-Racial Make-Up During Halloween

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Abstract: Over the past decade, many politicians and celebrities in North America have found themselves embroiled in scandals that involved them having worn black make-up and in at least one incident white make-up. In most of these cases, the used make-up was part of a costume for Halloween, Purim, Carnival, or a themed party. This article challenges the view that wearing cross-racial make-up on such occasions as part of personal costumes—as opposed to costumes that are integral to specific cultural traditions, such as the New Orleans Zulu parade—is always wrong. To do so, it assesses the five most promising objections to this practice. Although some of these objections count against certain uses of cross-racial make-up, I show that in several high-profile cases where such make-up was worn, *none of them had force*, whether because the objections themselves were implausible and/or because they did not apply.

Keywords: cross-racial make-up; blackface; whiteface; Halloween; offense; costumes

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1. A Decade of Cross-Racial Make-Up Controversies

The past decade has witnessed a large number of white politicians and celebrities in North America being caught up in scandals that feature them wearing black make-up in the recent or more distant past, commonly referred to as “wearing blackface,” or them excusing others’ wearing of such make-up. In the large majority of cases, the used make-up was part of a cross-racial costume for Halloween, Purim, Carnival, or a themed party. Consider some examples:

- In 2013, Dov Hikind, a state assemblyman from Brooklyn, came under fire after a picture of him emerged with his face blackened. Hikind had dressed up as a black basketball player for Purim that year, a Jewish holiday during which people wear costumes. His actions were quickly denounced by the City Council’s Black, Latino

and Asian Caucus as “deeply disturbing,” while the Jewish Anti-Defamation League said that he had shown “terrible judgment.” Unimpressed by the criticism, Hikind wrote on his blog that the accusations of racism against him amounted to “political correctness to the absurd” and that “there was not a prejudiced bone in his body’.”¹

- In 2017, French footballer Antoine Griezmann found himself embroiled in a very similar incident. Like Hikind, he had dressed as a black basketball player, in this case for a 1980s-themed party. Responding to the angry comments that a picture of his outfit sparked on Twitter, he wrote, “Calm down guys, I’m a fan of the Harlem Globetrotters and their good old days ... it’s a tribute.” Not long thereafter, however, he put out another statement that read, “I recognize it [dressing up as a black basketball player] was clumsy on my part . . . If I have hurt anyone, I apologize.”²
- In 2018, Luann de Lesseps, an actress from the reality TV-series, *Real Housewives of New York City*, engendered controversy for dressing up as Afro-American singer Diana Ross at a Halloween party. De Lesseps had used bronzer to darken her face as well as donned herself an afro. Responding to the incident, fellow *Real Housewives* co-star Carole Radziwill did not shy away from condemning her colleague: ‘Luann’s costume is so disrespectful; I think she’s tone-deaf when it comes to cultural stereotypes. For her part, De Lesseps denied any wrongdoing, tweeting: ‘I would like to clear the air, I love and respect Diana Ross, this was my tribute to her I was showing my sincere admiration.’³
- Later that year, television host Megyn Kelly faced a backlash for defending De Lesseps’s costume on air, including the actress’s donning of black make-up. In fact, Kelly had gone as far as question the taboo on wearing black make-up during Halloween more generally, noting approvingly that when she was a child, it was okay to darken one’s skin as part of Halloween costume “as long as you were dressing up as like a character.” While Kelly apologized to her colleagues and viewers within hours of the incident, her days at television station NBC were over.⁴
- In 2019, Canadian Prime-Minister Justin Trudeau was confronted with a media storm after pictures emerged of him wearing black make-up on several occasions during the 1990s and early 2000s, including one where he had dressed up as Aladdin at a gala. Among the many high-profile people who criticized him were Canada’s Green Party leader Elizabeth May, who said, “I usually don’t have trouble articulating my feelings, but I find this deeply troubling and really shameful behavior and it’s inexplicable that Justin Trudeau could be three times recorded.”⁵ Yet rather than trying to defend himself as Hikind, Griezmann, and De Lesseps had at least initially done, Trudeau immediately apologized, stating that “darkening your face,

¹ Thomas Kaplan, “Assemblyman Dov Hikind Defends Wearing Blackface to a Party,” *The New York Times*, February 26, 2013, sec. New York, [link to this article](#).

² Sky News, “Antoine Griezmann Apologises for ‘Blackface’ Photo of Basketball Player,” *Sky News*, December 18, 2017, [link to this article](#).

³ Daily Mail, “RHONY: Luann de Lesseps in Tweet Denies Being in Blackface in Premiere,” *Mail Online*, April 5, 2018, [link to this article](#).

⁴ Tom Kludt and Brian Stelter, “Megyn Kelly Leaves NBC with All of Her \$69 Million Contract Intact,” *CNN*, January 12, 2019, [link to this article](#).

⁵ Hannah Jackson, “May ‘Deeply Shocked’ by Trudeau’s Wearing of Racist Makeup in Past Photos, Video,” *Global News*, September 22, 2019, 20, [link to this article](#).

regardless of the context and circumstances, is always unacceptable because of the racist history of blackface; I should've understood that then, and I never should've done it."⁶

While all incidents mentioned so far involved the use of black make-up, the use of other types of cross-racial make-up—defined here as make-up⁷ that matches the skin color of a racial group other than one's own—can be controversial as well. For example, in 2014, Nick Cannon—a black rapper and presenter of the singing contest America's Got Talent—caused outrage on Twitter when he posted a picture of himself on Instagram dressed as his skate boy alter ego, Connor Smallnut, in order to promote his new album, White People Party Music. Cannon had not just vested himself in a skater outfit and adopted a skater accent, but also painted his face white, a practice that is sometimes referred to as “wearing whiteface.” Although some Twitter users found Cannon's persona “hilarious,” many others were not amused and accused Cannon of being “racist” and “hypocritical.”⁸

What these and various other cases I could have mentioned suggest is that *irrespective* of the race of the person impersonated, wearing cross-racial make-up is controversial within some Western societies even if the greatest controversy is reserved for cases where white people wear black make-up. But should it be? In other work, I have argued that when such make-up is worn as part of costumes that are integral to specific cultural traditions, the answer is “not always.”⁹ Specifically, I argued there that the use of black make-up by both black people and non-black people in New Orleans's annual Zulu parade¹⁰ is morally justified, as is its use under certain conditions within Spanish Epiphany celebrations.¹¹ What is important for present purposes is that one might agree with this *without believing* it to be ever morally permissible to wear cross-racial make-up, or simply black cross-racial make-up, as part of *personal costumes*, i.e., costumes that are not integral to specific cultural traditions like the ones just mentioned, which are of the focus of this article. On my understanding, most people who participate in costumed holidays and events such as Halloween, Purim, Carnival, and themed parties wear costumes that are personal in this sense, for although the need to wear a costume on such occasions is culturally dictated and although there exist certain broad constraints on the types of costumes that we can wear during themed parties (which must be apposite to the theme, such as 70s disco, Alice in Wonderland, or the Middle Ages), this does not require us to wear *any specific outfit*. By contrast, when one is a member of the Zulu Social Aid and

⁶ BBC, “Canada's Justin Trudeau Cannot Say How Often He Wore Blackface,” *BBC News*, September 19, 2019, sec. US & Canada, [link to this article](#).

⁷ Which can take the form of e.g., face-paint, powder, and creams.

⁸ Hilary Miller, “Nick Cannon Wears Whiteface, Sparks Internet Debate,” *Huffington Post*, March 24, 2014, sec. Celebrity, [link to this article](#).

⁹ Bouke De Vries, “Black Pete, King Balthasar, and the New Orleans Zulus: Can Black Make-Up Traditions Ever Be Justified?,” *Controversial Ideas* 1(1) (April 2021): 1–14, [link to this article](#).

¹⁰ During this 115-year-old parade, which takes place during the city's Mardi Gras carnival, circa 1500 people dress up as Zulu warriors to commemorate their victory over the British colonists in 1879. See e.g., Felipe Smith, “‘Things You'd Imagine Zulu Tribes to Do': The Zulu Parade in New Orleans Carnival,” *African Arts* 46(2) (2013): 22–35; Kevin McQueeney, “Zulu: A Transnational History of a New Orleans Mardi Gras Krewe,” *Safundi* 19(2) (April 3, 2018): 139–63, [link to this article](#).

¹¹ These feature representations of King Balthasar, who is traditionally portrayed as a black monarch from Africa and is commonly played by white city councillors within this country. See Esther Sánchez, “After Years of Pressure, Madrid's King Balthazar to Be Played by Black Man,” *El País*, September 18, 2015, sec. Inenglish, [link to this article](#).

Pleasure Club, one is socially expected to dress up as a Zulu warrior with darkened face during the Club's annual parade, just as some people are expected to play King Balthasar during Spanish Epiphany celebrations and to do so wearing black make-up if they do not have dark skin already.

Why think that wearing cross-racial make-up might be justified when it helps to maintain cultural traditions, but not when it is worn as part of personal costumes? The answer is that one believes that the value of preserving such traditions—which may, for instance, help to foster social cohesion¹² and provide people with a sense of intergenerational continuity¹³—but not any value that such private uses of cross-racial make-up might have (about which more in due course) *at least sometimes outweighs* the potential negative aspects of wearing this type of make-up, such as that it cause offense or that it evokes painful associations with dehumanizing cross-racial impersonations like those found in the North American black minstrel shows of the 19th and early 20th centuries.^{14,15} Indeed, whereas I am unaware of any surveys on this topic, it has been suggested that among proponents of the interracial use of black make-up during the New Orleans Zulu parade, many *simultaneously oppose* its use as part of personal costumes.¹⁶ Responding to a Tweet by Chelsea Clinton in which the former First Daughter expressed outrage over a poll that found that over a third of Americans believe it to be at least sometimes permissible for white people to darken their face for Halloween, one follower replied, for instance, that she agreed with Clinton's statement that blackface is never acceptable *"unless you're riding in Zulu."*¹⁷

In Section 2 of this article, my aim is to defend a more permissive view still. I shall argue that wearing cross-racial make-up for personal costumes *is also morally defensible under certain conditions*, thus challenging the scholarly consensus that at least the cross-racial use of black make-up for such costumes never is.¹⁸ To do so, I will assess

¹² Cf. Rachel E. Watson-Jones and Cristine H. Legare, "The Social Functions of Group Rituals," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 25(1) (February 1, 2016): 42–46, [link to this article](#); Jacob Taylor and Arran Davis, "Social Cohesion," in *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 1–7, [link to this article](#).

¹³ Cf. Roger Scruton, *Conservatism: An Invitation to the Great Tradition* (New York, NY: All Points Books, 2018); Edmund Burke et al., *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: Yale University Press, 2003), [link to this article](#); Samuel Scheffler, *Equality and Tradition: Questions of Value in Moral and Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁴ Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 1997); Stephen Johnson, ed., *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy*, 1st ed. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012).

¹⁵ For the use of a similar balancing approach in assessing other types of traditions, cf. Paula Casal, "Whaling, Bullfighting, and the Conditional Value of Tradition," *Res Publica* 27(3) (August 1, 2021): 467–90, [link to this article](#).

¹⁶ John Simerman, "For Zulu Leaders, Blackface Remains 'Tradition,' 'Cultural Expression' Even amid National Reckoning," *The Advocate*, February 12, 2019, [link to this article](#).

¹⁷ Simerman, "For Zulu Leaders" (emphasis added).

¹⁸ See, e.g., Philip S.S. Howard, "A Laugh for the National Project: Contemporary Canadian Blackface Humour and Its Constitution through Canadian Anti-Blackness," *Ethnicities* 18(6) (December 1, 2018): 843–68, [link to this article](#); Mélodie Sommier, "'How ELSE Are You Supposed to Dress up like a Black Guy?': Negotiating Accusations of Blackface in Online Newspaper Comments," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43(16) (December 10, 2020): 57–75, [link to this article](#); David J. Leonard, "Just Say No to Blackface: Neo-Minstrelsy and the Power to Dehumanize," *HuffPost*, August 8, 2012, [link to this article](#); Angelita D. Reyes, "Performativity and Representation in Transnational Blackface: Mammy (USA), Zwarte Piet (Netherlands), and Haji Firuz (Iran)," *Atlantic Studies* 16(4) (October 2, 2019): 521–50, [link to this article](#); Ayanna Thompson, Christopher Schaberg, and Ian Bogost, *Blackface* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

(what I regard as) the five most promising objections to this practice, according to which it (1) mocks the appearance, behavior, or social standing of members of the imitated races; (2) flouts social norms; (3) causes offense; (4) causes innocent offense, i.e., offense that is not mediated by morally problematic beliefs; and (5) causes reasonable offense, i.e., offense that is supported by good reasons. Although some of these objections count against specific uses of cross-racial make-up, I show that in several high-profile cases where such make-up was worn, none of them had force, whether because the objections themselves were implausible and/or because they did not apply. I end, in Section 3, by discussing the practical implications of these findings.

Before delving into these matters, two preliminaries are in order. One is that when speaking of different “races” or “racial groups” (I use these terms interchangeably), I am not assuming that there is a biological reality to these categories, which are widely used in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom.¹⁹ All it means on my account to say that a person P adopts the skin color of another racial group is that P adopts a skin color that many people within P’s society *associate* with a different racial group.²⁰

The other preliminary is that, while I concentrate here on cases where people adopt the skin color of *another* racial group, the practice of painting one’s skin in a color that matches, or that is comparatively close to, one’s own skin color has generated controversy in some cases as well. For example, black individuals who wear black face-paint in the context of the New Orleans Zulu parade have been described by some as “modern-day minstrels” after the aforementioned dehumanizing stereotypes of black people that were performed in North American minstrel shows,²¹ whereas Afro-American singer Beyoncé attracted criticism in 2011 for darkening her skin as part of a tribute to Nigerian musician Fela Kuti.²² Although an appraisal of such cases has to await another occasion, it bears mentioning that *if* I am right that wearing cross-racial make-up can sometimes be justified, then given that we are often believed to have more leeway to use attributes and terms associated with our own racial group (think, for instance, of the use of the N-word by black people)²³, this might suggest that such intraracial uses of racial make-up must sometimes be justified too.

2. Five Objections to Wearing Cross-Racial Make-Up for Personal Costumes

It is a well-established principle within contemporary moral and political philosophy that *unless* some particular action *x* can be shown to be wrong, engaging in *x* is morally

¹⁹ Where it is much more common to use such categories in both popular discourses and academic discourses than it is in countries such as France and other Western European countries. Compare Sommer, “How ELSE Are You Supposed to Dress up like a Black Guy?,” 65.

²⁰ For further discussion of the ontological status of race, see Michael James and Adam Burgos, “Race,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2022 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2022), sec. 2, [link to this article](#).

²¹ Simerman, “For Zulu Leaders”.

²² US Weekly, “Beyoncé Criticized for ‘Blackface’ Photo Shoot,” *Rolling Stone* (blog), February 24, 2011, [link to this article](#).

²³ Cf. Keith Burgess-Jackson, “Philosophical Reflections on ‘the Filthiest, Dirtiest, Nastiest Word in the English Language’¹,” *Controversial Ideas* 2(1) (April 2022): 4, [link to this article](#).

justified.²⁴ In this article, I assume this to be correct, which means that to determine whether the use of cross-racial make-up for personal costumes can ever be morally justified, we need to consider whether there are compelling objections to it and, if so, whether these objections are always decisive. What follows is an assessment of the five most promising candidates of which some critics might accept more than one (the first two being compatible both with themselves and with one of the last three).

2.1. Mocking Features

The first of these objections maintains that wearing cross-racial make-up is wrong when, and because, the impersonation of which it is part has specific features that mock the appearance, behavior, or social standing of members of the imitated racial group as opposed to individual persons or members of particular non-racial subgroups, such as skaters. For this to occur, Phillip S.S. Howard has argued, such mockery need not be intended if this means that those who darken their face as part of personal costumes must be fully aware of the mockery's existence; focusing on the Canadian context, he thus writes that the "humour of contemporary Canadian blackface" may, and sometimes, does, go "largely unexamined."²⁵

As it happens, contemporary critics of cross-racial uses of black make-up have not laid too much emphasis on the current objection. The reason seems to be that most think that such uses *always* mock black people, meaning that there is no way in which they can be part of cross-racial impersonations that are respectful of members of this group. For example, Howard says that whenever white people wear black make-up, they "do not simply tell jokes about the Black body, but rather become the joke by wearing the Black body," which in his view renders this practice an "expression of embodied racism's humour".²⁶ In similarly sweeping statements, Mélodine Sommier notes that at the core of such impersonations is "the objectification of Black bodies by White people and for White people's entertainment,"²⁷ whereas David J. Leonard notes that "there is no acceptable reason to ever don blackface . . . It's not a joke; it isn't funny."²⁸ Still, some of them acknowledge that there can be "stereotypical accoutrements" present in cross-racial uses of black make-up—Howard mentions among other things the portrayal of joints—that *independently* ridicule black people and thereby amplify the perceived wrongfulness of what almost all of these critics refer to as the "wearing of blackface."²⁹

Bracketing for now the possibility that donning cross-racial make-up in general or black make-up in particular is wrong regardless of the specific form it takes (I will consider this possibility later), one immediate response to the current objection is that there certainly are cases where cross-racial make-up is used as part of cross-racial impersonations that mock the members of the imitated races. For example, in 2007, American comedian Sarah Silverman played a black person as part of a sketch for which she had painted

²⁴ See, e.g., Stanley I. Benn, *A Theory of Freedom*, New (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Gerald Gaus, *The Order of Public Reason: A Theory of Freedom and Morality in a Diverse and Bounded World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin I. Kelly, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2001); Joel Feinberg, *Harm to Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

²⁵ Howard, "A Laugh for the National Project," 860.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 855.

²⁷ Sommier, "How ELSE Are You Supposed to Dress up like a Black Guy?," 67.

²⁸ Leonard, "Just Say No to Blackface".

²⁹ Howard, "A Laugh for the National Project," 861–63.

her face unnaturally dark in addition to having made her lips seem unnaturally large using white make-up, which resulted in an impersonation that was reminiscent of the dehumanizing blackface characters enacted during North American minstrel shows.³⁰ Or consider a more recent case in which a UPS worker from Ohio dressed as a “mammy” for Halloween,³¹ which is the historical stereotype of a genial black servant to a white family who is known for her motherly qualities.³² As with black minstrel characters, which portrayed black people as buffoonish and intellectually inferior to whites, this particular character was used to justify racial hierarchies in the United States by depicting black women as content with the racial status quo.³³

What is apposite for us is that while such incidents show that cross-racial make-up *can feature in impersonations that mock the appearance, behavior, or social standing of members of the imitated races*, this is by no means always the case. Just witness a recent incident where a white nurse from Missouri had (slightly) darkened her face to impersonate Beyoncé for Halloween and ultimately lost her job over this.³⁴ Unlike Silverman and the UPS worker, this person had not adopted features that ridiculed the appearance of black people, such as unrealistically dark skin or overdrawn lips, neither had she portrayed a black person in a subservient role, assuming there is nothing subservient about being a singer, let alone about being a singer with the fame and success of Beyoncé. The same is true of Luann De Lesseps, and her impersonation of Diana Ross at a Halloween party. Like the Beyoncé impersonation by the Missouri nurse, De Lesseps’s Ross impersonation lacked features that can be reasonably understood to mock the appearance of black people, such as unrealistically dark skin and overdrawn lips. And, like the former, it did not portray a black person in a submissive position—again, there is nothing subservient about being a singer. When we add to this that there are no reports of either of these individuals having conducted themselves in ways that made fun of black people—which is a third way in which a cross-racial impersonation might mock members of the imitated racial group, for example by engaging in dim-witted behaviors as black minstrel actors traditionally did—there appears to be no reason for thinking that black people were mocked by any specific features of their cross-racial impersonations, assuming once more for now that the sheer act of wearing black make-up does not involve such mockery (I will consider this possibility later). However, if this is so, then *even if* for uses of cross-racial make-up to mock the members of the imitated race is sufficient to render them wrong (as looks plausible), we must conclude that wearing such make-up as part of personal costumes does not always do so and that the scope of the current objection is therefore limited.

³⁰ Catherine Shoard, “Sarah Silverman: I Was Fired from Film after Blackface Photo Resurfaced,” *The Guardian*, August 12, 2019, [link to this article](#).

³¹ AP, “UPS Employee Fired for Wearing Blackface as Part of Costume,” *AP News*, November 2, 2018, [link to this article](#).

³² In both these cases, the cross-racial impersonations had professional repercussions. Whereas Silverman was fired from a film after photos of her blackface sketch were seen by the film’s producers, the UPS worker lost her job at the company.

³³ Wendy Reynolds-Dobbs, Kecia M. Thomas, and Matthew S. Harrison, “From Mammy to Superwoman: Images That Hinder Black Women’s Career Development,” *Journal of Career Development* 35(2) (December 1, 2008): 129–50, [link to this article](#).

³⁴ Alexandra Klausner, “Nurse Fired for Blackface Beyoncé Costume,” *New York Post* (blog), October 31, 2018, [link to this article](#).

2.2. Social Norms

A second objection to use the of cross-racial make-up for personal costumes might be formulated as follows:

1. If certain behaviors are (almost) universally considered to be disrespectful within a society, then provided that these attitudes are not based on morally problematic norms (e.g., misogynistic or racist ones), said behaviors are disrespectful within that society.
2. The use of cross-racial make-up for personal costumes is (almost) universally considered to be disrespectful within contemporary societies based on norms that are not morally problematic.

Therefore,

3. The use of cross-racial make-up for personal costumes is disrespectful within contemporary societies.

For a behavior that satisfies the conditions of premise (1), one might think of giving someone the finger. There is nothing *inherently* disrespectful about raising one's middle finger to someone, as illustrated by the fact that in some alternative universe, we can imagine this gesture having a positive meaning, perhaps because it communicates, "well-done!" Nonetheless, the fact that it is almost universally understood to express disrespect within many countries along with the fact that such felt disrespect is not based on morally problematic norms (to see the need for this subrequirement, notice that rejecting it would mean, among other things, that the existence of widely observed norms requiring women to obey their husbands could render it disrespectful for women to flout such patriarchal expectations, which looks deeply implausible) appears *sufficient* to render this gesture disrespectful within much of the world, assuming it would be wrong to start randomly flip off strangers in places such as North America and Europe.³⁵ However, if this is the case, then insofar any felt disrespect that the use of cross-racial make-up for personal costumes causes is also (almost) universal and not mediated by any morally problematic norms, its use would appear to be morally wrong as well *regardless* of whether it is worn as part of cross-racial impersonations that do not mock the appearance, behavior, or social standing of members of the imitated race (see Section 2.1).

Suppose that this is indeed the case. Even then, I believe the current argument does not go through, as premise 2 seems to be false. To bring this out, it should be noted that *even* in the country where the use of cross-racial make-up as part of personal costumes appears to be the most controversial, namely the United States, its use is not (almost) universally deemed to be disrespectful. One piece of evidence for this is offered by a 2013 YouGov poll that found that 43% of adult Americans think that it is acceptable for a white person to "wear blackface makeup in order to appear as a black person for Halloween" (21% among black Americans) against 37% who think that this is unacceptable (68% among black Americans) and 20% who are unsure (11% among black Americans).³⁶ Although already substantial, had the pollsters used the term "black

³⁵ Cf. A.P. Simester and Andrew von Hirsch, "Rethinking the Offense Principle," *Legal Theory* 8(3) (2002): 278.

³⁶ YouGov, "In Your Opinion Is It Acceptable or Unacceptable for White People to Wear a Barack Obama Mask and Dress up as the President for Halloween?," October 30, 2013, [link to this article](#).

make-up” rather than “blackface make-up,” this percentage would likely have been higher still, given that the latter term has strongly negative connotations due to its association with black minstrelsy. More recently, a 2019 poll by the Pew Research Center found that 34% of adult Americans believe that “a white person using makeup to darken their skin so they appear to be a different race as part of a Halloween costume” is at least sometimes acceptable,³⁷ while a poll by YouGov and *The Economist* from the same year reported that 42% of adult Americans believe either that it is at least sometimes justified to “wear blackface make-up” or are unsure about this.³⁸ (Whereas no questions were asked about the use of other types of cross-racial make-up, the fact that black make-up is the most contentious suggests that these rates can be expected to be higher still, providing further support for the notion that even in the United States, the use of cross-racial make-up for personal costumes is not close to being universally considered disrespectful.)

2.3. Sheer Offense

A third objection maintains that the use of cross-racial make-up for personal costumes is morally indefensible because it offends some people even if such offense is not ubiquitous (see Section 2.2). By this, I mean that being exposed to cross-racial make-up causes them to experience negative mental states such as shock, annoyance, or anger.³⁹ Although few, if any, scholars hold that the *sheer offense* caused by the use of cross-racial make-up as part of personal costumes renders such uses wrong, it is instructive to start considering why this objection fails in order to understand the motivations behind the more complex—and I believe more plausible—offense objections discussed later.

The most straightforward way of demonstrating the untenability of the sheer offense objection is to draw attention to its counterintuitive implications. Consider a society in which a highly religious segment of the population is offended by homosexual couples holding hands. In this case, people’s offense does not seem to generate even *pro tanto* reason against the behavior that is causing the offense. Similarly, for racist inhabitants of a society to be offended by interracial marriages does not appear to generate any reasons for people to refrain from marrying someone from a different racial background *regardless* of how widespread the relevant offense is. In both cases, the reason is that people’s offense is mediated by beliefs that are both false and morally objectionable—i.e., homophobic and racist—for which, it seems, we cannot reasonably expect others to absorb the costs by protecting their holders from any offense that these beliefs make possible. This is true especially of those wrongfully targeted by them; while the existence of said beliefs can already be understood to visit a dignity-harm on these individuals, expecting them to alter their behavior so as not to offend those who hold them would add insult to injury.⁴⁰ However, if this is correct, then simply pointing out that some people

³⁷ Pew Research Center, “About One-Third of Americans Say Using Blackface in a Halloween Costume Is Acceptable at Least Sometimes,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), February 11, 2019, [link to this article](#).

³⁸ YouGov and *The Economist*, “Do People Find Blackface and Brownface Makeup Acceptable?” September 19, 2019, [link to this article](#).

³⁹ Cf. Joel Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law: Vol. 2: Offense to Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 5; John Tasioulas, “Crimes of Offence,” in *Incivilities: Regulating Offensive Behaviour*, ed. Andrew Von Hirsch and Andrew Simester, 1 ed. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006), 150.

⁴⁰ Cf. James Edwards, “No Offense,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Applied Ethics and the Criminal Law*, ed. Larry Alexander and Kimberly Kessler Ferzan (Berlin: Springer International, 2019), 510, [link to this article](#); Tasioulas, “Crimes of Offence,” 154.

are offended by certain practices, including the use of cross-racial make-up for personal costumes, cannot be enough to show that these practices are morally unjustified.

2.4. Innocent Offense

In response, and this brings us to a fourth objection, critics of the use of cross-racial make-up for personal costumes might concede this but argue that contrary to the types of offense just mentioned, any offense caused by this practice is *morally innocent* in that it is not mediated by morally objectionable beliefs, which they may say is sufficient to render it wrong. Call this the “innocent offense objection.”

The problem with this objection is that *even if* it is innocent to take offense at the practice of wearing cross-racial make-up for personal costumes, there are many practices that people are offended by based on morally unobjectionable beliefs or attitudes where it is clear that the offense suffered fails to render the relevant practices unjustified. Consider individuals with cynophobia (an irrational fear of dogs) or ones with pogonophobia (an extreme dislike of beards). Whereas the negative mental states that these individuals suffer upon witnessing dogs and beards respectively are not, or simply need not be, mediated by immoral beliefs or attitudes—there is nothing evidently morally problematic about being afraid of dogs or about disliking beards—it would be absurd to conclude from this that having a dog or growing a beard must therefore be wrong.

One possible rejoinder would be that compared to people’s interests in having a dog or a beard, our interests in wearing cross-racial make-up during costumed holidays and events such as Halloween, Carnival, Purim, and themed parties are *relatively small*. Not only do we have the option of imitating cross-racial individuals without such make-up, which is not taboo in countries such as the United States, we remain free to impersonate people from the same race, as well as non-human beings such as animals and robots. While this does seem to render our interests in wearing cross-racial make-up on such occasions trivial—the fact that there are many cross-racial individuals (e.g., actors, athletes, politicians) that we might reasonably desire to impersonate, perhaps because we admire them (more on this in Section 2.5), along with the fact adopting the right skin color will ordinarily make our cross-racial impersonations much more realistic suggests this is not the case—it might be said that these interests *still are not large enough* to vindicate the innocent offense caused by the use of cross-racial make-up for personal costumes.

There are several things to say about this modified version of the innocent offense objection. One is that it does not condemn the use of cross-racial make-up when one can be reasonably sure that nobody will be offended by it. In some cases, this may be because *no type* of cross-racial make-up is likely to cause offense, as might be true, for instance, at some small-scale themed parties within the United States or at large ones within societies where wearing cross-racial make-up does not usually offend anyone (in general, we can say that the less controversial the use of cross-racial make-up is within a given society, the wider the range of circumstances under which its use will be morally permitted under the current objection). In other cases, there may simply be *specific types of cross-racial make-up*, such as the white make-up worn by Nick Cannon, that are unlikely to cause offense and that can consequently still be permissibly donned as far as the modified innocent offense objection is concerned.

But even when wearing (specific types of) cross-racial make-up for personal costumes *can be expected to produce innocent offense*, there is a rebuttal to this objection that may be formulated thus:

1. If there are easy and inexpensive steps that individuals can take to avoid being exposed to practices that cause them offense, including innocent offense, then these practices cannot be wrong by virtue of the offense that they cause them, at least not insofar as those who participate in said practices have some (non-trivial) interest in doing so.
2. We have some (non-trivial) interest in wearing cross-racial make-up for personal costumes.
3. There are easy and inexpensive steps that we can take to avoid being exposed to people wearing cross-racial make-up as part of personal costumes.

Therefore,

4. Wearing cross-racial make-up for personal costumes cannot be wrong because of the offense it causes *even when* such offense is innocent.

Having already defended premise 2, my focus here will be on vindicating premises 1 and 3.

Premise 1 is inspired by a claim that Joel Feinberg makes in his canonical treatment of the place of offense within law, *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law: Offense to Others* (1988) where he argues that “the more difficult it is to avoid a given offense without serious inconvenience to oneself, the more serious is that offense.”⁴¹ In his view, there are some acts that we cannot reasonably expect people to avoid—among the examples he gives are “obscene remarks over a loudspeaker, pornographic handbills thrust into the hands of passing pedestrians, and lurid billboards in Times Square graphically advertising the joys of pederasty”⁴²—and that are therefore deemed to be appropriately legally proscribed by him. By contrast, he writes, “no one has a right to protection from the state against offensive experiences if he can easily and effectively avoid them without unreasonable effort or inconvenience,” which are understood to include offense caused by obscene books, given that “when printed words hide decorously behind covers of books sitting passively on the shelves of a bookstore, their offensiveness is easily avoided.”⁴³ Although my concern in this article is not with the legal regulation of offense-inducing behaviors but with the morally (im)permissibility of one such behavior,⁴⁴ I believe similar implications exist from a moral deontic perspective. Insofar as people can avoid in easy and inexpensive ways exposure to practices that offend them, it looks like any (innocent) offense that they suffer as a result of such exposure cannot in and of itself show these practices to be morally impermissible, at least not inasmuch as those who engage in them have some interest in doing so.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law*, 35.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁴ For an overview of the philosophical debate on legal regulation, see Edwards, “No Offense.”

⁴⁵ It might be pointed out, as an anonymous reviewer for this journal has done, that for some individuals, the bare knowledge that certain activities take place offends them *even when* they are not exposed to them. In such cases, the ability to avoid exposure to the relevant activities will not (completely) protect them from feeling offended. Whereas this is true, the notion that the presence of such “bare knowledge offense” can *suffice* to render the activities deemed offensive morally unjustified looks implausible. Not only do some activities that cause such offense seem perfectly innocent, including same-sex intercourse, masturbation, and an equitable division of household labor between heterosexual partners, any principle

To vindicate this claim, consider a city that organizes an annual beard parade like the one hosted in Antwerp, Belgium, just before the Corona-pandemic of 2020.⁴⁶ To say that such parades must be morally unjustified because some local residents suffer from pogonophobia seems highly counterintuitive even if, as I take it, those who participate in them or attend them generally lack strong interests in these activities (while beard parades may be a source of momentary joy for many, few are likely to live worse lives as a result of their not taking place). What is important for our purposes is that this can be explained by the fact that it does not take much for those with an irrational fear of beards to avoid these parades, which may involve staying at home or going to a place that is not along the parade route.⁴⁷ Similarly, the notion that it must be wrong to have an annual beauty contest for dogs at a given venue because some locals suffer from cynophobia appears to be a *reductio*, given that these individuals can easily avoid being offended by the contest by not visiting it. Yet, if these observations are accurate, then insofar as personal costumes that feature cross-racial make-up *can also be avoided in easy and inexpensive ways*, it cannot be the mere (innocent) offense produced by such uses of cross-racial make-up that renders them wrong. (Of course, this does not rule out the presence of other possible wrong-making features to which I turn in Section 2.5.)

This then raises the question: Is the (innocent) offense caused by the wearing of cross-racial make-up as part of personal costumes for e.g., Halloween, Carnival, Purim, and themed parties easily and inexpensively avoided, as premise 2 maintains? To see why the answer looks affirmative, notice that those who are offended by it can simply not attend such costumed events, which may involve staying home or going somewhere else (e.g., a cinema, a restaurant). What is more, even if not attending them constitutes a considerable cost for many people from a hedonic and/or social perspective, it is neither difficult nor expensive for these individuals to organize costumed events in which the wearing of such make-up, or simply specific kinds thereof, such as black make-up, is banned. (Here, the already discussed fact that a sizable, although as became clear by no means all-encompassing, share of the American population opposes the use of cross-racial make-up is relevant, as it suggests that it should be fairly easy within this country to find guests who support, or are simply willing to comply with, such dress codes, especially in the age of social media.) In short, although the offense caused by the wearing of cross-racial make-up for personal costumes appears to be innocent and therefore normatively relevant, unlike the offense caused by homosexual couples holding hands and interracial couples marrying each other (see the previous subsection), the fact that there are relatively easy and inexpensive ways to avoid being exposed to such costumes means that the existence of said offense still *fails to establish* that these uses of cross-racial make-up must be wrong.

that attributes this kind of normative power to bare knowledge offense would leave almost no personal freedom. To see this, notice that that for almost all activities, the thought of their occurrence is likely to offend at least some people within diverse societies. For further discussion, see Simester and Hirsch, "Rethinking the Offense Principle," 280; Tasioulas, "Crimes of Offence," 150–51; Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law*, 34.

⁴⁶ *The Brussels Times*, "Antwerp Hosts World's Finest Beards and Moustaches Parade," May 20, 2019, [link to this article](#).

⁴⁷ Cf. Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law*, 32–34.

2.5. Reasonable Offense

Let us turn then to the fifth and final objection, according to which donning cross-racial make-up for personal costumes is wrong not simply because it causes offense (see Section 2.3) or morally innocent offense (see Section 2.4), but rather because it causes offense that is *reasonable* in that it is supported by good reasons.⁴⁸ I can, and will, assume here for the sake of argument that the existence of such reasons is *sufficient* for rendering these uses of cross-racial make-up morally impermissible. However, it bears mentioning that this is probably false given that, as James Edwards has pointed out, there are cases where people have good reasons for taking offense at specific behaviors where this does not appear to render those behaviors wrong and in some cases not even *pro tanto* wrong.⁴⁹ For example, although my excessive coffee- or pie-consumption might give me good (health-related) reasons to start taking offense at the practices of drinking coffee and eating pies respectively, this does not seem to render these behaviors morally impermissible unlike, say, the practice of making crude racist remarks where the reasons for taking offense do seem to render the offense-inducing practice unjustified.⁵⁰

In what follows, I want to evaluate two possible—and I suspect by far the most promising—grounds for taking offense at the practice of wearing cross-racial make-up for personal costumes *even when* such make-up is worn as part of cross-racial impersonations that do not mock the appearance, behavior, or social standing of members of the imitated race, which I argued in Section 2.1 not all of them do. In each case, I will argue that the invoked considerations do not supply people with good reasons for being offended, which, if correct, suggests that not only the reasonable offense objection fails, but also any objection that treats the existence of such reasons as *enough* to render the wearing of cross-racial make-up for personal costumes wrong whether anyone is offended by it.

2.5.1. Intentions

According to one version of the reasonable offense objection, even those who wear cross-racial make-up as part of personal costumes that stay shy of racial mockery—think again of the De Lesseps's Diane Ross impersonation and of the Beyoncé impersonation by the Missouri nurse—generally do so to cause offense, which might be thought to render *all such uses* of cross-racial make-up unjustified. In premise form, this argument might be stated as follows:

1. If people who wear cross-racial make-up for personal costumes generally do so to offend others, including those whose impersonations do not mock members of the imitated race in the ways identified in Section 2.1, then wearing cross-racial make-up for such costumes *must always be wrong* regardless of whether it is meant to offend others.

⁴⁸ These reasons, it should be noted, do not exist when cynophobic or pogonophobic individuals are offended by the sight of beards or dogs respectively (see Section 2.4).

⁴⁹ Edwards, "No Offense," 502–3.

⁵⁰ One possible way of sharpening the objection would be to say that taking offense must not, or simply not merely, be useful for the offeree to use Edwards's terminology, but (also) be *fitting* by virtue of being an appropriate response to certain intrinsic properties of the offense-inducing practice. Since I do not think there are good reasons within contemporary societies to take offense at the wearing of cross-racial make-up for personal costumes that are not guilty of racial mockery as defined in Section 2.1, we do not need to consider here how successful this move is.

2. Even people who wear cross-racial make-up as part of personal costumes that do not mock members of the imitated race in the ways identified in Section 2.1 generally do so to offend others.

Therefore,

3. Wearing cross-racial make-up for personal costumes must always be wrong.

The best way to argue for premise 1 is to draw an analogy. Suppose that in some European country, a group of friends started to wear swastika emblems on their coats. Yet, rather than seeking to communicate their support for (Neo)Nazism, their motives for wearing the emblems happen to be innocent. Perhaps they just like the aesthetic qualities of the swastika, or perhaps they simply hope that it will bring them luck, the swastika being a symbol of prosperity in much of the Asian world. Whatever their precise motivation, I suspect many will intuit—myself included—that their actions are wrong. What is pertinent for present purposes is that this intuition can be accounted for by the fact that, within Europe, the swastika is mostly worn by people with (Neo)Nazi sympathies, which looks *sufficient* to render the displaying of the emblems morally unjustified within this part of the world. (Although the argument from analogy proposed here does not require me to explain exactly why it is sufficient, I believe the explanation should be sought in the fact it is key to our wellbeing and to social cohesion that we can be reasonably sure that others are treating us, as well as third parties, with what Stephen Darwall terms “recognition respect,”⁵¹ i.e., respect for our own and other people’s dignity as a person,⁵² which seems impossible within the case at hand, given that anyone who witnesses the swastika emblems within a European context will have *every reason to assume* that those who wear them are advocating (Neo)Nazi tenets, such as antisemitism and homophobia. If correct, then inasmuch as we should try to ensure that others have such assurances, as I take it we should, it follows that the actions of the swastika-wearing friends must be wrong *despite* their innocent intentions.) However, if the proclivity of those wearing swastika emblems on coats to be motivated by (Neo)Nazi tenets suffices to render it impermissible for *everyone* to wear this symbol on their coat irrespective of their intentions (barring a few possible exceptions, such as ones where World War II movies are being filmed), then insofar as even those who wear cross-racial make-up as part of personal costumes that are not guilty of racial mockery (see Section 2.1) generally do so with the aim of offending others, these uses of cross-racial make-up look *invariably wrong too* whether or not some have innocent intentions for engaging in them. To see this, notice that, under these conditions, just as witnessing someone in Europe wear a swastika emblem on their coat (and do so outside a film-set) makes it reasonable to think that they are sympathetic to (Neo)Nazism, so witnessing someone with a personal costume that features such make-up would make it reasonable to think that they are aiming to cause negative mental states such as shock, annoyance, and anger even if this sometimes turns out to be false.

Whereas a lot more is to be said about premise 1, these observations indicate that there are strong considerations speaking in its favor. By contrast, premise 2 does not appear to have much going for it. One piece of evidence for doubting whether most people who wear cross-racial make-up as part of personal costumes that do not mock

⁵¹ Stephen L. Darwall, “Two Kinds of Respect,” *Ethics* 88(1) (1977): 36–49.

⁵² Cf. Regina Rini, *The Ethics of Microaggression*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 76; Christina Friedlaender, “Microaggressions and the Problem of Attributional Ambiguity,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Social and Political Philosophy of Language* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021).

members of the imitated race in the ways identified in Section 2.1 are seeking to offend others is anecdotal. Over the past years, not only have there been many individuals who have vehemently denied that their wearing of cross-racial make-up was meant to cause offense, but also those who claimed to have done so in order to *pay tribute* to a cross-racial individual or to a particular group whose members are predominantly, if not wholly, of a different racial background. Besides the already mentioned examples of De Lesseps's Diana Ross impersonation and Antoine Griezmann's impersonation of a Harlem Globetrotter, one might think here of Julianne Hough's cross-racial impersonation of the character Crazy Eyes from the television series *Orange Is the New Black* in 2013. As the American actress wrote in a Tweet at the time that responded to the uproar spawned by her outfit, "I am a huge fan of the show *Orange Is the New Black*, actress Uzo Aduba, and the character she has created," before adding that her impersonation was done "all out of fun and out of respect for the character."⁵³

It might be pointed out, correctly, that since most, if not all, societies have taboos on offending others, especially in ways that are regarded as racially insensitive, there are strong social and professional incentives for individuals such as De Lesseps, Griezmann, and Hough to *deny* that they were seeking to cause offense. While this suggests that such statements do not prove too much on their own, there are additional considerations that, combined with this kind of anecdotal evidence, do seem to offer us strong reasons for doubting whether, in the main, those who wear cross-racial make-up as part of personal costumes that steer clear of the types of racial mockery discussed in Section 2.1 do so with ill intentions. One was mentioned in Section 2.2 when I noted that even in the United States where opposition to the use of such make-up appears the greatest, no less than 42% of the adult population report being unconvinced that it is always wrong for a white person to wear the most controversial type of racial make-up, namely black make-up, whereas another poll indicates that 34% believe that it is at least sometimes morally permissible for white people to do so.⁵⁴ (To put these figures into perspective, a much larger share of adult Americans, namely 70–72% among white Americans, 71% among black Americans, and 58% among Hispanics—believes that it is never acceptable for a white person to use the N-word.)⁵⁵ Another relevant additional consideration is to do with the fact that, each year, *tens, if not hundreds, of millions of individuals* dress up as someone else during costumed holidays and events such as Halloween, Carnival, Purim, and themed parties, which might involve impersonating specific celebrities, politicians, members of another sex, members of another profession, members of another age group, etc. Although it is theoretically possible that *most of these individuals* are seeking to shock, annoy, or otherwise offend others as opposed to simply be enjoying this type of pretend play or showing their admiration or affection for particular persons (e.g., a movie star, a professional athlete) or groups of people (e.g., the Harlem Globetrotters, firefighters), this view is statistically implausible, as it presupposes much higher rates

⁵³ Alexis Loinaz, "Julianne Hough Apologizes for Blackface Costume at Party," *People.com*, October 26, 2013, [link to this article](#).

⁵⁴ Furthermore, as was also noted, this percentage would almost certainly have been higher still had the pollsters used a less tainted term to describe such make-up than "blackface make-up," which evokes images of the humiliating caricatures of black people that were enacted during North American minstrel shows.

⁵⁵ Pew Research Center, "*Race in America 2019*" (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, April 9, 2019), [link to this article](#).

of sadism within contemporary populations than are believed to exist by psychologists.⁵⁶ However, if this is correct, then it is unclear as to why we should think that those who wear cross-racial make-up as part of personal costumes that portray cross-racial individuals in racially non-mocking ways, i.e., in ways that do not ridicule the appearance, behavior, or social standing of members of the imitated race in the ways described in Section 2.1, would generally have malevolent goals. (Notice in passing that this last consideration also casts doubt on a previously mentioned claim by Howard, namely that when white Canadians believe themselves to have innocent motives for wearing black make-up, their conduct remains best explained by a subconscious desire to assert their perceived racial superiority.)⁵⁷

2.5.2. History

Another version of the reasonable offense objection is backward-looking. As noted already, throughout the 19th and first part of the 20th century, countries such as United States and Canada had a theatre genre known as “minstrel shows.” During these shows, white actors, and in some cases black ones as well, would portray black people as buffoonish and dim-witted while wearing burnt cork, shoe polish, or greasepaint to make their skin seem unnaturally dark.⁵⁸ Because of this history, many contemporary scholars believe that using black make-up for personal costumes *can never be morally justified*. Consider, for instance, the following statement by Leonard:

There is no acceptable reason to ever don blackface. It’s not a joke; it isn’t funny. No claims about humor or creative license can ever make it okay. Blackface is part of a history of dehumanization, of denied citizenship, and of efforts to excuse and justify state violence. From lynchings to mass incarceration, whites have utilized blackface (and the resulting dehumanization) as part of its moral and legal justification for violence.⁵⁹

One immediate thing to note about this version of the reasonable offense objection, according to which past objectionable uses of cross-racial make-up can render contemporary uses of such make-up wrong, is that its scope appears to be limited. For one thing, it only seems to condemn the use of cross-racial make-up if, and when, the skin color is adopted of a racial group that was *historically ridiculed and dehumanized* through cross-racial impersonations that featured such make-up and that in some cases might continue to be. So, while wearing black make-up for personal costumes must be off-limits within the United States and Canada given their past black minstrelsy traditions, the fact that neither country had a tradition in which white make-up was used to mock and dehumanize Caucasian people, which is an extremely rare phenomenon if it exists at all, means that the current objection does not proscribe donning this type of make-up in any straightforward manner; while it could be that the problematic use of one type of cross-racial make-up in the past suffices to render impermissible the use of *all types of cross-racial make-up*, this is by no means obvious and would need to be argued for. For another, it only seems to apply to *some countries*, namely those in which cross-racial

⁵⁶ Roger J. R. Levesque, “Sadistic Personality Disorder,” in *Encyclopedia of Adolescence*, ed. Roger J. R. Levesque (Berlin: Springer, 2011), 2445–46, [link to this article](#).

⁵⁷ Howard, “A Laugh for the National Project,” 862–64.

⁵⁸ Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*; Johnson, *Burnt Cork*.

⁵⁹ Leonard, “Just Say No to Blackface”.

make-up was widely used, and in some cases might still be widely used, to mock and dehumanize members of particular races. Unless this is the case, for one country in the world such as the US to have, or have had, such a practice or tradition would be enough to ruin the party for everyone by making the use of cross-racial make-up *wrong across the world*, which would be an odd imperialistic implication. By contrast, it appears to lack force within countries that have never had such practices or traditions (whereas an investigation into which countries fit this bill is for historians to conduct, the most likely examples include ones that are, and historically have been, ethnically highly homogenous, such as Iceland and Japan).

Having discussed two ways in which its scope appears to be restricted, the question remains whether the history version of the reasonable offense objection is successful within its domain of application. Is it reasonable to be offended by a person *P* wearing cross-racial make-up as part of a personal costume when the adopted skin color belongs to a racial group that was historically mocked and dehumanized by cross-racial impersonations involving the use of such make-up within the relevant society *even when* there are no grounds for assuming that *P* is seeking to cause offense (see Section 2.5.1) and *even when* *P*'s impersonation lacks any specific features that mock the members of the imitated race (see Section 2.1)? To see why I am skeptical, it should be noted that since those who engage in such impersonations do not seem to have the aim of shocking, annoying, or otherwise offending anyone—nor do their impersonations ridicule the appearance of the members of the imitated race (e.g. by representing black people as having unrealistically dark skin or overly large lips); attribute crude stereotypical behaviors to them (e.g., by representing black people as buffoonish or dimwitted); or portray them in degrading roles (e.g., by portraying black people as servants)—it looks like insofar as it is reasonable to be offended by their cross-racial impersonations, it must be because these impersonations *remain sufficiently similar* to ones that are, or were, disrespectful because of the impersonators' motives and/or their appearance, behaviors, and/or enacted roles. However, it is doubtful whether enough such similarity exists. Not only is there a world of motivational difference between, say, a white person who performed as a blackface character in a 19th- or 20th-century North American minstrel show and, say, a white person who darkens their skin for a Halloween impersonation that is meant to pay homage to a black idol of theirs (as both De Lesseps and Hough claimed they were seeking to do), cross-racial impersonators who eschew features that mock the appearance, behavior, or social standing of black people like the ones just mentioned end up looking very different from such characters, which can be compared to the difference between, on the one hand, a photo or realistic portrait of someone and, on the other, a humiliating caricature drawing of that person made by a high-school bully on a whiteboard to embarrass them in front of other students.

Lest I be misunderstood, I am not denying here that the use of cross-racial make-up constitutes a relevant similarity even if I am right that it makes an important difference whether or not other people's skin color is being exaggerated (as happened in North American minstrel shows where black people were represented as having unrealistically dark skin). The point I am making is simply that this link *does not seem strong enough* to render cross-racial impersonations unjustified in cases where such impersonations are well-intentioned and stay clear of racial mockery. To vindicate this claim, it bears mentioning that there exist many things that we can wear that have some link to unjust or immoral practices or events where the links in question are clearly *too weak* to create a moral duty to refrain from wearing those things *even when* they remind some individuals of said practices/events and cause them to suffer unpleasant mental states. For example:

- Seeing someone with a cross-necklace might trigger associations with the Catholic child-abuse scandal.
- Seeing someone with a kippah might trigger associations with the construction of illegal Jewish settlements in Palestine.
- Seeing someone with a headscarf might trigger associations with Muslim terrorist attacks.
- Seeing someone with a Black Lives Matter (BLM)T-shirt might trigger associations with the riots in which a fraction of this protest movement engaged.

Although there are links between the *relata* in each of these cases, these connections are so tenuous that they cannot plausibly make it wrong for people to wear a cross-necklace, kippah, headscarf, or BLM T-shirt respectively.

In response, some might concede this but feel that compared to the *relata* in the examples just mentioned, there exists a much tighter relationship between e.g., past enactments of blackface characters in North American minstrel shows (to return to this example) and the contemporary wearing of black make-up for personal costumes *even when* these impersonations are neither ill-intentioned nor guilty of racial mockery as defined in Section 2.1. One reason why I think such impressions are misleading is to do with the tendency within the Anglosphere to use the term “blackface” to refer to *all possible uses of black make-up*, including ones that are well-meaning and that avoid mocking the appearance, behavior, and social standing of black people, such as those by De Lesseps, Hough, and the Missouri nurse. Since this term has highly pejorative connotations, due to its close association with black minstrel characters, using it as a catch-all to describe any possible use of black make-up is like referring to any Muslim headscarf as a “terrorist scarf” or to any BLM T-shirt as a “pro-rioting T-shirt.” Once such pejorative terms are used, the connections between the *relata* will appear a lot stronger than they are in reality.

Another reason for thinking that the link between blackface characters and impersonations of black individuals such as those by De Lesseps, Hough, and the Missouri nurse is much weaker than many in the United States and Canada nowadays believe is that, while blackface characters have been taboo for several decades within North America, it is *only recently* that they have come to be widely—although as we saw in Section 2.2 by no means universally—perceived as intimately related to uses of black make-up that seem neither ill-intentioned nor mocking of black people’s appearance, behavior, or social standing. Consider, for instance, how in the early 2000s, American talk-show hosts Jimmy Kimmel and Jimmy Fallon still felt comfortable, and did not face any professional repercussions for, wearing black make-up on national television; whereas Kimmel did so to impersonate NBA player Karl Malone and television host Oprah Winfrey, Fallon did so as part of an impersonation of comedian Chris Rock.⁶⁰ Fast-forward circa 15 years and we are presented with a popular television host, Megyn Kelly, being fired not for wearing black make-up herself, but for merely defending someone else who did (Luann De Lesseps) *even though* this person’s cross-racial impersonation looks to have been well-meaning and did not ridicule black people’s appearance, behavior, or social standing and *even though* Kelly had been quick to apologize to her viewers and had

⁶⁰ Reid Nakamura, “15 Stars Whose Blackface Blunders Backfired, From Ted Danson to Jimmy Kimmel (Photos),” *TheWrap* (blog), June 23, 2020, [link to this article](#).

to be paid an outstanding salary by her employer of reportedly USD 30 million.⁶¹ In short, whereas it might appear as if the over-inclusiveness argument offered here draws a false equivalence, both the tendentious use of the term “blackface” and the recent shift in attitudes toward the donning of black make-up and cross-racial make-up more generally suggest otherwise.

3. Concluding Remarks

To determine whether wearing cross-racial make-up for personal costumes is ever morally justified, this article has assessed the five most promising objections to this practice. As we saw, these objections maintain that wearing such make-up (1) mocks the appearance, behavior, or social standing of members of the imitated races; (2) flouts social norms; (3) causes offense; (4) causes innocent offense, i.e., offense that is not mediated by morally problematic beliefs; and (5) causes reasonable offense, i.e., offense that is supported by good reasons. Although some of these objections were found to count against particular uses of cross-racial make-up, I showed that in several high-profile cases where such make-up was worn, none of these objections had force, whether because the objections themselves were implausible and/or because they did not apply. Specifically, my findings suggest that various individuals who have worn cross-racial make-up in the context of Halloween, Carnival, Purim, and themed parties have been falsely accused of unethical conduct in recent years, including actress Luann De Lesseps, actress Julianne Hough, and the Missouri nurse who impersonated Beyoncé, and in some cases have been wrongfully fired over its use (think of the Missouri nurse) or been wrongfully given the sack for defending other people’s use of it (think of television host Megyn Kelly).

My hope is that this article will help to draw attention to these injustices, as well as help to prevent future outrage over innocent uses of cross-racial make-up for personal costumes, which it became clear most scholars have erroneously treated as a contradiction in terms, at least as far as the use of black make-up is concerned.

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⁶¹ Kludt and Stelter, “Megyn Kelly Leaves NBC with All of Her \$69 Million Contract Intact”.