

To What Extent is Cindy Sherman's Blackface as Problematic as Bell Hooks' Claims? Cindy Sherman's Real Implication in Blackface

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ABSTRACT

Cindy Sherman, an influential artist in the late 20th century, aims to reconstruct women's identity by playing their roles. Some of her photos named Blackface, belonging to a series titled Bus Riders, is well-known. In this series of pictures, Sherman imitates herself as a black woman by making herself up completely black, which is considered racial discrimination by many people. In this case, we try to delve into the matter and analyze some photos in the Blackface, using bell hooks' theory of yearning to interpret it. By selecting several photos from this series, the relationship between the fashion of the 1970s and the costumes in this series is found; the main purpose of creating it is figured out. The artwork's meaning and influence are examined from different aspects. Through these steps of probing it, comprehensive aspects are provided to interpret these photographs and find reasons for potential understanding from other artists of the Blackface — the "otherness" and the "difference" can be viewed as a behaviour of a racist. However, we can also infer that Sherman's original sake might be getting public attention on the existence of black women. In other words, she uses an unusual way — both on the clothing and makeup — to express the unique identity of black women, whereas whether this method is acceptable and understandable by all the audiences is still doubtful.

Keywords: Postmodernist Art, Cindy Sherman, bell hooks, Yearning, Blackface, Photography.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cindy Sherman, born in 1954, is one of the most influential artists in the late 20th century [1]. By imitating other women in a series of photographs, Sherman aims to discuss contemporary female art and explore the role of women in society [2]. Without considering herself as a feminist, she seeks to deconstruct and reconstruct women's identity by using visualization instead of academic comments [3]. As a child, Sherman lived with her amiable mother. In her words, her father was "strict and cruel" [4]. In 1972, She enrolled in the visual arts department at Buffalo State College, becoming frustrated with the "meticulously copying art," and decided to start doing photography instead of painting [1]. Then, in 1974, Sherman

participated in the exhibition introducing different artists from various backgrounds in Hallwalls. Because of this, she was regarded as a part of the Pictures Generation [5].

In her early artworks, such as Untitled Film stills and the Bus Riders, Sherman tried to use diversified costumes and make-up, acting like others instead of herself through the camera. A few years later, In the 1980s to 2000s, she was inspired by a magazine and created a series of photos with the topic of fashion, history, status, and soft-core sex [6]. In her artistic career, she is considered an anonymous photographer who emphasizes the identities of different people. As an anonymous artist who seldom explains the public discussed her artworks, one of her famous photos named Blackface for a long time. [7].

Bus Riders is a series of photos created in the late 20th century by Cindy Sherman. It illustrates fifteen passengers on the bus, including different races and genders. To look like a black person, Sherman painted herself completely black [8]. The black people in the photo were called Blackface. Her inspiration for Blackface came from the Minstrel show, a popular type of performance in America. This type of show involves white actors painting themselves black to perform the humiliating history of slavery, stereotypes against black people, and the miserable living condition of them [9]. These performances seemed funny and interesting to the white audience but were criticized for being racist and offensive to the black community. Black people had a long history of slavery. Even slavery was abolished a long time ago in the U.S., they still had an unfair opportunity in society, and white people discriminate against them. Hatred, conflicts, and violence between the two races never ended in hundreds of years. As the most radical organization during the 20th century, Ku Klux Klan had a separatist movement that caused the death of thousands of black people [10]. Then, the civil rights movement also pushed the idea of anti-racism and encouraged the creation of protestant works [11]. Overall, during Sherman's period, racism was a severe problem in the U.S [12].

The presence of blackface in Cindy Sherman's work was criticized because it could agree to the prejudice against black people. Critiques claimed that Cindy Sherman only changed the color of her skin to represent a black person. It is a huge stereotype that black people's symbol of black skin. Black's identity should not be represented by skin color. In this way, Cindy Sherman threw the real black identity away but presented an incomplete and one-sided identity. For this reason, she was accused of being a racist [13].

To better understand Cindy Sherman's work and the criticism surrounding it, in the current article, Cindy Sherman's work has been based on Bell Hooks' comments on the postmodernist viewpoint over black people. Bell Hooks is an American scholar, feminist, professor, and social activist. She explores topics concerning racism, sexism, social class, and the influence of media and art [1].

In her book *Yearning*, she explores the long-standing "absence of recognition of black female presence" in both culture and literature, leading to the destabilization and confusion of their own identities [14]. She underscores that black people and their lives still remain "invisible" to a society who "passively absorb white supremacist thinking". The black experience is generalized tacitly into submissive and taciturn roles through the "master narrative" of authority and history. Under this context, Hooks points out that, ironically, even the most radical and progressive postmodernist works that focus on "otherness" are still directed toward

a "specialized audience" that excludes the black people [14]. Hooks concludes that this is why the black reader, in specific, black female reader's confusion and struggles when they encounter this kind of work. Their own sense of unique and varied identity is repudiated and eliminated by the society around them with "universality" [14].

Hooks' criticism of the scholars' generalization of black identities and marginalization of black experience thus serves as a key to unlock the criticism of Cindy Sherman. According to Hooks and other critiques, her creation of these preposterous social stereotypes damages the black people's sense of identity. Nevertheless, her intentional presentation of the ironic and artificial qualities in these stereotypes also helps to reconstruct mixed and reformed identities for the black people.

2. ANALYSIS OF BLACKFACE PHOTOS



Figure 1. Blackface#1

In Figure 1, the woman has two of the most popular women's hairstyles of the 1970s: the loosened afro and the asymmetrical coiffure. These two styles imitate the nature of the hair of the black women, aiming at advocating black women to accept and embrace [15-16]. The hats that the woman wears were no longer popular among women at that time [16]. In addition, the seeking of sexual freedom was represented in women's new style of clothing was pants, making them move closer towards men's wear [17]. However, Cindy Sherman mixed all of these elements to shot some controversial photos. Take one of the pictures from Blackface as an example. A black woman who Cindy imitated sat on a chair in the center of this picture, wearing an unpopular

black cap, a white hoodie, and stripy pants. Her hairstyle is opposite from what prevailed in the 1970s, which is normative and conservative. Plus, her elusory expression, which looks askance somewhere out of the picture, seems to claim that she was pondering over certain problems.

The fragmented and combined dress-up send some signals to audiences, contrasting with the contemporary fashion and providing the imagination to viewers. Since Cindy did not state her purpose of this series, two interpretation possibilities can be seen in the yearning from bell hooks. For one thing, the “difference” and “otherness” can be interpreted as Cindy did not or underestimated the clout of black face to black folks [14]. To be specific, the use of sensitive history of the black face makes the critics consider the “intellectual seriousness” of the Blackface, which leads to an issue that whether it is a proper way to analyze the black identity using a hot topic [14]. For another, it seems to imply that the Blackface “enters a discourse and practice [14].” Without considering the feeling of the black women, and whether there are “ready audience” for this series, the voice of Cindy seems might not be heard [14]. However, the original purpose of it might be positive. Blurring the boundaries between black and white women on their clothing, Cindy provided the viewers with a fake identity. In this case, the disordered and unusual use of clothing draws the public attention to black women, offering them a chance to be seen by other people.



Figure 2. Blackface#2

Figure 2 portrays a black woman standing in front of a white wall, the shadow of her figure being cast on the white wall. She has one hand on her hip and another raised. She is wearing a suit jacket and printed short

skirt. She also wears glasses, curls, and high-heeled shoes. She puts on a fake and over-enthusiastic smile on her face, showing all her white teeth. This is a highly controversial image for it both highlights and challenges the social stereotypes of black people. The sharp contrast of black and white color helps to illustrate the poignant social barrier between the two races. The dull and singular skin tone she imposed on black characters and the sexualizing garment and gesture the model wore undoubtedly created the “narrow, constricting notion of blackness” that Hooks criticized the general public has been putting on black females [1]. Margo Jefferson specifically attacked Sherman in her review of the exhibition “White: Whiteness and Race in Contemporary Art”, saying that “the blacks [in her work] are all exactly the same color, the color of traditional blackface makeup”, which shown a “stale visual myth” that has restrained and defined the black figures for a long time [4]. She also dresses with white-people fashion that enhances the conflict between her racial and social identity. Her distortion of the black figure in a public exhibition strengthens the misunderstanding and stereotypes enforced on black people. It makes them look funny and unrealistic.

The #Cindygate campaign was fired up to oppose and protest against Sherman’s work. The founder of the #Cindygate campaign, E. Jane has said, that she is “frustrated” with the “flatness” of Sherman’s characters and “appalled” by her representation of colored people [5]. The fact that Sherman, as a white artist, is putting on black makeup and shoddy costumes to display her “idea” of black people is not only disorienting but also dangerous. As Hooks complains, Sherman, like other white artists, has created a “static over-determined identity” for the black people [14]. According to critiques, she is directly overlooking and indirectly hurting the feelings of her black audience by exaggerating and distorting their characters. It seems that her work fits into Hook’s category of artists that aim at “specialized audience” and ignore the “diversity” and “exist” of black readers [14].

Nevertheless, on the other hand, the performative nature of her photo gives it a satirical and derisive cover. It is noted that the audience can easily see the artificial quality in the photos. Sherman has intentionally made the photos look like fictional photos instead of reality. The “cable release” that is right under the high-heeled shoe of the character and the “mark” on the floor foreground the act of photographing and fabrication [3]. The work also implicates a sense of surrealism and ridiculousness in the “hammy” expression and unnatural posture of the figure [3]. In fact, by putting white people’s dressing on a black character, Sherman also undermines the sense of boundary between the two races and ridicules the narrowness of socially “appropriate” identity.

The very act of her dressing up and pretending to be this character suggests that the social stereotype behind this figure is also a made-up thing. The artist maximizes every aspect of a conventional social stereotype to intensify the absurdity contained in that stereotype. By deliberately ruining the sense of authenticity and veracity in this portrayal, Sherman might also be helping the audience to overturn the traditional stereotype and be more aware of the “diversity” of real-life black people [14]. In Tim Davis’ book “Portrait”, Sherman’s work serves both as an “artifice” and a “narrative” that draws the audience’s attention toward the construction of racial stereotypes and addresses the problems behind it [6].

To conclude, Sherman’s work appears to fit with Hook’s criticism of being a narrow and white supremacist. Nevertheless, her caricature of these social stereotypes actually allows people to realize the absurdity and artificiality of these stereotypes. The blurred sense of social boundary and racial differences in Cindy Sherman’s work helps to eliminate the inherent concept of segregation between the two races. It challenges traditional stereotypes and breaks restrictions on what people should look like. It encourages people to embrace and persist with their unique characters and the “otherness” in their multifaceted identities [14].



Figure 3. Blackface#3

In the center of Figure 3, a black woman is in ordinary and modern clothing. She has a clean and neat haircut, formal clothes, a bag on the shoulder, and convenient shoes. According to these wearing, it is a reasonable guess that she is a businesswoman, on the way to or from her workplace. Looking at her face, the woman shows an angry expression. Her fingers clench to form a fist like she is hitting or protesting something.

This emotion portrays an “angry black woman”, a common stereotype in the late 20th century. This concept was originated from a radio show Amos ‘n’ Andy when it claimed that black women are “sassy and domineering” [18]. Due to this stereotype, for the next half century, black women suffered from marginalization, especially those who want to have progression in their work [18]. The purpose of Cindy Sherman playing an angry black woman could reasonably be to criticize this stereotype, according to hooks. Hooks criticizes the generalization and marginalization that the public adds to the black race [14]. In fact, Sherman shows the diversity of emotion, the variety of life and possibilities among black people, which portray them in a normal sense. The series *Bus Riders* is a narration of a story, so even though the people in the photos are fictional, they represent lively humans [19, 20]. From this level, the angry black woman seems to be mocking and making fun of people. It is a sign of racism. However, if we look at the whole work, the angry black woman represents only a small part of people. Therefore, Sherman claims that people can include all emotions, but people should not be signed or classified to a certain type. Then, the angry woman’s dressing implies that she struggles with the damage and stands the societal stereotype brings to her. Therefore, Sherman also criticizes stereotypes and encourages people to break them and search for their own expectations and breakthroughs.



Figure 4. Blackface#4

The black man in Figure 4 sits in front of a white wall, wearing a coat similar to waterproof material and a pair of loose white trousers. He also wears a pair of black leather shoes, coupled with a pair of big and thick glasses and some books in his hand. From the books and

glasses, it can be seen that he is a student. His posture shows that he is rather lonely, self-closed, and alert. As a black student, he is not adapted or comfortable with the social attitude of this vulnerable group. In fact, his action can be explained by the history of racial discrimination. According to the 14th Amendment of the United States, "All persons born or naturalized in the United States..., are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside.", and "No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States" [21]. Therefore, African-Americans are citizens of the U.S. and should have equal rights as white citizens, including education rights. However, in 1954, the segregation law deprived black school children of the right to enroll and violated the same protection rights guaranteed in the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution [22]. Due to discrimination and segregation laws, most black children were denied enrollment based on race factors in the 20th century [23]. After this series of judicial cases were called *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* [24]. Even segregation of education was abolished in justice, in actual American schools, black students still received unequal treatment from white students and teachers. This photo fully embodies the racism hidden in the students. The black female student in the picture seems to be the victim of verbal violence surrounded by white students in a corner.

3. CONCLUSION

By analyzing Cindy Sherman's Blackface photos in the *Bus Riders* series, Sherman's intention is a potential interpretation in the current article. From one aspect, Cindy Sherman demonstrates the "otherness" and the "difference" in her characters to mock or marginalize black people's identity. This action can be viewed as a behaviour of racist. However, according to Bell Hooks' theory, Sherman's original sake should be the opposite. She tries to use the existence of stereotypes to get the public attention on the black race. Her artwork inspires her black audiences, encourages them to embrace their "differences" in their identity, and break the boundary on races. Her way of doing this is unusual. Plus, as a postmodernist artist, she does not explain herself fully to her audiences. Criticism about her being a racist seems rather reasonable on a surface level. The existence of this problem questions whether Sherman's method is acceptable understandable.

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