

ALICIA

McDANIEL

Racial Impersonation:
Emma Hallberg's
Perpetuation of the
Blackface Minstrel



Skin color and hair are among the most recognizable indicators of ethnicity, referred to as *racial* or *ethnic signifiers* by scholars such as Kobena Mercer.¹ Mercer states that hair stylization is a cultural activity and practice specific to each ethnic community. Emma Hallberg, an Instagram influencer, often styles her curly textured hair into French braids, crowns, and other hairstyles specific to contemporary African-American women's beauty culture.² Indeed, her profile photo, a selfie (*fig. 1*), suggests she is a person of color.³ Hallberg's light, caramel-brown skin is illuminated by a glimmering spot upon her right cheek. Her skin color and hair stylization have led many to be under the impression that Hallberg is Black or mixed-race. She has received financial compensation from Black-owned businesses to sell their products, and Black beauty pages such as Ali Grace Hair (@aligracehair_1 on Instagram) have featured her selfies.⁴ Hallberg's influence is wide; she currently has over 318,000 followers and receives financial endorsements from companies such as Fashion Nova to wear their clothing products and market to online users.⁵

In 2018, about a year after Hallberg gained popularity, one of her followers asked her if she was Black. Hallberg responded with: "I'm white and I've never claimed to be anything else... I'm NOT 'posing' as a colored person as you claim, I've never tried to be or look black, I was born with naturally curly hair and my skin gets very easily tanned in the sun!!" (*fig. 2*). The follower snapped a screenshot of Hallberg's response and shared it with Twitter user Deja (@yeahboutella), who subsequently posted Hallberg's statement on Twitter. Deja created a Twitter

- 1 Kobena Mercer, "Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe," in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 171-219.
- 2 Born on September 12, 1999, Hallberg identifies herself as a twenty-year-old "SWEDE" model on her Instagram, @eemmahallberg, and has gained a significant following over the course of two years as an Instagram beauty influencer and model. An Instagram influencer is an online content creator who photographs themselves utilizing products from companies that compensate them. Hallberg is a beauty influencer who is endorsed by makeup, fashion, and beauty brands.
- 3 According to *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, a *selfie* is "an image that includes oneself (often with another person or as part of a group) and is taken by oneself using a digital camera especially for posting on social networks."
- 4 Ali Grace Hair is a wig company in China whose target market is Black women.
- 5 Fashion Nova, an online, American-based fashion retailer, is one of the companies that endorses Hallberg.

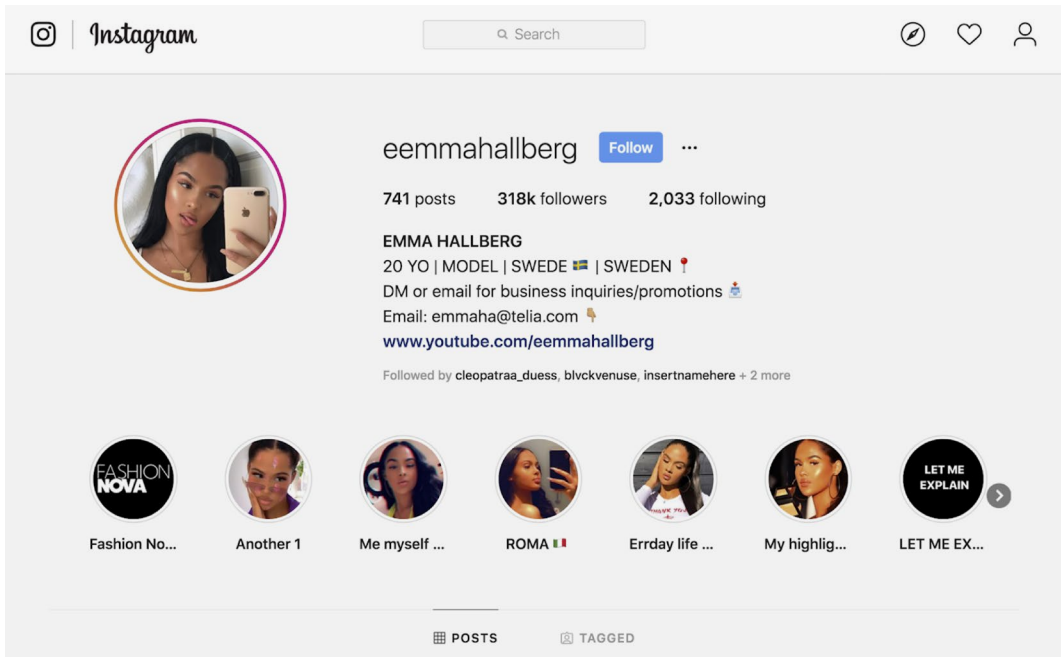


Figure 1. Screenshot of Emma Hallberg's Instagram profile (@eemmahallberg), 2019.

feed specifically to expose Hallberg and other white and white-passing Instagram influencers who were applying dark makeup, wearing traditionally Black hairstyles, choosing selective body enhancements, or exercising some combination of these styling choices, resulting in an appearance that suggests Black identity.⁶ The feed went viral, becoming subject material for news channels such as BBC and talk shows such as the *Wendy Williams Show*. Hallberg and others were accused of *Blackfishing*—a play on the term *catfishing*—to suggest that they have used their appearance to deceive others.⁷ After Hallberg was exposed, many online users began to question: “Is this Blackface?”

Blackface minstrelsy is an American tradition of racial impersonation and part of a long history of Black exploitation. The practice of

6 Amira Rasool, “White Influencers Are Being Accused of ‘Blackfishing,’ or Using Makeup to Appear Black.” *Teen Vogue*, November 16, 2018, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/blackfish-niggerfish-white-influencers-using-makeup-to-appear-black>.

7 According to *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, *catfishing* is “to deceive (someone) by creating a false personal profile online.”



Figure 2. Screenshot of a conversation between Emma Hallberg and a follower. Photo: Twitter user Deja (@yeahboutella), 2018.

Blackface has raised questions about what race is, why it matters, and the assumptions people make on the basis of skin difference. Alisha Gaines, author of *Black for a Day: White Fantasies of Race and Empathy*, and Shannon Steen, an American Studies, Race Theory, and Performance Studies professor at the University of California, Berkeley, define racial impersonation as an act in which an individual or a collective adopts the mannerisms and aesthetics of a racial group that is not their own. Preconceived notions of particular racial identities provide the basis for racial impersonation. In this essay, I argue that Blackfishing is a contemporary form of Blackface minstrelsy. Demonstrating the connections between Hallberg's persona and the Blackface minstrel will provide further insight regarding the consequences of these racial impersonations. Hallberg exemplifies the case of a white woman who

perpetuates the circulation of Black stereotypes and caricatures in order to financially benefit through corporate sponsorships. Her impersonation detrimentally impacts Black women, who face ostracism and social resistance for their hairstyles, culture, and general existence due to colonial skin-privilege hierarchies. In other words, white women have the freedom to dress in styles that are an appropriation of other cultures, whereas those from the appropriated cultures are penalized for styles associated with their race or ethnicity. While social media may enable unchecked racial impersonations, the recent emergence of the #Blackfishing movement to call these instances out suggests that social media is also a space in which Black communities and allies can challenge such acts. Today, many people are equipped with language formulated from a collective consciousness to critically fight against performances of racial impersonation.

In his book *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, American cultural historian Eric Lott defines Blackface minstrelsy as the practice of white stage actors who perform characters based on exaggerated representations of Blackness.⁸ This theatrical impersonation reached a peak in popularity in the early nineteenth century and was achieved through the application of greasepaint, burnt cork, shoe polish, or paint upon the actor's skin. According to art historian and curator Cherise Smith, the Blackface minstrel "depended on and perpetuated an exaggerated blackness that was, at turns, debased, threatening, humble, and virile."⁹ White minstrel performers dehumanized and commodified Black bodies and culture for entertainment. Blackness was exploited to affirm white affluence and fallacious racial superiority through this mode of oppression. Intriguingly, Smith makes the provocative argument in *Enacting Others* that the Blackface minstrels are "reinscriptions of power differentials and domination" through her discussion of cross-dressing as performance. She states, "In this understanding, drag and minstrel performers dress as their 'opposite' to dramatize their difference from, and power over, those they find threatening."¹⁰ Smith references American feminist scholar

8 Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6.

9 Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 14.

10 *Ibid.*, 16.

Peggy Phelan, who asserts that the crossdressing man mimics an image of a woman to reaffirm that he possesses her externally and hyperbolically. Smith concurs, in her argument that performers of Blackface attempt to possess the racialized individuals that they both “love and hate.”¹¹ Hallberg’s racial impersonation suggests that this cycle persists today.

Blackfishers and Blackface minstrel performers employ Blackness to act upon their desires to become the fetishized, commodified, and sexualized Other. The Black minstrel, enacted by Black performers, emerged after the Blackface minstrel was popularized by their white counterparts within the mid-nineteenth century. Likewise, these Black actors also darkened their appearance and reenacted caricatures as a means to thrive within a white male-centric paradigm. Both white and Black minstrel performers established a long-lasting legacy of the trade in and consumption of Black bodies and Black culture. Lott asserts that the minstrel shows performed two functions. First, they provided a venue in which middle-class performers were able to assume a version of Black masculinity as a vicarious means of temporarily transcending middle-class pretensions. Second, these shows enabled white working-class audiences to distinguish themselves apart from Black individuals, with whom they competed for work and respect.¹² It is worth noting that the primary objective of white minstrel performers’ impersonations was not to pass as Black individuals through their hyperbolic impersonations. Instead, “they relished their unlikeliness from their characters” just as Hallberg takes pleasure in showcasing her Instagram persona.¹³

It is crucial to understand that viewers experience Hallberg’s images online, where she can reach a wide range of audiences through her easily-accessible, influential, and interactive interface. In *Enacting Others*, Smith points to the importance of the relationship between performers and their audience. Hallberg’s actions “are learned from, and, in turn, performed for, various audiences,” or in this case, for her followers.¹⁴ Online users and followers feed social ideologies such as

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 57.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 19.

constructions of beauty, popularity, and stereotypical expectations. Essentially, Hallberg stylizes and presents herself in a persona that has been constructed through social media and the tradition of Black-face minstrelsy. Because the influencer passes as a Black or mixed-race woman, she was expected to be one, supported by a significant number of followers who praise her appearance. According to gender theorist Judith Butler's theory of performativity, identity is a "set of socially mandated behaviors and actions that individuals perform in order to take on and maintain a particular identity."¹⁵ While Hallberg's racial impersonation is enabled through rewards of praise and monetary profit, she also maintains her temporary identity through a means of stereotypical actions and stylization. For instance, the influencer incorporates music from hip-hop and rap artists like Drake and Chris Brown into her beauty tutorials, Instagram stories, posts, and YouTube channel.¹⁶ She stylizes herself with hoop earrings, hair extensions, wigs, braids, headwraps, and do-rags. She uses Ebonic language in her posts—phrases like "too much sauce," "hustle," and "came through drippin'"—to suggest a Black identity.¹⁷ Prior to being exposed as white, Hallberg was complacent; she never denied or acknowledged that she was not a person of color on any public platform until she was publicly confronted.

Upon the revelation of Hallberg's white identity, before-and-after photos of the Instagrammer circulated across social media. A comparison of these photos juxtaposes Hallberg's natural skin tone to her applied one. In the "before" photo (*fig. 3*), a young, cheerful Hallberg faces the viewer with a wide smile and visible laughing lines. Her eyebrows are drawn on fully, and her hair is straight. Hallberg wears a black, open jacket and a white, scoop-neck T-shirt. Most notably, her skin is white. In the "after" photo (*fig. 4*), Hallberg photographs herself, from the top half of her midriff up, standing in a doorway leaning against a white door. Her skin is a deep shade of brown, and she wears her hair in a top bun from which tight curls emerge. Hallberg's gaze

15 Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988), 519-31.

16 Emma Hallberg (@emmahallberg), YouTube, accessed March 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCroSgo4dCHyPeGbMaYmbPGg>.

17 According to John R. Rickford of the Linguistic Society of America, the term *Ebonics* is a blend of the words *ebony* (black) and *phonics* (sounds). The term was created by a group of Black scholars in 1973 who rejected negative terms such as *Nonstandard Negro English*. *Ebonics* is also referred to as *African American Vernacular English* in academia.



Figure 3. Screenshot from Emma Hallberg's Instagram account (@eemmahallberg), originally posted ca. summer 2016, 2019.



Figure 4. Screenshot from Emma Hallberg's Instagram account (@eemmahallberg), originally posted ca. fall 2018, 2019.

locks onto the viewer with a seductive gleam in her eyes, an alluring arch in her brow, and a slight pout on her lips. The Instagrammer's head is tilted down and towards her right shoulder. Her left shoulder is raised and exposed through a yellow, off-shoulder sweater, which is tied in the front to accentuate her cleavage and the top of her midriff. Hallberg's right arm is raised into a loose fist resting close to her face and parallel to the bottom of her chin. These contrasting differences in her appearance led to significant backlash from other online users, which included a spectrum of insults ranging from "culture culture" commentary to death threats. Communities of color were infuriated with Hallberg's perpetuation of Blackface, cultural appropriation, and the exploitation of hypersexualized women of color as well as her

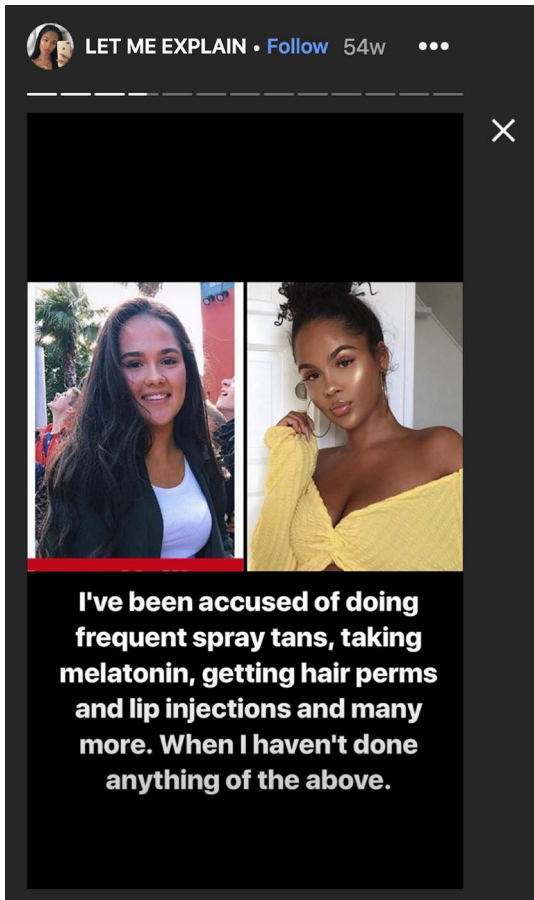


Figure 5. Screenshot from Emma Hallberg's Instagram account (@eemmahallberg), 2019.

deceitfulness overall. In response to public scrutiny, Hallberg insists that she is not posing as a Black woman.

Additionally, she also makes provocative explanations for her deceitful appearance. In her Instagram highlights, Hallberg attempts to provide genealogical and biological evidence as she maintains that her appearance is natural. Included among these items are photos of her family members, her hair routine, and herself as a child. The first photo is a black image with the white text stating, "LET ME EXPLAIN." Next, Hallberg displays the same before-and-after picture that had been circulating the web and states that she has been falsely accused of frequent spray tans, taking melatonin injections, getting hair perms,



Figure 6. Screenshot from Emma Hallberg's Instagram account (@eemmahallberg), 2019.

and having lip injections (fig. 5). According to Hallberg's claims, these photos were taken between the summers of 2016 and 2018. The influencer further asserts that her skin tone is natural. Insisting that her appearance is hereditary, she provides photos of her father and brother who appear to be markedly tan and a video showcasing her mother's hair to challenge people that believe "white people can't have naturally curly hair" (fig. 6). Hallberg also posts four pictures of herself as a child and claims that they provide evidence of her curly hair; however, each face has been covered by drawn-on pink hearts, which obscures these images from serving as proof for her argument. She moves onto other arguments in attempt to justify herself to her base. Hallberg responds

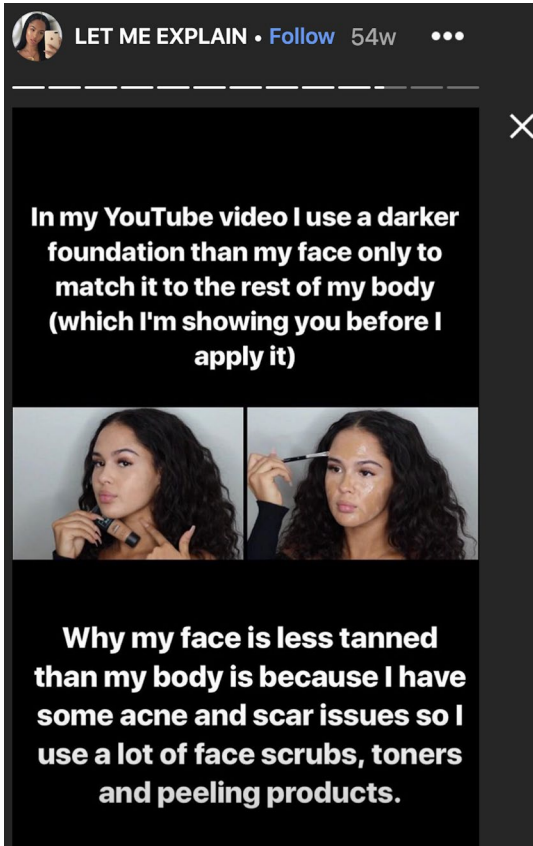


Figure 7. Screenshot from Emma Hallberg's Instagram account (@eemahallberg), 2019.

to two screenshots taken and circulated from one of her beauty tutorials on YouTube, where Hallberg applies a foundation that is several shades darker than her skin tone to her face. She states that she had to match her face to the rest of her body that had tanned (*fig. 7*). Even if one were to believe Hallberg's claims that her hair and skin are indeed natural, it is disturbing that she is attempting to justify appropriation and commodification of a particular Black aesthetic that is enshrouded in hypersexualized stereotypes. She benefits from a capitalist system that enforces skin stratification, racism, and consumption of Blackness, while remaining complacent and silent about Black exploitation.

As mentioned previously, Lott asserts that Blackface minstrel performers were not actually trying to emulate Black individuals. Instead,

they emulated an ideological caricature that was formulated through a desire to assert power and control over the Other through a means of dehumanization, homogenization, and essentialization of Blackness. Hallberg operates similarly as she emulates stereotypes of Black individuals that are enacted by those who have eminence in celebrity culture.¹⁸ For instance, the *Kylie Jenner effect* refers to the reality star and founder of Kylie Cosmetics. According to content creator and blogger Stephanie Yeboah, the *Kylie Jenner effect* is when non-Black social media users decide to emulate the Kardashians as a means of “exocitizing their look.”¹⁹ There has been much controversy and debate about the Kardashian family’s appropriation of Black hairstyles and culture despite their assertions that they are not doing so. Actress Amandla Stenberg is one such critic who confronted Kylie Jenner for appropriating Black hairstyles on Instagram. Under a photo of Jenner with her hair styled in cornrows, Stenberg commented, “u appropriate black features and culture but fail to use ur power to help black Americans by directing attention towards ur wigs instead of police brutality or racism.”²⁰ Stenberg brings attention to how Blackness is consumed within white culture, and yet there is no desire for these non-Black individuals to address issues that impact Black communities.

Hallberg’s case demonstrates how the legacy of Black minstrelsy continues to perpetuate harmful stereotypes that oppress Black communities. While Hallberg has the platform to voice her concerns and empathy for Black women, she instead exploits them for personal benefit. If there is anything true about Hallberg’s claims, it is that she does indeed profit off of how she stylizes herself (*fig. 8*). As of the time of this writing, the influencer receives sponsorships from rising companies like Fashion Nova and has been featured in well-renowned publications such as *Teen Vogue*.²¹ Hallberg and other Blackfishers enact performances that fail to acknowledge structural inequality. They fail to

18 Celebrity culture is the consumption of the personal lives of celebrities perpetuated through mass media.

19 Dorothy Musariri, “White Women are Posing as Black on Instagram: Are the Kardashians to Blame?” *New Statesman America*, November 12, 2018, <https://www.newstatesman.com/science-tech/social-media/2018/11/white-women-are-posing-black-Instagram-are-kardashians-blame>.

20 Lily Workneh, “Amandla Stenberg Calls Out Kylie Jenner For Cultural Appropriation” *HuffPost*, July 12, 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/amandla-stenberg-kylie-jenner_n_55a28697e4b0ecec71bc5141.

21 Emma Hallberg (@eemmahallberg), “@fashionnova top fashionnovapartner,” Instagram photo, February 26, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9Cd1W5h0Ab/>.



Figure 8. Screenshot from Emma Hallberg's Instagram account (@eemmahallberg), 2019.

address the racist history of the Blackface minstrel; they fail to respond to contemporary notions of racism; and they fail to confront issues of cultural appropriation and colorism.²² Importantly, Hallberg's continued followers fail to acknowledge the experiences of Black individuals and remain complicit. Despite this bleak perspective, there are avenues of hope. There *is* discourse around skin privilege, race, and collective social consciousness occurring among online and offline users. Most significantly, Black communities are able to come together under the common cause of making Hallberg's deception known.

²² According to *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, *colorism* is the "prejudice or discrimination especially within a racial or ethnic group favoring people with lighter skin over those with darker skin." The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines *cultural appropriation* as "the act of taking or using things from a culture that is not your own, especially without showing that you understand or respect this culture."

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